

Jan-Werner Müller. *What Is Populism?*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 123 pp. \$19.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4898-2.

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Populism captivates academics and journalists like no other subject in politics today. This interest is evident in the frequent invocation of the polemical term “populist” concerning, for instance, the controversial victory of the Leave campaign in the Brexit referendum and, shortly thereafter, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump’s campaigns for the American presidency. However, despite the word’s ubiquity, populism has thus far escaped rigorous definition; there is still no coherent theoretical consensus among academics on how to identify political actors as populists. Populism is ascribed to politicians and movements from left to right, like Sanders and Trump, and found in different continents, where “populist” can have conflicting meanings.

In the pursuit of clarity, Jan-Werner Müller offers an overarching definition of populism founded on two components: the critique of elites and a claim to be the sole, authentic representative of a “single, homogenous, authentic people” (p. 3). This latter claim is the essence of Müller’s definition, based on the populists’ “moralistic imagination of politics” (p. 19). Within this “fantasy,” they believe that only “a *part* of the people is the people,” who are by their “populist logic” the “real or true people” (p. 22). This claim is perpetuated by the rhetoric of populists, exemplified by Nigel Farage’s celebratory claim that Brexit was a

“victory for the real people” (p. 22) while ignoring the fact that only 48 percent of the population voted for this “victory.” This exclusive moral claim on behalf of a single group leads the author to define populism as fundamentally antipluralist; as Jürgen Habermas observes, “*the people* appear only in the plural” (quoted, p. 40).

Müller explores the problematic relationship between populism and democracy, which “requires pluralism and the recognition that we need to find fair terms of living together as free, equal but also irreducibly diverse citizens” (p. 3). Populists do partake in the democratic process, but like a wolf in sheep’s clothing: once in a position of power they launch a three-pronged attack on liberal democracy, which Müller identifies as the “colonization of the state,” “mass clientelism,” and the “systematic repression of civil society” (p. 44). These threaten freedom of speech and assembly, judicial and media independence, and the rights of minorities, as is the case with the populist government of Viktor Orbán in Hungary.

Müller classifies these features as not just an attack on liberal values, but on democracy itself. He is critical of the term “illiberal democracy” as applied to populist regimes, since it benefits populist leaders like Orbán, who value the legitimizing label of “democracy,” which is “the most important ticket to recognition on a global stage” (p.

56). It is at this stage that Müller runs into a bit of a muddle, as he leaves it unclear what the place and role of populism is in relation to democracy.

Müller refuses to see populism as a potential corrective for liberal democracy, placing him in opposition to scholars such as Chantal Mouffe and David van Reybrouck, who represent a school of thought that encourages a more nuanced perspective of populism based on its potential power to improve democracy. Voters in democratic societies are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the current establishment due to the failure of elites in power to address problems such as rising inequality, corruption, and multicultural integration; Mouffe and van Reybrouck give credit to populists for at least highlighting these issues. In their view, a progressive form of populism based on social movements could serve as a potential cure for democratic maladies. Mouffe turns the harmful populist equation of “us vs. them” on its head into a useful version if expressed as “the people vs. the actual root of problems in society.” On the one hand, Müller does sympathize with the despair of voters in democratic societies, quoting David Ost: “democracy isn’t committed to them [the people]” (p. 60); yet on the other, Müller firmly disagrees with Mouffe and van Reybrouck’s vision, as he expects that populists will use such issues to gain popularity but will never actually solve them. Müller considers all populist movements to be ultimately negative for democracy.

These positions depend on one’s definition of populism, as political theorist Yannis Stavrakakis illustrates: “Whether populism can be considered to be a threat to democracy or a source of democratic renewal obviously depends on how one defines populism.”[1] In his conclusions Müller deems populism a “defective democracy” (p. 58) embodying “a permanent shadow of representative politics” (p. 101). Müller appears therefore to ignore his own advice by granting populists their claim to democracy. As we have seen, Müller presents populism in power as intrinsically an-

tidemocratic, opposing the “real people” to the establishment without allowing for the possibility of pluralism. For Müller, populism seeks to erode democratic values; it keeps the democratic institutions, but they are used to perpetuate the rule of the populist leader or party, the sole authentic representative of the people. With this belief, populists deny, or at least seek to suppress, the possibility of a democratic transition of power to an opposition. Müller stops short of categorizing such regimes as authoritarian; but if populism “distorts” democracy to such an extent that it is only by name a democracy, can we still call it a “defective democracy”? Müller leaves the reader uncertain of the answer to this question.

Müller also provides an insufficient answer to the question of how to deal with populists; he recommends the creation of a “new social contract” (p. 99), one that emphasizes fairness, but he provides no outline of how this could be achieved in practice. The chapter might have been bolstered with policy suggestions on how to erode the conditions that spawn populism. Müller’s strengths clearly lie in analyzing the phenomenon.

Indeed, Müller’s seminal contribution to the scholarship on populism here is equipping academics with a populist “minimum,” in the same vein as the “fascist minimum” used by scholars of fascism such as Zeev Sternhell, Roger Griffin, and Stanley Payne. The “minimum” definition utilizes a parsimonious framework that selects the core features of fascism, thereby constructing an “ideal” fascist or a generic type. Müller provides a key with which to identify populists that is by no means definitive but nonetheless useful in its application. Based on the moral claim to exclusive representation of the people, Müller’s definition surpasses the political cleavages of left and right, thereby allowing for the unprecedented grouping under the populist label of figures as diverse as Marine Le Pen, Hugo Chávez, Edouard Duarte, and Donald Trump, to name but a few. The drawback of this “minimum” method is its lack of con-

sideration for the unique historical and political contexts of each particular case, which arguably plays an essential part in understanding the emergence of populism.

Despite its brevity, *What is Populism?* succeeds in effortlessly combining theory with a plethora of examples, making populism comprehensible for a general readership, which may prove fruitful as the phenomenon continues to challenge twenty-first-century democracies.

Note

[1]. Yannis Stavrakakis, “Anti-populism may be the real threat to democracy,” part of the discussion “Five views: Is populism really a threat to democracy?” on the EUROPP website, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2017/07/24/is-populism-really-a-threat-to-democracy/> (accessed January 1, 2018).

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