

Complex Futures: Problems and Performance of Populism

Jan-Werner Müller, *Was ist Populismus? Ein Essay*. Surhkamp. 2016. 160 pages. ISBN 9783518075227.

Benjamin Moffitt, *Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford University Press. 2016. 224 pages. ISBN 9780804799331.

Emilia Palonen, University of Helsinki

To compare these two books is a challenge, as one is a pamphlet by an established scholar of European history and politics, and the other is based on a doctoral thesis of a young political scientist hailed as one of the most important up and coming authors on populism. To start, I would agree with these judgments. Both have already made their name on their new books even if they are addressed to different audiences.

Jan-Werner Müller's book is titled *What is Populism?* (For this review I have read the original German version *Was ist Populismus? – Ein Essay*). Benjamin Moffitt's book seeks to answer the same question. Although its title is not equally conclusive or manifest, this book neither shies away with its title: *The Global Rise of Populism*. The crucial distinction between the two books is visible in the titles. It is on the nexus of essentialism and anti-essentialism. One sees populism as a question of what is and what not, while the other deals with its dynamics. *The Global Rise* has the subtitle: *Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Populism is not a question of is or not but about articulation and representation. It is something performative rather than a state of affairs.

In his "essay", Jan-Werner Müller is interested in establishing a concept and moral stance of populism rather than exploring its historical basis or articulations. Examples of populism are presented as support for the thesis. *Meine These* is in short that populism is an anti-establishment attitude with exclusive claim to be representing the people. The evidence, that in a pamphlet is more anecdotal than rigorous, is interesting, well argued and clever. I share much of Müller's concerns. But I worry that, perhaps in his need to define populism in a particular way, he is actually re-mystifying rather than demystifying what is going on under the heading of populism. The People (*Volk*) is a dangerous word, as he points out with reference to Claude Lefort and the French Revolution (Müller, 2016: 86).

Müller introduces the reader to different perspectives to populism that range from the crisis of representation to the various symptoms of populism, and to different empirical cases of populism. It is exciting to read how he rolls one argument after another and refutes them. Finally, what matters is his thesis or reading of populism.

Redescriptions, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring 2017), © *Redescriptions Association*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/R.20.1.9>

Populismus, so meine These, ist eine ganz bestimmte Politikvorstellung, laut der einem moralisch reinen, homogenen Volk stets eine unmoralische und parasitäre Elite gegenüberstehen – wobei diese Art von Eliten eigentlich gar nicht wirklich zum Volk gehören. (Müller, 2016: 42)

For him, populism is something beyond mere criticism of the elite (26), but an articulation of the people as moral and the elite as immoral.

At times reading *What is Populism* I wonder if Müller's heading is wrong. What Müller actually seems to be talking about is ethno-nationalism. While he defines populism as the confrontation between morally pure homogeneous People and immoral parasitic Elites, he continues with examples of ethnic purity and homogeneity. He gives as an example the Finns Party, for whom this has only been a side-discourse until now. However, Timo Soini, the leader of the party during 1997–2017, repeatedly defined himself and his movement as populist – and even wrote his Master's thesis on populism. Müller engages in the fashionable trend of studying populism and draws his scholarly identity around that. Yet, it is the worrying aspects of nationalism, xenophobia, ethnic purity and fascism that are hidden behind his title and definition of populism. As the author of books of *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe* (2002) and *Constitutional Patriotism* (2007), Jan-Werner Müller is blending the distinct character of populism with a different historical phenomenon (ethno-nationalism) that he has studied for long.

Unlike Müller, Moffitt is more focused on populism as a phenomenon of its own. That said, the first chapter of his book is also entitled “The Problems with Populism”. He acknowledges that there are indeed problems with populism – but that there are also multiple understandings of populism, which do not really come across in Müller's book. At the heart of these problems is a struggle over the definition of populism.

Moffitt draws from Ernesto Laclau's (*On Populist Reason*, 2005) theory, where often populism is equated with politics, in a problematic way. Moffitt sets out as his task to find ways to expand on Laclau's theory rather than to reject or overcome it. He sees Laclau's famous definition of populism as a logic as “perhaps the most innovative – and not to mention, most formally developed – theory of populism”. And adds that “to be used for empirical analysis, it must be ‘brought down to earth’ in some regards.” Here I cannot but agree.

So, instead of trying to find a singular definition for populism, Moffitt points to the variety of cases of populism in the world. He even acknowledges “that populism today may have shifted and evolved from its previous iterations and thus needs new thinking to reconsider it, re-describe it, and bring it up to date in a way that is sensitive to its time and space context.” (Moffitt: 27)

The comparison between Moffitt and Müller brings about an important distinction about populism: some take populism as a definable object to study, others look at the phenomenon through its multiple aspects rather than its embodiments.

Müller seeks to highlight how there is this “thing” called populism that is anti-democratic – and even in its progressive forms not very useful. As a result, it is a misunderstanding to consider that populism would be a corrective to democracy, he stresses. “Populists are not interested in participation of citizens as such.” (Müller, 2016: 44). He bases his examples on populist figures such as Orbán, the leader of Fidesz in Hungary and Soini’s Finns Party in Finland – who incidentally both have assumed support for democracy in their own ways.

Müller also discusses views by other scholars including the left populist theorists Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. Müller’s response is simply left hanging on his rhetorical question of what is the added value of the “peopling” in politics understood as conflict: “Politik ist Konflikt, aber was genau ist durch diese volkschaften – ich sage bewusst nicht : völkischen – Unsreibungen gewonnen?” (123) For Laclau and Mouffe populism is something relevant for politics and for democracy as it addresses the people – that should be the centre of democratic politics by definition – but Müller does not understand what’s the value of the focus on the people. So he decides to morally oppose such articulations, as populism is an inbuilt danger in modern representative democracy (28) and the people is fiction (58). In an ambivalent way, Laclau acknowledges this possibility but would still find “volkschaft” important.

What indeed is the value of populism? Müller seems not to grasp the one thing that is crucial to populist articulations: the capacity of populism to generate bonds among the people through the “chains of equivalence” and the generation of demands, as they articulate the antagonistic and constitutive frontier in politics, as described by Laclau. His liberal view draws mainly on numbers and voting, but not on what makes people vote in the ways they do. These decisions are not only related to rationality or interests, but also on passions and identifications.

For Müller representing the people is not a legitimate claim. Through rhetoric and structural linguistics – or drawing on Saussure’s distinction between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic (associative) axes of language – Laclau makes the distinction between logics of substitution and combination in politics (see e.g. *Rhetorical Foundations of Society* 2014). In fact, this same distinction lies at the core of Müller’s argument: the metonymic replacement of “the people” with “the populist movement” is not allowed in democracy, what is allowed is a substitution in relation to the paradigmatic extension of the signifying chain. What is legitimate for Müller is the format “we too are the people”, but not we are the people (21).

Following Habermas, Müller argues that the people is only about plurality (“[Das Volk] tritt nur im Plural auf”, 19). He imagines the people as a composition of an ever-expanding set of segments of society. It is composed of socio-economic groups, and is not whole. Any expression of totality appears for Müller to be a sign of totalitarianism. This is understandable, given his interest in European history, WWII memory and his German background. And, in the face of increasing populism – which in Europe has been strongly linked with right-wing populism – it appears rather scary. And this is the interpretation in this book, too.

Indeed, curiously, Müller’s thesis is compatible with the logic of populism conceptualized by Ernesto Laclau, according to which antagonism and exclusion dominate politics. He argues that the democratic “we” is not a fact *per se* but that the state of belonging is always renewed in a process, which precisely fits the thesis of Laclau and Mouffe. Yet, this leads him to a different conclusion than them: populists for Müller are against democracy because they claim to represent the people. Like Laclau and Mouffe, Müller bases his argumentation on Claude Lefort. But contrary to them Müller reads Claude Lefort literally: if the space of power should be empty, as the French theorist claimed, then it should be empty. He omits contingency. Sadly, in the pamphlet besides repeating his *These*, Müller does not engage with this logic. He engages with the contents. And hence, loses the anti-essentialist character that was crucial to Laclau’s formulation. More specifically, he fails to understand the performative and constitutive logic of populism – that for Laclau and Mouffe is aligned with Lefort’s idea of the empty space of power; for them identity is always a fleeting relation in the need of re-articulation.

At the time of writing this review, the contingency and emptiness was well encapsulated in Emmanuel Macron’s solemn march to the position of power on the election day at the ceremony of the French president at Louvre. And Macron, as is common, knew to address both his own supporters, and those of his rival Marine Le Pen, and even those not voting at all. His presence at the highest office in France does not mean that the activists of his movement En Marche! would now be synonymous with power. Ironically, Macron challenged the traditional political establishment and old parties, too: and could fit to the category of populism – but probably not following Müller.

Müller discusses populism and anti-populism and also the bipolar opposition of technocracy-populism, which he refutes: technocracy can also be void of ideas and focused on policy so it is more similar to populism than generally thought of (Müller, 2016: 115). Here again, he simply brackets away a contesting claim.

The performative aspect of populism is visible in the history of various forms of populisms and it is this salutary aspect of populism that Moffitt emphasizes in his book. He has written an excellent study that challenges main-

stream understandings on populism. What could be explored further, however, is the constitutive role of populism in politics – and the consequences of serial temporary attempts to generate it through the use of syntagmatic-metonymic rhetoric. While the work is moving to that direction, concepts such as “audience” do not encapsulate sufficiently what takes place in populist mobilization and rhetoric: that an uneven multiplicity becomes, even if temporarily, the people.

But following Laclau, Moffitt seems to argue that what matters for populism is not its content – that should be discussed in other instances – but its form. Hence, he investigates populism as a political style (Ch. 3); as performance – of the leader (Ch. 4); through the role of the media (Ch. 5) and the audience – the people (Ch. 6); with regard to the role of crisis in populism (Ch. 7), and populism’s relationship with democracy (Ch. 8). Each of these aspects presents an interesting study of the ways in which populism has been and could be explored. He also singles out the relevant topoi of populist rhetoric: “the people-versus-the-elite”, “bad manners” that the populists have and “crisis” that capture much of the focus.

Moffitt’s stance is that populism is neither clearly democratic nor antidemocratic – as Mudde and Kaltwasser (*Populism in Europe and the Americas*, 2012) have argued. He enumerates a list of arguments both for the democratic ethos of populism and against it, and exemplifies them through a link to specific political figures. He is not convinced about the processes of “othering” that are at the heart of empirical descriptions of populism – such that imply the annihilation of the enemies of the people, or more generally deny the complexity produced by a homogenizing articulation of the unified people. Also he sees problems in personifying the phenomenon, because it dichotomizes the political space into two antagonistic camps and assumes a monopoly of power in the hands of the leader. Yet again, I cannot but agree, as when the antagonistic divide that the populist movement generates, following Laclau’s theory of populism, becomes its own anti-thesis: institutionalization. After all, for Laclau the opposite of populist identifications are institutional identifications based on pre-given political interests or identities derived from structural positions without articulation.

These attempts to reduce populism to a simple phenomenon often shadow over the potential of populism to include previously excluded groups or identities in the “performance of the ‘people’”, or to enable people to understand complex political phenomena; or to “reveal the dysfunctions of the contemporary democratic systems”; or finally to offer alternative influencing tools than mere voting (Moffitt, 2016: 144, 142–149). “While it might be nice to state clearly that populism ‘is’ or ‘is not’ democratic, it is only by acknowledging the complexity of the relationship between the two phenomena, and noting populism’s both democratic and antidemocratic tendencies, that we do it justice.”

(Moffitt, 2016: 151). Perhaps the binary separation of populism and democracy should be abandoned altogether, he suggests.

The dominant trend in the literature, particularly in political science, is to consider populism as an ideology that is thin-centered (cf. Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012), and has a non-normative dimension. Moffitt rejects this. From Müller's position, however, populism is *übernormative* and the only normative stand is to refute it. Populism is a danger to democracy, he argues (Müller, 2016: 28). Like Moffitt, he does not embrace the concept of ideology. In fact, even though his argumentation may be ideological, and even though populism presents an essentialisable object of study, Müller's examples articulate instances of populism. He still needs to present cases to illustrate his normative claim. For him, populism is a view of politics (Müller, 2016: 42). For Moffitt, it is a way of performing politics. While exploring the constitutive role of populism, we should also look at the "how" this is happening. According to Moffitt (2016: 151): "there will be a need to pay close attention to the way that populism, as a style, manifests across different political contexts and how it adapts and reconfigures democracy's performative tropes and repertoires in its own image."

The two books operate more or less on the same level of abstraction, and showcase a rigorous analysis that highlights the complexity of the argument that is present in both books. In Moffitt's book, the author manages to highlight the complexity of the phenomenon both in theoretical terms and through the engagement with the multiplicity of illustrated cases. Still, the engagement with the topic could be more detailed and rigorous, but I will wait for the sequel(s) to appear.

While many liberal critics have been welcoming a down turn in rightwing populism after the French and Dutch elections, Moffitt (2016: 151) argues differently: "populism is likely to be a reoccurring and possibly more common phenomenon across the global political landscape, given that democracy and populism share this central political subject and audience." He suggests types of populism for future research. These would indeed be fruitful to consider alongside the overused focus on the degrees of populism or the scales of democracy. Exploring populist articulations among the mainstream actors is also something I have a personal take on.

Leaving behind any illusions of being able to associate "populism" (in singular) with a particular definition is the next task for the research field on populism. According to me, Müller's definition, which stresses that populism gets entangled with the purity of the people and the immorality of elites, is rather a type of "fringe populism": it moves to the center from the position at the edges of the political field. This type of populist movements may either influence existing parties through changes on their agendas or break through the party system themselves. Furthermore, to study populism in the future, we might

have to end up exploring mainstream actors ever more often. Where and how can we recognize the spillovers of populism – if we only focus on the explicitly populist movements and authors?

The crucial question is: how can we grasp the changing character of populism, as Moffitt (2016: 161) aptly stresses. Engaging with the very concepts at play, their use and the game of naming to discuss new aspects of populism that capture the manifestations of new dimensions of old phenomena, is not only a task for political praxis but also for political science.

References

- LACLAU, Ernesto, 2005. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.
- LACLAU, Ernesto, 2014. *Rhetorical Foundations of Society*. London: Verso.
- MUDDE, Cas and Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira, 2012. Populism: Corrective and Threat to Democracy. In Mudde, Cas and Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira (eds.), *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 205–222.
- MÜLLER, Jan-Werner, 2002. *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MÜLLER, Jan-Werner, 2007. *Constitutional Patriotism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.