

***What Is Populism?* Jan-Werner Müller. University of Pennsylvania Press: 2016, 136.**

Shamsa Nawaz*

The populists peril is the most defining characteristic of today's profound anti-pluralism and exclusive functioning democracy. The rule of elites, being threatened with the reasoning that "we are the people. Who are you?" In fact, you are the "enemies of people" and hence democracy. The democracy defined "for the people, of the people and by the people" is no more a comprehensive ideology. It has been sky jacked. So "let the people rule." The German professor of politics, Jan-Werner Müller, in his thin 136 pages lucid and coherent book, *What is Populism?* asks the question that whether this would mean that democracy is encountered with the threat from within? He has underlined the requirement of a more distinctive explanation of democratic political judgement and fringes it from the insecurities of the populists.

The populists, in his view, are blatantly undemocratic. The concept is most unsteady and therefore, detrimental to democracy. While keeping Donald Trump, Silvio Berlusconi, Marine Le Pen and Hugo Chávez in view, Müller has defined the expansion of populism's most salient characteristics of anti-elitism, anti-pluralism, exclusivity across the globe. He has most pressingly diagnosed the critiques of the Wall Street and Washington in order to understand populism. The difference between the right-wing and the left-wing is also adroitly filtered in order to understand its imperatives. "The People" and their place in the representative democracy are judiciously dealt with by indulging into an analytical and provocative debate on both historical facts and conceptual perceptions and misperceptions. He has drawn the instances from the electoral successes of the populists in Latin America, Europe and the US through his secondary sources of research work.

Müller, a specialist political theorist, fears that if the populists are not handled astutely, their governance on the basis of their claim to exclusive moral representation is most likely to gain power which can eventually help

* *The reviewer is Research Fellow at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.*

create an authoritarian state. Such state would be unaccommodating towards the rebels of their definition of “people” since they alone represent the people and their interests. The populists have rejected all other contenders of power through democracy since their mechanism bodes in corruption and immoral means. Democracy belongs to “Puritans.” Even the people who support the elite democracy are not the “real people.”

Populism has increasingly become a politically contested concept. In America, it is conceived as an egalitarian left-wing political idea which is sufficiently in conflict with the stances of the Democratic Party. The populist critics consider it too centrist. The commentary in Europe has been captured by and for technocrats (or, even worse, “plutocrats”). The defenders of “Main Street” against “Wall Street” are pitched as populists.

Moreover, the functioning of “democracy” is endangered between the “Social Democrats” in North, Central and South America who have explained “liberalism” within the confines of checks and balances by subscribing to the constraints on the popular will. It is more close to “pluralism, progressive and grassroots.” The notion of populism in Europe is more historically conditioned and generally interpreted by the liberal commentators. They view the concepts of “demagoguery” and “populism” as a correspondent. It is considered as an irresponsible policy explanation. Chapter one of the book substantiates this argument by the narration of the parties like Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain. They have been classified as “left-wing populists” by many European commentators.

Müller argues that populism is not a structured doctrine. It is more of a corrective socio-psychological claim based on the assessments of the policies and their proposals. To portray and sift the phenomenon of populism is, hence, difficult from that of democracy. The space, thus, provided is conveniently used by the “establishment figures” to tag their opponents as populists, while inviting the counter-attacks of the labelled populists. On the other hand, the populists have proudly claimed the label for themselves. They argue that if populism means working for the people, they are indeed populists. The “revolt of the masses” against the establishment is acclaimed by the morally pure people of whom they are the only authentic representatives.

Further, to differentiate between the acclaimed and real populists is yet another multiplex curiosity in this socio-psychological debate creating conceptual chaos. Almost anything from left, right, democratic, anti-democratic, liberal, illiberal and populists can be viewed in the premise of both friend and foe of democracy.

It is sometimes fixated on certain classes. The “elite-driven” illustration of democracy in today’s world also pits them against the silent majority who have been ignored. This marginalisation has increased over a period of time and has made the elected politician more of an illusion. The consequent pernicious insight of populist politics encourages a deeper understanding of democracy which sometimes slides towards the thoughts of the right-wing as well. It is, therefore, modern representative democracy is persistently overshadowed by the populists’ unmethodical paradigms. A close awareness of the characteristics of populism and its distinctive features would sufficiently abreast us with the shortcomings of the functional democracies.

The philosophical thesis of the book certainly does not intern itself to the understanding of today’s politics alone. Its spectrum is adequately wider. It has successfully identified the social behaviour commonly experienced by today’s world of ‘democratic system’ which has conveniently adapted itself to mistrust and insincerity since it is easy. The same is being transferred to the new generation by shying away from the solutions. Müller has derived his thesis from Stephen L Albert who once said “a re-emergence in the belief in people; a chance to humanise ourselves again.” He suggests programming the response of our system likewise would help us live in a less stressful and more meaningful society. Though precise, forthright and crisp yet require more explanations. The application of abstract solutions makes it an unpractical suggestion.