

Müller, Jan-Werner, *What is Populism?*¹

Jovito V. Cariño

I was tempted to introduce this review by borrowing Marx's iconic remark—a spectre is haunting the Philippines—in a supposed attempt to give Müller's book a local slant. After poring over the text, however, I realized that such introduction, had I pushed it, would be quite inaccurate. First, as a spectre, populism is haunting not just the Philippines but the rest of the world; and second, more than mere haunting, populism has in fact encroached into our political culture long before its global surge. One may detect a remote parallelism between contemporary populism and the demagoguery of the Greeks and the Romans, or even the grassroot movement of the American farmers in the 1890s, but none of these historical instances may be proximately comparable, factually nor conceptually, to populism the way it sways politics across nations today. In the tumultuous period of the 1960's in Europe, two pioneering scholars on populism, Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, tried to use the term to signal the spreading crisis of democracy by announcing, similar to my aborted introduction: "A spectre is haunting the world: populism."² It was a warning with an earnest and provocative intent but the erstwhile tentativeness of the term "populism" seemed to have worked against the public attention that both Ionescu and Gellner were hoping to solicit. Until such time, populism was understood in the same sense as its kindred term, *popular*. It was easy for anyone back then to associate the term with anything related to "populace" or the "public." Such lack of a specific referent made populism a "politically contested concept."³ Definitely, the former use of the term had none of the attributes of a typology of politics that is unfolding or has unfolded in countries as varied as the United States, Russia, Turkey, Hungary, Poland, Spain, Venezuela, Greece, Spain, North Korea and the Philippines to name a few. What Müller did in this very reader-friendly introductory book on populism was to strip it of its attendant ambiguities and to sharpen the focus on its features which, to date, have brought various countries (like those cited above) into a single

¹ United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 2017, 142pp.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

populist mold. Müller achieved this by citing anecdotes to illustrate the relative “success” of populism in places where it has become hegemonic. Among the examples he related was the common proclivity among populist leaders like Hungary’s Viktor Orban, Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez, Ecuador’s Rafael Correa and Bolivia’s Evo Morales to maintain a strong and constant media presence either via a radio or TV program as a strategy to maintain what they described as “proximity to the people.”⁴ Such media offensive which, according to Müller, could last for as long as six hours, was normative for populist politics, hence the correlative tag, “media democracy” or “audience democracy.” By staging their own radio and television shows, the aforementioned leaders thought they could foster closer immediacy with their constituents and vice versa. They would rather talk straight to their own people rather than rely on the mainstream media to do the talking for them. Using the same logic, it has been customary for other leaders like Italian parliamentarian Beppe Grillo and the President of the United States, Donald Trump to take to their blogs and tweets respectively when they wish to address the public directly. It is important to note that when Müller employed the term “populism” or “populist”, he did not have in mind politics as a collective praxis undertaken by the principal political agents, that is, the citizens themselves; he was using the term to refer to the maneuverings of strongmen who managed to propel themselves to power by riding on the widespread popular resentment with the inadequacies and unfulfilled promises of liberal, representative democracy. As Müller noted, “populism arises with the introduction of representative democracy; it is its shadow.”⁵ When the dysfunction of such political system sets in, when the electorate feels that those whom they elected no longer represent them, they turn to charismatic individuals who project themselves as anti-establishment and assume the persona of a messiah who promises to come to the people’s succor.⁶ These two elements—the populist leader and the imagined united “people”—are two sides of the same coin, mutually feeding on each other. On one hand, the authoritarian posits the symbolic stature of a “people” to legitimize his hold on power; on the other, the public, which imagines itself as one homogenous whole, foments the rise of authoritarian regime as a corrective measure to a decadent establishment. The complicity of populism, both in theory and in fact, with the persistence of identity politics and the emergence of authoritarianism can hardly be overstated. The patent distaste for plurality and dissent is a signature trait of populist politics and populist leaders.

⁴ Ibid., 43.

⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁶ Ibid., 75-79.

What is Populism? is a slim, straightforward yet very engaging read on populism. In this book, Jan Werner-Müller is neither theorizing on populism nor extrapolating on what it should be but is merely offering an account of this phenomenon as a socio-political fact. By profiling varieties of populist leaders and authoritarian governments across the globe, he is able to draw up a picture of populism recognizable even to those who do not have enough background on political theory or geopolitics. For some reason, Philippine politics does not figure in Müller's chronicle of examples, but one will surely find allusions to it all over the place. Readers on the lookout for an educated explanation as to why Philippine politics is constantly on the rut will surely find Müller's book a very useful resource.

Department of Philosophy, University of Santo Tomas, Philippines