

BOOK REVIEW


## Revisiting the contested history of democracy in the age of populism

Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth Century Europe*

New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2011.

Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?*

Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

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Recent years have seen the rise of right-wing populism and the weakening of liberal democratic institutions across the globe. Among others, the surging influence of populist movements in Europe in the aftermath of the 2015 migration crisis has drawn considerable attention from both scholarly and practical perspectives. The looming decay of Europe's democratic order is considered particularly worrisome, given that European postwar democracy has long been considered to be firmly consolidated. Numerous studies of comparative politics have also shown that well-off advanced democracies are rarely vulnerable to authoritarian backsliding thanks to several self-reinforcing mechanisms associated with the democratic rules of political competition and the growth of democratic political culture and involving economic development.<sup>1</sup> Against this backdrop of strong belief in the resilience of advanced liberal democracy, the recent phenomenon of the rise of far-right political parties – on a global level in general and across Europe in particular – raises the fundamental question of whether today's liberal democracy is in serious crisis.<sup>2</sup> By engaging with one of the leading political theorists Jan-Werner Müller's recent studies on the intellectual (and political) history of democracy and populism, this essay will first discuss why it is important to revisit the contested history of twentieth-century European democracy as a way to improve our understanding of populism's contemporary rise and then discuss how Müller's perspective can help us develop a new vision of liberal democracy in response to the challenges from right-wing populism.

Jan-Werner Müller's latest book, *What is Populism?* (2016), draws huge attention in tandem with the rise of populism in Europe and the United States. Since its publication, the book has been translated into more than 24 languages, including Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, and it has become one of the core references in the study of populism. Compared to his previous book *Contesting Democracy* (2011), *What is Populism* is much thinner and easier to read, as it is written for a wider audience. Conversely, *Contesting Democracy* is more of a scholarly book that addresses a complicated conceptual

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<sup>1</sup>See Rustow (1970), Inglehart and Welzel (2005), and Przeworski and Limongi (1997)

<sup>2</sup>See Pappas (2016), Foa and Mounk (2016), and Kim (2019).

history of democracy concerning the diverse (and competing) versions – from liberal to totalitarian – of ‘popular sovereignty’ that prevailed in twentieth-century Europe.

As the British intellectual historian Quentin Skinner points out, one of the biggest virtues of studying conceptual history concerns the wisdom that any politically salient concept is necessarily an outcome of fierce political contestations and deliberate choices made by numerous political actors at the scene. By rediscovering a concept’s historical context, Skinner underscores, intellectual historians can thus contribute to ‘uncover[ing] the often neglected riches of our intellectual heritage,’<sup>3</sup> which in turn provides us with a valuable moment for thoughtful reflection on our current – often narrow and ahistorical – usage of politically salient concepts, such as ‘liberty’ and ‘democracy.’ In this sense, *Contesting Democracy* strongly shows that understanding the historical contestation over the meaning of democracy in twentieth-century Europe is not just a matter of historical interest but an important matter of current political issue, namely the fierce populist challenges on liberal democracy. Given these complementary aspects of Müller’s recent two books readers would therefore benefit greatly if they read the two books together, especially with conscious attention to several common underlying themes – for example, an explanation of populism in close connection with ordinary people’s (somewhat inevitable) discontent with existing democratic institutions and unfulfilled promises of equal and responsible political representation.

As the title of the book connotes, *Contesting Democracy* traces the conceptual history of democracy in twentieth-century Europe, when diverse ideas of democracy were proposed, experimented, and contested in close connection with real-world politics. To be specific, Müller claims that the European twentieth century, especially after the World War I, was ‘an age of democracy’ when the notion of popular sovereignty became a universal norm across the ideological spectrum (Müller, 2011, p. 4). Simultaneously, fierce contestations over the meaning of democracy also took place under the political circumstances where numerous political actors of significantly different ideological positions tried to claim ownership of the *genuine* meaning of democracy (Müller, 2011, p. 5). Müller thus emphasizes that, only by rediscovering the largely forgotten history of the conceptual contestation of democracy in this era, can contemporary readers understand how a particular kind of liberal democracy, adopted in postwar Europe and in most contemporary democracies, has achieved the current dominant position (p. 241). Additionally, the conceptual history of democracy also informs us of diverse forms of discarded democratic ideas in the long process of ideological competition (p. 241).

Of course, the contemporary Western version of liberal democracy cannot be regarded as the final (or stablest) shape of democracy simply because of its historical triumph; and such a triumphalist view is far from Müller’s perspective. Rather, at the end of the book Müller remarks that ‘Democracy [...] is institutionalized uncertainty’ (p. 242). By this he implies that no political institution can completely remove the ‘uncertainty’ from its political order; rather, the actual history of twentieth-century Europe informs us that such efforts to establish an artificial stability in the political world have often resulted in disastrous outcomes, such as the rise of totalitarianism or other repressive political systems in the name of the ‘common good’ or public interest.

Interestingly, Müller points out that the numerous political ideas of twentieth-century that resulted in authoritarian ideology also claimed that they sincerely upheld the *sovereignty of the people* – or further claimed that only they were the *genuine* representative of the people. In this context, Müller suggests acknowledging that even ‘fascism partly played on the register of democracy’ (p. 116). Since the main proponents of non-liberal ideologies that prevailed in the twentieth-century, such as fascism or Leninism, also developed their own version of ‘popular sovereignty,’ Müller proposes that we do not entirely exclude those collectivist ideologies from the contested history of modern democracy. Furthermore, Müller closely examines the relationship between the crisis of political representation and the rise of dictatorial variants of democracy so as to understand why and how communist, fascist, and totalitarian thinkers appropriated the rhetoric of popular sovereignty. This examination of the theoretical foundations of the non-liberal ideology’s use of the democratic ideal is an also important task

<sup>3</sup>Skinner (1998), pp. 118–9.

for analyzing the contemporary phenomenon of ‘the revival of illiberal democracy,’ since the movement appears to rely on similar types of political backdrops, such as the crisis of parliamentary democracy and malfunctioning democratic institutions.

Another main focus of the book concerns the rise of ‘constrained democracy’ in European countries after the World War II. Müller notes that the underlying ethos of the new, postwar version of constrained democracy concerns the hostility toward the ideals of ‘unlimited popular sovereignty,’ which were considered to be responsible for the rise of the totalitarian regime in Nazi Germany (p. 6). Based on this anxiety about ‘the unrestrained political power of the masses,’ Müller explains, postwar European democracies introduced several institutional safeguards, such as constitutional courts, the expansive use of welfare programs, and the European Community. The problem is that, as Müller points out, these newly introduced institutional safeguards placed no small constraints on the exercise of popular sovereignty – by generating veto powers wielded by ‘unelected political institutions,’ such as the Constitutional Court or other transnational institutions. Thus, the postwar European model of constrained democracy, unfortunately, has often degenerated into an ‘elitist’ or ‘top-down mode’ of politics, which, as a result, betrayed the citizens’ strong demand for political participation and self-determination.

These critical limitations of postwar ‘constrained democracy’ in Europe thus paved the way for the rise of populism, which constitutes the main theme of the book *What is Populism?* To briefly summarize the book’s main arguments, Müller basically defines populism as ‘an exclusionary form of identity politics’ that relies on the false idea of ‘the single, homogeneous, authentic people’ (Müller, 2016b, p. 3). In his account, the danger of populism vis-à-vis democracy arises not from its focus on ‘identity politics’<sup>4</sup> but from its essentially ‘anti-pluralistic’ nature; thus, populism directly conflicts with the core values of democracy, such as pluralism, recognition of others, and toleration (Müller, 2016b, p. 3). Populism’s obsession with identity politics becomes a formidable threat to democracy particularly when it is combined with its ‘anti-pluralism’ tendency because – based on the dangerous fantasy of ‘the authentic people’ – populists tend to ‘treat their political opponents as “enemies of the people” and seek to ‘exclude them altogether’ (p. 4).

As to its relationship with the modern political order, Müller states that populism is a ‘shadow’ of modern representative democracy (p. 20) and likely to gain huge popularity where democratic institutions are malfunctioning and when a majority of people feel they are unduly marginalized from the major democratic procedures of political representation. For instance, populists usually challenge the political institutions of liberal democracy by criticizing political elites and unresponsive democratic institutions and then making a false promise of direct representation of ‘the authentic people’ through a charismatic – and often authoritarian – political leadership. As such, it is important to note that modern populism is another anti-plural version of popular sovereignty, which is not unprecedented in the history of modern democracy. Therefore, Müller concludes that the contemporary rise of populism, especially in Europe, is to, a certain extent, a historical outcome of the postwar European model of constrained democracy built on a historically contextualized ‘distrust of unrestrained popular sovereignty’ (p. 95).

Having seen the necessity of understanding the historical origin of contemporary populism, one might wonder at this point what specific lessons we can learn from the contested history of democracy so as to defend and revitalize it. For this purpose, it would be helpful to briefly review Müller’s recent commentary on the current European democracy crisis. Through diverse outlets, Müller points out that ‘a technocratic approach’ taken by European leaders in response to the recent Eurocrisis is partly responsible for the present-day rise of populism (pp. 96–7). Among others, Müller’s critique of German Chancellor Angela Merkel is especially worth noting here since she has been the most central political figure in twenty-first-century European politics, whose leadership hugely affected the destiny of European democracy. In ‘Angela Merkel Failed,’ a *Foreign Policy* magazine article published shortly after Merkel’s announcement of her scheduled retirement, Müller provides a highly critical evaluation

<sup>4</sup>Müller (2016b) aptly adds that ‘[N]ot all versions of identity politics are populist’ (p. 3).

on how the Merkel's technocratic, evasive, and visionless style of leadership has ended up inviting strong populist backlash.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Müller specifies that Merkel's 'There is no alternative' stance during the Eurocrisis, which denounced different opinions as irrational and immoral, generated huge frustration among Merkel's political opponents and thus paved the way for the rise of the far-right populist party, Alternative for Germany (AfD).<sup>6</sup> As the name AfD powerfully connotes, populism grows along with 'the broken promises of democracy' (Müller, 2016b, p. 76).

In their recent book *How Democracies Die* (2018), Levitsky and Ziblatt underscore that, to protect democracy from extremist demagogues and populist movements, political leaders and parties should work closely together 'to prevent them from gaining power in the first place' (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, p. 7). This is what the authors termed the 'gatekeeping' role of democratic political parties and leaders, which is supposed to filter out anti-democratic candidates by isolating and defeating them by means of democratic procedures. Although Müller partly agrees with the necessity of gatekeeping measures in saving liberal democracy from extremist challenges,<sup>7</sup> his recent works on democracy and populism make a convincing case that so-called 'militant democracy' itself might be insufficient for – and even harmful to – defending democracy from today's powerful populist backlashes. Instead, he carefully proposes that building 'new majorities' and making a 'new social contract' based on broad-based support is a desirable alternative that can address the root cause of the current liberal democracy crisis.<sup>8</sup> Though this suggestion may still sound somewhat abstract in and of itself, revisiting the forgotten history of 'contested democracy' of the previous century (as discussed above) might furnish us with clearer ideas of – and insights into – how to revitalize liberal democracy in the age of populism.

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<sup>5</sup>See Müller (2018), 'Angela Merkel Failed.'

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. And also see Müller's other related articles: 'The Merkel Method' (2015) and 'Behind the New German Right' (2016a).

<sup>7</sup>See Müller (2012), 'Militant Democracy.'

<sup>8</sup>Müller (2016b), pp. 98–9.