

Populists and Populism: what are they?

*Discussion at The Park
Wednesday 7 June 2017 7:30pm at The Park Tavern, Macclesfield*

An Introduction:

The words “populist” and “populism” have passed into common usage in recent years. But, do we really know what they actually mean. One uncertainty is that the American (i.e. pertaining to the USA) meanings are not the same as the European (i.e. pertaining to the UK and mainland of Europe) meanings. A further confusion is that UK political commentators sometimes draw their language from US, not European, contexts. As the words have become fashionable, three experts from both sides of the Atlantic have published slim books – referenced at the foot of the questions – to try to explain to a wider public what these words mean. All are truly informative reads. Two also offer measures for combatting populism.

In recent months these are some of the political leaders who have been called “populist”: the late Hugo Chavez, Evo Morales, Victor Orban, Michael Gove, Jeremy Corbyn, Donald Trump, Pablo Iglesias Turrion, Bernie Sanders, Marine Le Pen, Beppe Grillo, Alexis Tsipras, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Nigel Farage, Geert Wilders, Vladimir Putin.

The American author and journalist, **John B Judis (JJ)**, describes populism as a political “logic” for examining the world about us. It is, he says, neither a menu of policies nor an ideology but an attitude of mind. As a result, populists can be found both on the Left and on the Right of politics. This is very much the American understanding of the words. The populist gathers the support of “the people” against the “elite” or “establishment”. The elite are accused of acting against the interests of “the people”, rather than representing those interests. Americans see such populists as of the Left. If the populist goes on to vilify minorities and accuses the “elite” of using minorities, such as immigrants or racial minorities, in order to undermine “the people”, the populist is seen as being on the Right. **JJ** sees politics, politicians, voters and policy decisions arranged along a conventional Left-Right axis.

The German political theorist, **Jan-Werner Muller (JM)**, adopts a European definition. The populist, in gathering support, claims to be the sole “moral” leader of “the people”. The populist also defines which part of the population makes up the “morally pure” people and defines all other groups in society as “the others”. The others may be the current national leadership as well as any group defined by him/her as “other”. The people defined as “other”, by the populist, are of no value. They are to be ignored and belittled as much as possible. There is no politically legitimate form of opposition, acceptable in the eyes of the morally, self-appointed populist or his/her supporters. Pluralism, that is a democracy accepting alternative arguments as equally valid, is not accepted. **JM** sees politics, politicians, voters and policy decisions arranged along a Pluralism-Populism axis.

The American historian, **Timothy D Snyder (TS)**, is an expert on how 20th century democracies, in several continents, slipped into authoritarianism then dictatorship, based on the testimony of those who lived through the process. As such he has been prominent in warning his fellow Americans of the potential for populism to evolve, via authoritarianism, into dictatorship. He takes **JM**'s position further by listing the actions of anti-pluralist leaders that indicate society is already moving from pluralist to authoritarian democracy and towards dictatorship. He offers 20 succinct lessons from 20th century Europe to show how citizens should react towards an authoritarian populist, in order to save their pluralist democracy.

Questions:

1. Going around the discussion circle, what initial, brief comments do we have about the alternative meanings of populist and populism, offered by **JJ** and **JM**?
2. Using these alternative definitions, can we suggest – with evidence – political leaders, from the above list, who we consider to be populist? Do some fit one definition but not the other? What examples can we identify from each side of the Atlantic?
3. Are there any significant differences in culture and political history between Europe and the USA that might explain how these rival definitions have arisen? For example, some observers of populism, on both sides of the Atlantic, note that the USA has experienced a much weaker Left-Right axis of politics than Europe has, especially since 1918. Alternatively, Europe experienced the 20th century slide from democracy to authoritarianism to dictatorship, unlike the USA. The suggestion is that this makes it more difficult for Europeans to think outside the Left-Right axis, in choosing political heroes and villains, whereas threats to pluralist democracy provide a more useful yardstick to which Europeans can relate. Is this a plausible basis for the two differing definitions of populism?

4. If **JM** is correct that populists see opposition to themselves as illegitimate, why do populists not go the whole hog and exclude them from politics completely? Alternatively, can we suggest populists who are, indeed, trying to eliminate legitimate oppositions?

5. Can populism only arise within a system of representative democracy? Further than that, does representative democracy guarantee that a populist movement **will** arise, from time to time? What potential failings of representative democracy might trigger the emergence of populism? What steps can pluralist democrats take to counter populism?

5. At this point in the discussion, does it appear that populism is a bad thing or is there any benefit that populism might bring to politics?

6. Consider the recent election for the President of France. Emmanuel Macron is on the Left in terms of social policy but on the Right in economic policy. By contrast, Le Pen is to the Left of the Parti Socialiste in economics but is to the Right in social policy. Is **JM**'s use of the Pluralism-Populism axis more informative in this case than thinking Left-Right? In other words, did Macron win by pitching Pluralism against Populism, rather than pitching Left against Right?

Further Reading or Viewing:

A. For those who prefer to learn a little via reading, a recent press article is here.

i) Judis, John B. *Us v Them: the birth of populism*: 13 October 2016, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/oct/13/birth-of-populism-donald-trump>

B. For those who prefer to learn by viewing, recent lectures by the three authors are here.

i) Judis, John B. Lecture hosted by *Program on Constitutional Government* at Harvard University, 7 October 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmomSGi7p0w>. His lecture ends at 38mins elapsed, followed by Q&A.

ii) Muller, Jan-Werner. *What is Populism?* Lecture at *Amsterdam Centre for Political Thought* at University of Amsterdam, January 2016 <https://vimeo.com/153095972>. His lecture ends at 50mins elapsed, followed by Q&A.

iii) Snyder, Timothy. *Can History Save Us from Ourselves?* Lecture at *De Balie Centrum* Amsterdam, 26 January 2017 <https://vimeo.com/201195502>. His lecture ends at 61mins elapsed, followed by Q&A.

C. For those who wish to read the three cited authors, the details of their slim books are here.

i) Judis, John B. 2016. *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*: New York: Columbia Global Reports. ISBN 978-0-9971264-0

ii) Muller, Jan-Werner. 2016. *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press. ISBN 978-0-8122-4898-2

iii) Snyder, Timothy. 2017. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*: London: The Bodley Head. ISBN 978-1-847-92488-9