

Editorial Introduction to Media Populism

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Parasitical, unstable, excessive, corrupt, inexact, threatening—the intellectual history of *populism* is, to say the least, vexed. ‘Few terms have been so widely used in contemporary political analysis’, Ernesto Laclau famously observed, and ‘few have been defined with less precision’ (1977: 143). As populism has increasingly become ‘the preserve of political scientists’ (Rovira Kaltwasser *et al.*, 2017: 10; Canovan, 1982), so too has its focus on political parties and movements become a default position in academic and popular thought. This orientation, today contested by many political scientists but nonetheless widespread, has the advantage of making populism visible, even measurable, through its analysis of speeches, polls, rallies, and electoral victories. At the same time, the narrow focus on parties and movements has created conceptual and epistemological barriers that continue to impede the emergence of new perspectives—on, for instance, the relationship between media and populism—that fall outside of political scientific frameworks, confirming Chantal Mouffe’s (2005) assertion that political theory alone is not equipped to answer populism’s contemporary challenges, even at an analytical level. Apart from the difficulty of disembodying populism from parties and movements, this approach remains closely allied to rational-choice assumptions, failing to embrace the *many* affective and infrastructural dimensions that are constitutive of the political sphere. Overcoming these limitations has been, and still is, a major challenge to the study of populism. Responding to *Culture Machine*’s call to open up cultural and theoretical research beyond established paradigms, this special issue brings problems of media and mediation to bear on populist phenomena and debates.

Our point of departure is the idea that populism mediates, that is, it comes in between, channels or interrupts the ordinary operations of social and political life. However, in order to comprehend such processes, we need to take media and mediation seriously. As we argue in our companion essay, the prevailing approaches to populist media in political theory remain narrowly focused on what populists say and do in the media, as if the media was merely a container of information or an ideology to be debunked. In contrast, this special issue aims to bring media studies into conversation with debates in social

and political theory, among other fields, and to explore the centrality of media, meant in a broader sense than just neutral channels for direct and unmediated exchange between demagogues and receptive audiences, for apprehending populism. In this respect, the essays collected in this issue move beyond the traditional scales and objects of populist research, placing questions of media and mediation front and center. Case studies range from zombies and pedagogy, video events and affective publics, counterfeit aesthetics and the internet ocean. Some of our contributors investigate forms of mediation that lend themselves more clearly to populist mobilizations. Others explore representations of the people in historically situated ‘new’ media. Others address the affective dimensions of populism as channeled through media aesthetics and platforms. Taken together, these interventions open up genealogical and multi-scalar perspectives on populism, while also speaking to the complexity of media populist forms and magnitudes, and their role in shaping contemporary political imaginaries.

While not comprehensive, the essays signal an expanded, even atmospheric, sense of mediation that is crucial for understanding populism’s fecundity. Recent developments in media theory are essential for understanding the new populism and inform this issue’s contribution to populist research as well as its call for new works at the intersection of media theory and political theory. Indeed, the contributors to this special issue bring media perspectives to bear on a wide range of political problems and worlds.

Media Populism consists of nine essays and an afterword. It opens with our framing essay, which presents a modest theoretical proposition aimed at bringing the gap between media and political theory. Starting from the assumption that the two disciplines must engage in a closer dialogue in order to advance significant contributions to both understanding and answering the populist challenge, the essay intends to introduce the reader to the main debates within the two areas in order to complicate commonsensical understandings of how media works for, to, and in populism. In doing so, we propose the notion of ‘media populism’ to shed light on the processes of social, technical, and political mediation through which populist practices and platforms around the world are articulated.

Bishnupriya Ghosh's contribution is a compelling exploration of the 'distributed affective politics' of social media virality. She focuses, in particular, on the ambivalent intensities accompanying the circulation of a photograph of Aylan Kurdi, a child drowned as he was trying to escape the Syrian civil war with his family. Ghosh analyzes a wide range of responses to the image, including data visualizations mapping its circulation, so as to problematize the political potentials of social media and its relationship to media populism. Drawing on a wide range of scholarship on affect, social media, and the migrant crisis, Ghosh asks whether highly individualized online practices can render affective communities that resemble the 'we' of populism, or if they rather produce a novel kind of collective formation.

Offering an important prehistory of such platforms, Ishita Tiwary examines how both the aesthetics and infrastructure of analog video can be the catalyst for popular mobilizations. Tiwary focuses on the coverage of social unrest and mosque demolition in Northern India between 1989-1992. Specifically, the essay investigates the video news magazine *Newstrack* that broke the monopoly of the state broadcasters, Doordashan, by circulating on video cassette outside of officially-sanctioned channels, as well as adopting a sensationalist visual and narrative style, reminiscent of today's cable news. Tiwary, ultimately, traces the way that *Newstrack's* distribution strategies and story-telling techniques were foundational in popularizing the Hindu nationalist sentiments associated with the rise of Bharatiya Janta Party. Turning to political aesthetics, David Bering-Porter analyzes *World War Z* (dir. Forster, 2013), among other examples of the zombie film, so as to establish the figure of the zombie as an illuminating analogy for the inner workings of populism. Bering-Porter historicizes the zombie film from its Caribbean plantation origins to its epidemiological present, revealing how this particular cinematic genre serves to, time and again, construct different versions of imagined communities, always dialectically produced in relation to an imagined Other. For Bering-Porter, therefore, the zombie analogy is central to understanding how populism constructs the people in constant dynamic tension with antagonistic frontiers.

Building on questions of populist form, Jason Pine turns to the affective and aesthetic operations of populism through the exploration of a variety of forms of 'populist realisms' within

the Italian media ecology (from fashion and popular music, to third-rate cinema and first-person gaming). Advancing the notion of ‘counterfeit aesthetics’, the essay brings a media-anthropological perspective to bear on the convergence of cynicism, insecurity, and aspiration at the core of a ‘new brand of populism’. As such, Pine offers an innovative approach to the new populism and the challenges it poses to participation, (brand) citizenship, veracity and credibility, and the aestheticization of politics. Kay Dickinson turns her attention to pedagogy, a field in which, quite unexpectedly, the promises of populism translate into radical forms of teaching and learning in the neoliberal university. Her inventive contribution addresses how manifestos, a form that the author explores (and practices) as an experiment in teaching, constitutes an incarnation of populism, formulating ‘different ways of working and being in the world’. Instead of providing an analysis of the overlaps of a literary genre and a political approach, the essay identifies a set of political issues that the practice of manifesto-writing throws in sharp relief: the materialization of collective sociality, utopian thinking and world-building, demands for social change. The analogies with populism could not be more striking. At the same time, Dickinson’s essay reflects on the politics of knowledge production and academic professionalism as seen from a perspective invested in reimagining (and reclaiming) ‘the commons and commonality inherent to living knowledge’.

Shifting from micro-practices to macro-politics, Arvind Rajagopal examines the enduring impact of (post)war models of communication and development on right-wing populist irruptions in India and the United States. In particular, he argues that ‘media undertake a churning, by bringing buried layers of the past’ back into the present and transforming the prior communications revolution into a populist counter-revolution. Tracking changes in technological operations and imaginaries across distinct histories of mass media and conceptualizations of political revolution, Rajagopal explores how modernization’s uneven social and economic outcomes jostle against a near universal embrace of media, as well as its impact on populist challenges to democracy. Weixian Pan extends this discussion by turning to the contested history of the internet as ocean and the Chinese state’s popular investment in the ‘national blue territory’ (*lanse guotu*). Focusing on the centrality of mediation in shaping geopolitical and environmental tensions in the South China Sea, Pan draws

on legal discourse, maps and other representations, as well as both official and amateur videos that popularize (and problematize) longstanding regional oceanic disputes between China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, and other neighboring countries. What she terms ‘videated populism’ describes how people unable to visit disputed territories come to know them through media. As such, her analysis brings into stark relief the way that techno-human interactions fuel contemporary populist sentiments and nationalist projects across new internet ecologies.

The ambiguities of populist politics in the face of neoliberal development are at the center of Patrick Brodie’s examination of the ‘Athenry for Apple’ advocacy group, a grassroots organization that advocated and staged popular support in favor of the US tech giant’s 850-billion-euro data center project in East Galway, Ireland. Drawing on a rich fieldwork and debates in political theory, Brodie illuminates how the ‘promises of infrastructure’ uncritically embraced by the local civil society prompted a paradoxical alignment of ordinary citizens and plutocratic interests, giving way to the unpredictable struggle for a multinational corporation led by ‘those who feel dispossessed and disconnected’. The essay constitutes a stimulating push for scholars of populism to finetune their conceptual tools and interrogate the mess of politics in actual social worlds.

The essays and conversations that make up this volume of *Culture Machine* grew out of a yearlong working group on the theme ‘Populist Media, Popular Culture, and Political Theory’ organized by the editors at Concordia University’s Global Emergent Media (GEM) Lab in 2017-18. The initiative, which included collective reading, lectures, and a screening series, culminated in a two-day conference, in April 2018, featuring several of the contributions collected here as well as a closing lecture by the distinguished scholar of rhetoric and public culture, Dilip Gaonkar. Gaonkar’s work is a key reference for this collaborative project (2001; 2002; 2007; 2012; 2014; Gaonkar & Povinelli, 2003), and we are pleased to include his reflections in the ‘Afterword’.

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