

The Parasite and the Chameleon: Notes on Populism, Populist Media and Media Populism

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This volume of essays—especially the framing introductory essay—draws its interpretive motivation and energy from distinguishing between “populist media” and “media populism” in terms of their respective assumptions and trajectories. This distinction involves a strategic simplification of the former in order to harness the conceptual possibilities and draw out the political implications of the latter. As long as one is able to characterize certain actors, movements and parties as “populist,” neither media nor populism is deemed conceptually problematic in the term “populist media”.

However, this simplifying strategy is compromised at the very outset because, unlike comparable political designations such as “socialist,” “liberal,” or “conservative,” the designation “populist” is rarely self-selected. Rather, it is most often a designation bequeathed on alleged populists by their critics, especially their liberal critics, who find in populism a specter haunting and corroding their beloved liberal principles, procedures, and institutions.

Consequently, the liberal critique of populism positions it as an “enemy from within,” a parasitic force internal to the democratic project. That is, populism hollows out well-established republican institutions and democratic norms by strategically exploiting venerable democratic practices. This hollowing out, according to the liberal narrative, involves three interrelated and incremental steps. First, populist media undermines discursive will formation by corrupting the public sphere through the dissemination of systematically distorted communication—lies, half-truths, scapegoating, fear mongering, xenophobia and much else.¹ This distorted communication stokes the embers of existing social divisions and conflicts through the language of a righteous majority of “us” against a conniving minority of “them.” Second, populists attempt to seize the reins of government by targeting elections and manipulating the electoral process. Levitsky and Ziblatt put this step bluntly: “Democratic backsliding today begins at the ballot box” (2019: 5). Once elected, populists swiftly and systematically undermine constitutional norms and institutional guardrails in order to establish an authoritarian, majoritarian, and exclusionary mode

of governance with a democratic façade. Third, populists seek to ensure long-term control of the state by permanently disabling and disempowering opposition, co-opting the media, and colonizing the civil service, the judiciary, and the University by installing their own loyal cadre. Democracy is thus undermined from within by some of its own distinctive and constitutive features: freedom speech and press, free and fair elections, and the tradition of bipartisan legislation and loyal opposition. However, unlike traditional forms of authoritarian regimes such as the Latin American *juntas*, populist regimes never fully abandon the legitimizing veneer of democracy. Hence, populism in the liberal imaginary is a parasite, eating away at and rotting the democratic body politic from within.

Populism is also simultaneously characterized as an externally triggered recurrent phenomenon flaring up like a disease with visible symptoms. From this perspective, the term populism describes a wide range of socio-political movements in different parts of the world both historically and in contemporary times. The number of movements so characterized is extremely high. Ideologically, they range from the radical left to the far-right. Sometimes they are narrowly focused on a specific grievance, other times on a more general sense of shared resentment. And, in certain cases, they are deeply cathected to a specific charismatic/demagogic leader. All these movements have palpable external triggers that are specific to the political communities in which they surface and often include socioeconomic conflicts, ethnocultural and religious differences, and political struggles and resentments.

The vast array of phenomena that register as “populist” has led some scholars to question the value of using a single capacious term to describe such dizzying variability. This externalist focus leads to the dismissive claim that populism is ideationally thin and without any stable normative orientation. Here, populism is viewed as a *chameleon*, changing its form, substance, shape, and color as required by time and occasion (Taggart, 2000: 10 & 15). In this sense, populism is opportunistic, a ready plaything for demagogues bent on exacerbating and manipulating smoldering conflicts, divisions, and resentments to their partisan advantage within a democratic body politic.

Thus, populism is denounced on both counts, as the parasite and as the chameleon, without fully explicating how they are connected. What is the thread that binds the parasite and the

chameleon? How do the vulnerabilities internal to the democratic project get exposed during the recurrent crises triggered by external pressures? Here we have the crossing of two tropes and their signifying chains. Parasite promises to offer an analytic that metaphorically condenses and captures the internal logic of a variable political phenomenon. Hence, the illusion that one can, upon grasping the internal logic, blithely ignore the multiple historical manifestations of populist eruptions/moments and movements. This essentializing impulse tends to ignore the temporal tissues that connect as well as disconnect the micropolitics of moments/events and the macro politics of movements. The trope of the chameleon, functioning more like a metonymy than a metaphor, thwarts this promise. It calls for both, an ethnography of events/moments and a socio-historical account of movements and searches for an enabling grammar of common preconditions and unanticipated contingent triggers, from seemingly trivial to epochal. However, the focus on populism's external chameleon-like manifestations—at once tantalizing and grotesque depending on political perspective—tends to obscure its internal, allegedly parasitic, logic embedded in the democratic project itself. Therefore, one has to carefully balance these two intertwined interpretive strategies. As Paul de Man (1971 & 1979) taught us in another context, the strategy of metaphoric condensation and its promise of a ruling insight is garnered at the expense of a blindness to the metonymic play and display of an indefinite number of populisms, the good, the bad and the ugly. On the other hand, an overemphasis on the metonymic play of external manifestations creates the impression that populism is ideationally “thin,” normatively “hollow,” and politically “opportunistic”. One must recognize that it is the structural interplay between these two interpretive operations that bestows the idea of populism with a palpable identity and continuity in time and makes it usable. Minimizing or ignoring the constitutive character of these structural dynamic results in brittle theories and florid descriptions.

It is generally agreed that the core ideational element, however thin, that sustains and drives all populist movements and parties (or the populist imaginary generally) is the relatively under-theorized concept/trope of the people as well as the associated doctrine of popular sovereignty. The very possibility of populism (and its unruly external manifestations) is grounded in the doctrine of popular sovereignty: in any democratically constituted polity, the people are the ultimate source of authority

and legitimacy. Imagined and conceived by the Athenians as a form of “popular” self-rule by the *demos* and enshrined for modern times in Lincoln’s succinct formulation, “the government of the people, by the people, for the people,” democracy places the populist appeal at the very center of the democratic imaginary. To be sure, the idea of the people at the center of the doctrine of popular sovereignty is an essentially contested concept. It is a site of semiotic struggle over the meaning of phrases such as “We, the people,” and “In the name of the People.” It does not have a clear and stable referent. Hence, it is often characterized as a “fiction,” (Morgan, 1988)—albeit a necessary one—or an “empty signifier,” (Lefort, 1988 and Laclau, 2005) awaiting inscriptions that will themselves be open to contestation anew. However, the fact that “the people” is nothing more than a “fiction” or an “empty signifier” does not immediately render populism ideationally thin or normatively vacuous. In place of conceptual elaborations that burnish ideas like “freedom” and “justice,” the idea of “the people” and the doctrine of popular sovereignty have a rich and complex history.

It is a history of struggles and eruptions, of how those struggles and eruptions become manifest, and of how they get recounted and narrated. It is a history of struggle carried out by a shifting and competing host of agents, both in individual and collective capacities, operating “in the name of the people” (Canovan, 2005). It is a history of appellative beckoning. Questions of who “the people” are and who speaks on their behalf are always open to new demands for inclusion and representation. Any perlocutionary lessons from the performative history of the idea of the people are unlikely to be neatly captured and deciphered within reasoned conceptual discourse. Rather, these struggles and their affective economies unfold over the *longue durée*, faintly registering in altered attitudes and perceptions until there comes about, to borrow Rancière’s formulation, a “redistribution of the sensible,” making audible and visible within the body politic what was once inaudible and invisible (2004).

This transformative endeavor has a complex genealogy that includes multiple struggles—of the nobility and baronage against the encroaching absolutist monarchy (as in the case of the right to petition or the Magna Carta), of the bourgeois republicans for parliamentary sovereignty against the aristocracy, of the Chartists and the suffragists for the right to vote and against the parliamentary republicans and liberals alike,

and of the workers and the trade unionists for the right to collective bargaining as a “social right” against the corporatized industrial state. This intertwined tale of privilege and liberty can be narrated in different ways: as the struggle of a republican elite to establish a constitutional government that would simultaneously bridle both the aristocracy and the demos but ultimately preserve the nobility’s traditional privileges; but also, as the struggle of the popular classes to abolish all privileges based on birth, wealth, rank and status that culminates in the granting of universal adult franchise (Wood, 1996). No matter the narrative structure, the genealogy of these democratic struggles amounts to a trajectory of inclusionary radicalization. It is this trajectory that makes populism, the “parasite within,” possible.

Universal adult franchise, periodic elections, and majority rule under the representative form of government institutionalize both the doctrine of popular sovereignty and populism’s parasitic logic. What is condemned as parasitic is the upending and subverting of the “representative” system and of elections (once deemed an aristocratic mechanism in contrast to the egalitarian mechanism of “lots”) by the radicalization wrought by universal adult franchise, long anticipated and feared by constitutionalists, republicans, and liberals alike (Manin, 1997). This is precisely Ernesto Laclau’s main thesis in his *Critique of Populist Reason*, which inverts the liberal dismissal of populism as an aberrant and irrational phenomenon on the margins of politics into the very “logic of the political” and recuperates *the people as a name of political subjectivity* (2005: 67). With the democratic imaginary now having gone global, Laclau’s positing of the people as the political subject par excellence and populism as the paradigmatic logic of the political acquires new pertinence.

The logic of the parasite explains why elections and electoral processes, once celebrated as pillars of civic pedagogy, can quickly turn into the primary site of struggle between contending interests and classes in political society. Under certain sociohistorical conditions, the ferocity of this struggle can be moderated and held in check by the party system (another elite mechanism Michels, 1962) or deflected by the pursuits and pleasures of “everyday” civil society and consumer capitalism.

However, there is no secure formula for taming class conflict. While doctrinally committed to political equality and to equal

standing before the law, democracy is not equipped nor designed to address the pervasive material inequalities of wealth, income, rank, status, resources and opportunities among the citizenry. Democracy, especially its liberal variant, is more deeply committed to protecting individual rights and promoting the ideology of equal opportunity under the free market than to an equitable society based on distributive justice. Even in social democracies, more deeply committed to collective and shared welfare, democracy cannot reliably mitigate social conflict on a long-term basis. There are two reasons for this: first, democracy does not fully control its destiny. As a socio-historically embedded enterprise, democracy has to contend with exogenous forces rooted in history, culture, geography, and economy that continually challenge its normative promise and disrupt its historical trajectory. Second, modern democracy, whose career has been deeply entangled with that of capitalism, must anticipate, adapt, and often promote societal accelerations and transformations wrought by the ever-changing dynamics of the capitalist mode of production (increasingly driven and dominated by the technological sublime and financial engineering). These transformations continually scramble the relative composition of populations and reconfigure the tables of social stratification which means that class conflict can only ever be tamed partially and temporarily. As a rule, the disruptions and instabilities that accompany these transformations pose significantly greater risk for non-elites than they do for elites. Even in affluent societies—beneficiaries of staggering economic growth in recent decades—the massively uneven distribution of wealth and income intensifies class divisions and conflict (Stiglitz, 2012 & Piketty, 2014). It is precisely in the wake of these changes and transformations, amidst socio-economic anxieties and the cultural derangements they trigger, that populism stirs the sleeping sovereign and populists go to work in the name of the people.²

Their prefiguration of the people is often exclusionary. It draws on a double binary: “us” against “them” and “the non-elites” against the “the elites” by flattening simultaneously the ethnocultural diversity of the population on the one hand and the complexity of socioeconomic stratification on the other. Such is the rhetoric of populism. Here we come upon populism as the chameleon, opportunistically adapting/shaping itself in accordance with the exigencies of time and occasion. This has led some scholars to confusingly characterize populism as “mere” style, ideologically promiscuous and normatively

hollow. Instead, what is in play in each and every resurgence of populism is the crossing of the singular internal logic of the doctrine of sovereignty in motion and the variable external rhetoric that takes its cue from the colors of the conjuncture, unsettled by the dynamics of capitalist mode of social reproduction, which in our times has effectively blurred the distinction between the cultural and the economic. Such is the structure of populism in play, aligning the parasite and the chameleon in its multiple incarnations, that confounds its critics.

Even Laclau, preoccupied as he was with recuperating populism as the constitutive rather than parasitic logic of “politics as such”, misses the significance of the sheer contingency of its historical manifestations and the mutability of its rhetorical expressions. His account of the discursive constitution of people as an “empty signifier” leads to bleaching contingency of its historicity, rhetoric of its fugitivity. Laclau ontologizes social heterogeneity and class antagonisms and reads contingency and rhetoricity formally. Thus, history vanishes and with it the play of ideology and utopia in populist thought and action. Unlike Jameson (1981), Laclau misses the exclusionary dimension of utopian thought as well as the utopian dimension of exclusionary thought. The doctrine of popular sovereignty is the utopian kernel of populist thought, of political thought as such. All politics, especially democratic politics, has to sustain itself by an appeal to the people. This rhetoric of the people cannot be fully bridled by the institutional guardrails as the republicans propose nor by the normative weight of individual and minority rights as the liberals insist. The people are always standing in reserve.

II. Populist Media

As long as one is able to characterize certain actors, movements and parties as “populist”—which, as indicated above, is not without serious difficulties—“populist media” consists of whatever populists “say and do” in public. Let us set aside those difficulties for a moment. There are two ways of approaching what populists “say and do” in public. First, through an account of how the mainstream media and other institutions of the public sphere, affiliated with and representing multiple ideological positions and interests, cover what populists “say and do.” Second, through an account of how populists use the available organs of publicity in a given polity to disseminate their message.

It is difficult to compare and contrast the mainstream media coverage of populists with the mainstream media coverage of, say, conservatives, liberals, or social democrats. This is due to the fact that populists are conceived of as a “marked” category while their traditional political rivals are left largely “unmarked.”³ Populists are not regarded as being among the usual cast of characters one finds in the political/public arena, but rather, to borrow Benjamin Arditi’s formulation, as the “uninvited guests” at the party—the loud, disruptive, and norm-shattering interlopers (2005). The mainstream media covers populists in the same way it covers feminists, anti-racists, social and environmental justice activists, and other oppositional groups: as marginal or occasional figures who are galvanized by specific causes, special interests, and particular grievances and only intermittently surface in the public sphere. Their emergence or periodic resurgence is seen as discontinuous and “out of the ordinary.” The point is not whether there is any justification for this mode of coverage. There is none. It is a deeply rooted habit and a troubled practice. What needs to be recognized is that the mainstream media coverage of oppositional political groups, including populists, is highly “marked,” and those markings frame news reports and stories. Even when the coverage is largely factual, the marked status of oppositional groups ensures that it will still be slanted.

Here, once again, one encounters the characterization of populism as an opportunistic chameleon and as an internally corrosive parasite. Take the case of the global resurgence of populism that has been underway, in fits and starts, since the beginning of this century and has become highly newsworthy since 2016 when Donald Trump won the US Presidency and the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. These two events were accompanied, both before and after, by many other allegedly populist electoral victories across the globe, unsettling the liberal democratic imaginary and its repertoire of norms, institutions and practices. We now have a new cast of political figures, parties, and movements which are routinely characterized as populist in the mainstream media and public discourse: Victor Orbán and Fidesz in Hungary; Hugo Chávez, Nicolás Maduro and PSUV in Venezuela; Alexis Tsipras and Syriza in Greece; Tayyip Erdogan and AKP in Turkey; Narendra Modi and BJP in India; Jaroslaw Kaczyński and LJP in Poland; Rodrigo Duterte and PDP-Laban in the Philippines; Jair Bolsonaro and SLP in Brazil, and so on. They all came to power

in relatively “free and fair” elections and seized the reins of government with democratic legitimacy. But, once in power, they neither adhere to liberal norms and practices nor follow constitutional strictures and institutional protocols. Instead, they claim to command majoritarian popular support and invoke “the name of the people” to justify their actions.⁴ On the ideological spectrum, populist leaders and their followers occupy positions ranging widely, from the far right to the radical left. This broader ideological alignment is less consequential than the context-specific ideological content of their rhetorical appeals and public arguments. The causes, issues, and grievances that motivate and drive these groups are dizzyingly variable: ethno-nationalism and the fear of minorities, anti-globalization, anti-immigration, the deep state, the corporate state, socio-economic inequality, the rigged system, the opaque system, big banks and big technology companies, anti-elite resentment. The list can be extended indefinitely. Media coverage, bound by news cycles and focused on the day to day unfolding of events, tracks what populists “say and do” across these matters in all their specificity and variability. Even a reasonably balanced media account gives the impression that the populist eruptions within a given nation or cultural region—let alone across the globe—have little in common. Thus, populism’s expression appears to be highly contextual. Each news-worthy manifestation a creature of its own time and place, with its own color, texture, and drama.

Populism’s apparent incoherent diversity leads to the glib inference that, as an ideology, it must be thin and opportunistic. The very fact that populist groups and movements are deeply rooted in their sociohistorical conditions becomes evidence of their lack of abiding values and principles. This representation of populists suggests that they are unable to address the unavoidable social dislocations and derangements that stem from economic and cultural transformations because populism lacks both a stable normative standpoint and an effective institutional strategy. As the media narrative goes, populists resort to empty rhetorical invocations of the doctrine of popular sovereignty and habitually engage in exclusionary majoritarian politics of one sort or another. Whether they are scapegoating rich and powerful elites or down-trodden and hapless minorities, they are masters of the “blame game.” They position themselves as the champions of an aggrieved majority of common people or, more polemically, as the voice of an anointed “real people,” hitherto ignored by the powers that be. They offer no long-term solutions to difficult and intractable problems. Power-hungry,

they win elections by blaming others and promising untenable quick-fixes.

This way of depicting populism, even when largely accurate, misrepresents populism in two ways. First, a few instances of populist expression or action come to stand for populist movements in general, both historically and today. Empirically, this generalization is faulty. Moreover, such a depiction distorts the contingencies of time not just in populist politics, but in politics as such. As Machiavelli points out, all politics—and especially republican politics—are held hostage by time (Pocock, 1975). Temporality is the very condition of politics. The constitutional and institutional strategies favored by republicans can tame the ravages of time to an extent, but never fully. The same is true of the normative commitments, shared by republicans and liberals alike, to protecting and promoting liberty, equality, autonomy, and justice as bulwarks against dishonorable political compromises. These strategies and commitments are always in flux. On every count and subject, there is progress as well as back-sliding. In the midst of a three-century narrative about progressive inclusion, individual rights, and minority protections, the history of republican-liberal politics in the mature Western democracies is riddled with numerous instances of back-sliding.

Thus, the question becomes to what extent populists actually deviate from the strategies and commitments enshrined in the liberal-republican tradition? In their quest for power, do the populists bend to the pressures of time more than their republican-liberal counterparts? Where democracy is concerned, what is the difference between republican-liberal backsliding and populist institutional and normative subversion? In the mainstream media as well as in scholarly liberal critique, the characterization of the populist as a parasitic agent comes to the surface through an impulse to distinguish populism from more “acceptable” traditions.

Here we can turn to a short and widely discussed academic monograph: *What Is Populism?* by Jan-Werner Müller (2016). Müller promises to disclose populism’s “inner logic” by analyzing a set of its “distinctive claims.” This method requires him to bracket, if not discard, the traditional psycho-social theories of populism that are grounded in either the class affiliations (working class or lower-middle class) or the psychological dispositions (angry, frustrated, and resentful) of

its adherents, and inseparable from the effects of major social transformations, such as modernization and globalization. Müller also brackets the historical account of past populist movements, including the rare self-avowed cases of the *Farmer's Alliance* and the *People's Party* in the United States the 1890s. Instead, he tries to distill the “inner logic” of populism by “pinning down” populist rhetoric—i.e., “what they say.”

Here is Müller's definition: “Populism, I suggest, is a particular *moralistic imagination of politics*, a way of perceiving the world that sets a morally pure and fully unified-but, I shall argue, ultimately fictional-people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior...In addition to being antielitist, populists are always antipluralist: populists claim that they, and *only they*, represent the people.” (2016:19-20). In this passage and throughout the book, Müller is arguing that anti-elitism, anti-pluralism, and the claim to being the sole and exclusive representative of the people are the necessary but not sufficient conditions for the constitution of populism. Rather than marking populism, these tropes appear in virtually every brand of political ideology and rhetoric. No politician in electoral politics can afford to entirely renounce such appeals. Thus, the “inner logic” of populism lies elsewhere. For Müller, it resides in “a particular *moralistic imagination of politics*,” that posits an undifferentiated unity of the people and is “exclusionary,” “*fictional*,” and, later, “*symbolic*.” Since every political community, even those that celebrate cosmopolitan ideals, are formed on the basis of what Laclau and Mouffe call a “constitutive exclusion” (often, the legal distinction between the citizen and the non-citizen), the distinguishing feature of a *populist moralistic political imagination* is a secondary exclusion internal to a given political community (1985). This populist exclusion finally turns on the distinction between the “real people” and the “phony or fake” people; the former suitably flexible for historically variable inscriptions and thus “fictional.”

Müller's version of the “fictional” is different from those of Lefort, Laclau and Morgan. It is not, as in the case of Laclau, an articulated “unity in difference” sutured by the rhetorical operation of a contingent “chain of equivalence” among a heterogeneous group. Müller's populists, unlike Laclau's, posit an undifferentiated symbolic unity, a metaphoric effect and articulation invulnerable to empirical falsification. Müller

claims that his definition is gleaned from and supported by populist rhetoric. However, he does not engage in a fully-fledged rhetorical or discursive analysis of what populists have said, which would implicate him in an empirical/historical examination, something he eschews as a normative political theorist. As a result, Müller's account of the "inner logic" turns out to be a prefigured "ideal type" illustrated with discursive fragments conveniently drawn from speeches, slogans, manifestos, political broadsides, blogs, and all sorts of other public statements meant for media circulation from well-known political figures (considered populists), including: Juan Perón, George Wallace, Hugo Chávez, Geert Wilders, Viktor Orbán, Silvio Berlusconi, Heinz-Christian Strache, Marine Le Pen, Beppe Grillo, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Nigel Farage, and Donald Trump. This is very much a Euro-American list, with a few figures from Latin America. And, with one exception, it is also a post-1970's list. Neither the absence of numerous populist movements in Asia and Africa nor older examples from across the world deters Müller's stipulative theorizing.⁵

Müller's allegedly non-empirical analytic strategy for disclosing the "inner logic" of populism amounts to a highly selective reading of mainstream media accounts of what European and American populists have said in recent decades. These are, of course, the decades during which neoliberal economic ideology took hold at the expense of the post-war consensus between the agents of capital, labor, and the state. While blithely drawing on symptomatic discursive fragments from the current resurgence of populism in Euro-America to bolster his thesis, Müller has no interest in contextualizing his examples within their shared historical conjuncture. Here one can observe how the characterization of populism in liberal political theory—as a parasitical specter haunting democracy—perfectly complements its characterization in the mainstream media as an opportunistic chameleon bereft of stable ideological content and normative orientation. This is not a matter of factual misrepresentation of what the populists "say or do," but the framing of it as deviant and disruptive of what is proper and right in democratic politics. In this narrative the populists come always already "marked" as disruptive agents on any given political scene.

To a large measure, the alternative organs of publicity devised and deployed by populists are responses to the mainstream media's marked—if not hostile—coverage of what they "say and do." While often dismissed as propaganda, there is a vast

historical archive of the array of artifacts oppositional media institutions (populist and otherwise) generate: pamphlets, manifestos, broadsides, public letters, petitions, newspapers and magazines, books, documentaries, and films. In an earlier age dominated by print, oppositional political groups ran their own cottage-sized publishing houses, opened bookstores, and maintained long mailing lists of subscribers and supporters. In the US, Europe, and elsewhere, the postal service, with its inexpensive bulk rate for printed materials, allowed these groups to disseminate their ideas, agendas, and programs. Together, small-scale independent publishing, subsidized circulation, and a devoted readership fostered a thriving oppositional print tradition. Within this tradition, populists figure prominently. From the vantage of this “documentary tradition”—as opposed to the officially sanctioned “selective tradition,” to borrow Raymond Williams’ seminal distinction (1961)—what populists say and do appears in a new light. Similarly, if we follow Michael Warner’s thesis (2002), “publics,” so valorized in Habermas’ account of the rise of the bourgeois public sphere (1989), almost immediately beget “counter publics” of anarchists, dissident religious groups, trade unionists, suffragists, and many others. The media produced by populists and their allies, partakes in this tradition of counter publics but with a key difference. Unlike other groups and movements, populists harness their counter publics, their media organs, and their networks of circulation to engage directly in politics: influencing specific public policies and, if possible, seizing the reins of government through general elections.

To illustrate this point, I would like to turn to Charles Postel’s splendid book, *The Populist Vision* (2007), a meticulously researched historical account of two American populist organizations, the *Farmer’s Alliance* and the *People’s Party*, and the movement they led in the 1890s. This historical case has a certain clarity. The rank-and-file members as well as the ideologues and leaders of the movement were self-avowed “populists.” In identifying themselves as populists, they claimed to be following in the tracks of a recognizable populist strand within the American democratic tradition. They were neither the first to take up the cause of the popular classes, nor the first to advance that cause in “the name of the people.” Just like their liberal and republican counterparts, the American populists of the 1890s thought of themselves as operating within the nation’s democratic framework. When confronted with this uncooperative historical case, Müller refuses to recognize these

populists as populists simply because they identify themselves as such (2016:19). For Müller, they are proto social democrats, Bernie Sanders their most prominent descendent. In Müller's schema, "good" populists don't exist because true populists are all bent on undermining democracy from within.

To be sure, the American populists in the 1890s had distinct social democratic leanings. They championed a progressive income tax, government regulation of big corporations and industry, public ownership of railroads and banking, a flexible national currency to augment liquidity, agricultural credits to support small farmers, and union rights, including the eight-hour workday. Representing a progressive farmer-labor movement, these populists thought of themselves as constructive reformers rather than disrupters, let alone revolutionaries. They believed that they could create a more equitable and just society through democratic means. Towards that end, they set out to do two interdependent things. First, they sought to arrest the growing power of commercial and corporate interests—so-called "big money"—and put an end to its propensity to corrupt the political process by "buying influence." Second, they sought to educate a broad coalition of non-elites—farmers, workers, small business owners, and some progressive urban professionals—and then mobilize them in a democratic and collective defense of their interests against commercial and corporate power. They mounted wide-ranging grassroots campaigns of political education and public deliberation to enhance citizen efficacy and empowerment. According to Postel:

Populism embodied a remarkable intellectual enterprise. It was known as "a reading party" and a "writing and talking party." Few political or social movements brought so many men and women into lecture halls, classrooms, camp meetings, and seminars or produced such an array of inexpensive literature. The lecture notes, editorials, letters, diaries, and minute books left behind offer insights into the multiple layers of the movement: the leaders and theoreticians, the organizers and lecturers, and the participants and correspondents at the grass roots. They provide evidence of the Populists' mental world, of their strivings, of their designs for the future (2007: 4).

As Postel describes it, the mental world of the populists was progressive, forward-looking, and resolutely modern. Despite how they were often characterized by their contemporary critics,

they were not tradition-bound reactionaries fearful of change. Rather, they were fully cognizant of and sensitive to the great societal transformations underway at the turn of the century. They saw that the globalization of commerce, especially of the agricultural commodities so central to the livelihoods of their constituents, was shrinking the world. They sensed the accelerating pace of social reproduction, propelled by new technologies (like the telegraph and railroad) as well as new forms of large-scale social organization (like corporations, mass media, and the penny press). Buffeted by such powerful winds of change, they did not try to resist and repel them but sought to leverage them for the welfare of the non-elite. Rather than succumb to the dominant corporate vision of the robber barons from above, often endorsed by established political parties and the federal government, the populists wanted to respond to the coming change with their own democratic vision from below. Instead of sticking their heads in the sands of tradition, they looked to science for guidance and put their faith in education.⁶ For the American populists of this era, knowledge was power.

In this context, populist pedagogy focused on imparting practical knowledge on subjects such as scientific farming, small business management, basic finance and book-keeping, home economics, and public hygiene. This kind of education did not have the sheen of cosmopolitan humanistic learning, nor the rigor and erudition of high science. Nonetheless, this populist pedagogy was not a philistine enterprise but down to earth, highly targeted, and pragmatic. It sought to impart precisely what its recipients needed most in order to survive and thrive in an increasingly complex and impersonal world. It also carried an additional political dimension and bite. Unlike conventional vocational education, this populist pedagogy sought to empower its students as citizens, not just train them as workers.

It is precisely at this point that the distinctions between populist pedagogy, populist mobilization, and populist media begin to blur. Populist pedagogy originates in and is disseminated through a populist media machinery made up of a vast network of reform newspapers and magazines and a readership that spans farming communities across the American South, Midwest, and West. In the absence of a carefully planned and accessible agricultural curriculum in schools and colleges, populist print media played a critical role in imparting up-to-date information about the technical aspects of scientific farming and the business aspects of running a profitable farm. The same media also mobilized

farmers to press the state and national governments to establish suitable educational facilities that would prepare them to compete in a global agricultural market. Furthermore, it called for a broader science-based education that would empower farmers to take their rightful place alongside their better educated urban peers as citizens within the national political arena.

In this respect, populists were statist. They thought of themselves as entrepreneurs, even though they ran small farms. They believed that the state had a pivotal role to play in the nation's political economy, namely, to ensure and promote fair competition. They pressed the state to regulate and bridle the predatory practices of "big money" banks and giant corporations—especially the railroads—who were squeezing small farmers out of existence. Cognizant of the competitive advantages of scale, they championed a benevolent cooperative commonwealth of small entrepreneurs against corporate monopolies impersonally managed by professionals in the interests of shareholders. In their vision of political economy, which they vigorously propagated through their media, the state had a pivotal role to play in protecting the economic well-being of common people and empowering them to participate in public life and politics as free and equal citizens. To move the state to attend to their needs, they turned to social mobilization and electoral politics. Both of these methods presupposed the existence of a democratic polity and ethos and relied on the populist print media of newspapers and magazines, supplemented by lecture circuits and mobile lending libraries to simultaneously disseminate populist pedagogy and spur populist agitation. Populism, as these Americans conceived it, could only flourish within an electoral democracy based on popular sovereignty, universal adult suffrage, and a free and independent press.⁷

To be sure, 1890s American populist media was not without its share of polemics and prejudices. Its record on race relations was mixed. In education and other spheres of socio-economic life and civil society, it adhered to the "separate and unequal" formula. The populist "bimetal standard" (gold and silver) currency proposal for enhancing liquidity was of questionable merit; however, it was not any more problematic than the prevailing gold standard favored by coastal banking elites. At once prejudiced and progressive, the populists were creatures of their time: no more prejudiced than a vast majority of their peers in the Republican and Democratic parties, and clearly more progressive than all but a select few. Populist media was not a clandestine

operation but a legible, visible, and integral part of the bourgeois public sphere. Adhering to the democratic norms of free exchange of ideas, persuasion and publicity, and discursive agonism, it competed against conservative, liberal, socialist and many other political orientations within the larger media ecology. While the agonism led to some distortions and misinformation, populist rhetoric sought to engage and enrich the institutions of the public sphere, not subvert them.

Without naming it as such, Postel furnishes a clear and distinct account of populist media in action; one story of a group of self-avowed populists and their media.

III. Media Populism

The phrase “media populism” is a vexing notion as it puts into question our taken for granted understanding of both media and populism. In ordinary usage, the two terms have independent and relatively stable meaning, as in the case of “populist media.” This is evident from the simple fact that we routinely distinguish “populist media” from “liberal media,” “conservative media,” and “social media”; or alternatively, when we distinguish it from “populist agendas,” “populist movements,” and “populist parties.” In these instances, the term “populist” functions as an adjectival modifier. By contrast, the two terms in the phrase “media populism” become deeply intertwined. Unlike “populist media,” “media populism” functions as a compound noun, thus conjuring up a new referent or a new signified (or, more precisely, a signifying chain). Similar to Benedict Anderson’s influential compound noun, “print capitalism”—which he deployed to mark a conjuncture that facilitated the rise of nationalism (1983)—“media populism” points at once to a complex historically emergent phenomenon as well as a way of imagining and naming that phenomenon poetically. It signals a historical intuition regarding an emergent conjuncture, explicable neither by the simple conjunction of two independent terms nor by an adjectival modification of the one by the other. If we follow Hayden White here, one might say that the phrase “media populism” *prefigures* a new object domain made legible in and through the performative act of naming (1973). Further, this phrasing is not simply a matter of making a given object domain legible—in terms of forms, genres, themes, characters, events, etc.—but of disclosing how that object domain is made

legible and rendered audible and visible, as attempted in this volume of essays.

In their introductory essay, Fidotta, Neves & Serpe (hereafter referred to as FNS), identify three features that mark and gesture towards the object domain prefigured by the phrase “media populism”: ontology, vitality, and affect. These are not actually legible features in any conventional sense. Instead, they function as hermeneutic wagers, intended to grasp, tether, and disclose an emergent and elusive phenomenon. The ontological wager seeks to map the very condition of possibility of something called “media populism” and its historical emergence at the present conjuncture. Following the lead of contemporary media theorists such as W.J.T. Mitchell, Mark Hansen, and John Peters—who in turn appear to be recuperating and reconfiguring earlier insights from Marshall McLuhan (1964) and Friedrich Kittler (1999)—FNS posit that media are infrastructural insofar as they secure a “general environment for living” (Mitchell & Hansen, 2010: xii) and function as “crafters of existence” (Peters, 2015: 15).

In their second hermeneutic wager, FNS invite us to think of media as vital or vitalist. Not only does media serve as the background of “our infrastructures of being” (Peters, 2015: 15), it supplies multiple bio-technical platforms that energize systems of social affiliation and action. Through different linkages and assemblages, media disposes people and things in time and space as they engage and disengage. Invoking the work of Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska (2012: xiii), FNS suggest that “*life itself* is increasingly ‘articulated as medium’,” where the “interlocking of biological and technical processes of mediation” habituates bodies/persons to operate as nodes and stations shaped by machine memory and steered by continually updated network information. There are ominous hints of mischief and darkness here. This hybrid “human/machine” grammar governing the network blurs the distinction between intention and instrumentation as one is constantly driven to, as Wendy Chun puts it, “updating to remain the same” (2016). Such is the task of the network Sisyphus. As FNS caution, media’s bio-technical platforms call into question our default humanist political vocabulary of “agency, subjectivity, representation, authority, sovereignty, the people, the public sphere, and populism.”

Finally, following in the tracks of a string of affect theorists ranging from Gilles Deleuze to Thomas Lamarre and Brian Massumi to Sarah Ahmed, FNS suggest that contemporary media infrastructures have ushered in and suffused a new sensorium and concomitantly instituted a new mode of perception, a new “distribution of the sensible.” In this new media ecology, the production and circulation of a massive number of images dominates the everyday sensorium that stimulates our senses and educates our sensibilities. In this image economy, according to FNS, humans are often relegated to the position of bystanders, the objects of bio-technical inscriptions. Here, FNS cite Trevor Paglen (2016), who while extending the earlier insights of Harun Farocki (2004), makes two stunning claims: first, “the overwhelming majority of images are now made by machines for other machines”; and second, “we no longer look at images—images look at us.” Whatever the other import of these enigmatic propositions, the imbrication of bio-technical systems has ruptured the modernist equation between cognition and affect, with the latter deranging (not erasing) the hegemonic priority of the former.

This alleged turn to tracking embodied affect, in private as well as in public, is not altogether new. Amidst the affect saturated space of the metropolis, Baudelaire initially discerned the pathos of bodies in motion. It was later theorized by Simmel, allegorized by Benjamin, aestheticized by Kracauer, and finally, totalized by Debord and celebrated by Baudrillard. In the same vein, Negt and Kluge (1993) were cognizant of such an affective turn when they revived the idea of *experience* as a corrective to Habermas’s influential thesis about the 18th century rise of a bourgeois public sphere that privileged rational-critical *speech* (1989). Thus, the affective turn in media studies has been long in the making. The distinctive feature of the thesis FNS are advancing, as I understand it, pertains to how affect operates in its historical specificity today, that is, how it springs at the interstices of the bio-technical systems and mediates their functioning at the human level without full transparency or critical understanding. And yet paradoxically, affect opens and attunes us to a new mode of navigating the mediascape. In a modern metropolis, we would be lost without our affective armature.⁸

If the three hermeneutic wagers FNS placed payout, then media thus conceived—as an ontological infrastructure, as a bio-technological life force (vitality), and as an affect saturated

navigational space—makes the notion of “media populism” legible and palpable. According to the protocols of this triple wager, media precedes both persons and things, the two constituent features of our manifest image of the world (Sellars, 1962); and further, history’s traces, signs, and figures, are inscribed in and by media and thus readable only in and by media.⁹ At this point, FNS are clearly gesturing towards a new socio-historical conjuncture and the concomitant mode of being in the world that cannot be simply characterized as “modern” or modernity, without further qualification and redaction. To say that our modernity is long in its making, global in its scope and multiple in its manifestations does not fully capture the character of a networked society ensnared by the technological sublime and afflicted with social myopia. Media populism, much like “print capitalism” in an earlier phase of modernity, signals a rupture within the given and an opening towards a new conjuncture.

Within a present thus historicized, the notion of “media populism” invites us to think and theorize the political, especially the resurgent populisms of the left and the right. How might one capture the color and character of our political present with media populism as a guiding (or goading) trope? If our sensorium—what we see, hear, and feel—is curated from elsewhere, say by the “format” protocols of a technological device or artifact,¹⁰ what happens to the rational-critical speech necessary for the formation of a democratic will and essential to the public sphere? We do not know. In conclusion, I would like to venture a few observations regarding the upsurge of the people in the political realm and beyond and the media/mediated fascination with the collective presence of people in motion, especially in crowd formations.

First, media populism heralds another coming of the people to the stage of history. This is yet another modern springtime of the people and runs parallel to Huntington’s (1991) third wave of democratic movements (underway since the mid-1970s with *la Transición* in Spain, the *Revolução dos Cravos* in Portugal, and *Metapolitefsi* in Greece). Paradoxically, it also runs parallel to the global predominance of neoliberal governmentality which subjects every sphere of human life, every bit of time and labor, to economization and its distinctive rationality. The resultant elevation of the *homo oeconomicus*, preoccupied solely with self-investment and monetization, leads to an evacuation of the political (Brown, 2015). How might one assess, if not reconcile,

these two opposed readings of our time (Camaroff, 2011)? What sort of coming and staging of the people is underway? What sort of dialectical image of this historical moment does their latest arrival represent?

To begin with, the coming of the people is no longer an exclusively Euro-American affair, fulfilling a sovereign historical destiny foretold long ago in the Greek city-state. It is no longer confined and contained within that fabled narrative that follows European protagonists from the Athenian agora to the Roman Republic, through the Italian city-states during the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the age of revolutions in the 17th and 18th centuries, to high modernity, the end of history, and liberal democracy's alleged triumph (Fukuyama, 1992).

The children of the lesser gods in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere, people of darker shades and hues who allegedly needed long colonial apprenticeship to awaken to their own humanity, who were granted a place on the periphery of Euro-American history since they were seen to have none of their own, are now swarming at the gates. Their eruptive arrival does not conform to the proper narrative telos or the traditional liberal/republican optics of what it is to be a people—free and equal, sovereign and self-governing. Theirs is not a progressive tale of securing liberal rights or of embodying republican virtues. Their collective agency is not a stepping stone to the individual agency of the citizen, politico-juridical subjectivity, or rationality borne of moral responsibility and economic calculation. This deviation from the script has prompted liberal-republican ideologues of the West (as well as ideologues trained in the West), to wonder aloud, in the face of the resurgence of what they fear and condemn as parasitic populism, if these *other* people are culturally prepared to shoulder the mantle of freedom, sovereignty, and self-governance.

Be that as it may, the people are here. They are everywhere, in staggering numbers. Europe and North America are no longer, if ever they were, exempt from this virus of the people/populism. What makes liberals and republicans anxious today is not the armed Marxist guerillas in the hills, nor the elusive bomb-throwing anarchists lurking in the dark, but ordinary people in streets and squares, uncalled, uncounted, and unappointed. The explosive comingling of people in history and people without history has begun (Gaonkar, 2014 & 2021). Not only has it begun, but it appears to have no end. While there have been

reactionary reversals and recessions, notably with the Arab Spring of 2010 to 2012, there is no countervailing force that can arrest, neutralize, or negate it. The people keep coming.

Second, this coming and comingling of the people, in all its hybrid mutations and manifestations, has become a ubiquitous trope, circulating incessantly across media, mediation, and media ecologies, agitating public institutions, and animating the public sphere. Like Medusa's head, its sight stuns human eyes and commands the attention of representational technologies, from writing to cameras.

In practical terms, the distinction between mainstream media and oppositional media (including populist media) has blurred as the former is driven to monetize its audience under the imperatives of the economics of attention (Citton, 2017). Marginal or oppositional movements no longer need to have their own organs of publicity to disseminate their message. The open platforms of so-called *new media* have altered the publicity of opposition. If the mainstream media denies coverage on account of numerical insignificance or ideological deviation, the exclusion is no longer decisive. Similarly, the affordances of *social media* have reorganized the logistics of connecting, mobilizing, assembling, and forming affinity groups for promoting solidarities and sowing strife (Castells, 2012). What matters is the magnitude of the audience's attention; friendly or hostile, distracted or prurient, makes no difference. Only numbers matter, the quality and affect are fugitive. While access to media remains asymmetrical, favoring the powers that be, the imperative to extract and monetize value from attention and circulation has scrambled and eroded a hegemony that had held steady from the Penny Press to broadcast media.

It is not that mainstream media has shed its bias. It still marks radical movements and counter hegemonic forces and, as Todd Gitlin demonstrated long ago in his study of media coverage of the "new left" in the 1960s and 1970s, frames them unfavorably (1972). But that bias, still persistent, is displaced by the logic of attention. Media seeks spectacle, and spectacle is people. Debord's thesis is being inverted (1967). So is Plato's critique of mimesis and Rousseau's polemic against theatre and theatricality. While the capitalist machine continues to mount spectacle after spectacle to benumb and tame the masses, and to make them yield to the logic of capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009), something unexpected has happened: the spectacle itself has

mutated. Drawing on Farocki and Paglen, one might say that people don't behold spectacles but rather spectacles behold people or, perhaps, people behold themselves as a spectacle. This coming of the people has been evident in cinema since its inception. We watch as they descend Sergei Eisenstein's Potemkin Stairs in Odessa, run through Gillo Pontecorvo's Casbah in Algiers, and cross Louis Malle's Howrah Bridge in Calcutta.¹¹ The camera is transfixed, the crowd, its discrete object of desire. In this regard, the camera is not alone. Capitalism covets the crowd. Markets and bazaars covet the crowd. Politicians (from Obama to Trump and Sanders) covet the crowd. Hollywood and Bollywood covet the crowd. Soccer and cricket covet the crowd. Big tech and their algorithms covet the crowd. Mega churches and the Hajj covet the crowd. Crowds are not just events, but media events. It is no longer the case that the people are sated with "bread and circuses," the people are now the bread and the circus.

Then, who is afraid of the crowd (Mazzarella, 2010)? Liberals and republicans, ever suspicious of masses and multitudes, cling to Le Bon's old equation: crowds beget mobs, and mobs spawn riots, and riots are violent, and violence destroys property (1895). This equation underwrites the ideology of "law and order" and sustains the protocols of "discipline and surveillance" imposed by nation states across the globe, democratic and authoritarian alike.

Hence, the dominant aporia of our time: coveting crowds and fearing riots. Media populism is another way of naming this aporia. Media is our only recourse to managing this aporia and navigating its vicissitudes. The question remains: Now that the sleeping sovereign has awakened, can the camera ride the tiger without ending up in its belly and what happens to the camera when it is lodged in the belly of the sovereign beast, the parasite and the chameleon rolled into one?

PS:

The seemingly interminable days of COVID-19 during which this "afterword" was composed have laid bare our addiction, as vessels of capital, to crowds. Perhaps, Plato's "great beast" is not the "demos," but the spectacle of capital.

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Notes

1. The idea of “systematically distorted communication” was developed by Jürgen Habermas in 1970.
2. For an interesting discussion of Thomas Hobbes’ idea of the “sleeping sovereign,” see Richard Tuck (2016).
3. I am here drawing on the distinction between “marked” and “unmarked” as initially proposed in linguistics, which has been productively deployed in political and cultural analysis and interpretation.
4. In these instances, the claim of majoritarian support is highly dubious. Their electoral support rarely ever exceeds 50% of votes cast, let alone of the eligible voters. Majority here is a strictly electoral phenomenon and effect.
5. For an alternative historically grounded conceptualization of populist movements prior to the 1970s, see, Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (ed. 1969).
6. Postel (2007) devotes an entire chapter in his book to the populists’ abiding faith in education as the panacea for every woe afflicting ordinary Americans caught in the vicissitudes of changing times.
7. Not surprisingly, many of the women involved with this populist movement would figure prominently as leaders in the Women’s suffrage movement a decade later.
8. This is analogous to what Fredric Jameson (1990) calls “cognitive mapping” which presupposes and is accompanied by affective bricolage.
9. This wagger taxes and stretches Derrida’s thesis about “writing and difference,” (1976 & 1978) as one is drawn beyond the table of graphemes into a vortex of signs, sounds, screens, memes, membranes, apertures, glitches, scratches, bots, and much else

generated, assembled, computed, and circulated by algorithmic design and logic.

10. For an excellent account of how “format” functions as a technical and cultural artifact, see Jonathan Sterne (2012).

11. This refers to two films and a TV documentary: Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) and Louis Malle’s *Phantom India* (1969).

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