

## CHAPTER 10

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# POPULISM IN LATIN AMERICA

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LATIN America is the land of populism.<sup>1</sup> From the 1930s and 1940s until the present, populist leaders have dominated the region's political landscapes. Mass politics emerged with populist challenges to the rule of elites who used fraud to remain in power. The struggle for free and open elections, and for the incorporation of those excluded from politics, is associated with the names of the leaders of the first wave of populism: Juan and Eva Perón in Argentina, Getulio Vargas in Brazil, Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre in Perú, or José María Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador. Populist movements and governments produced deep lasting political loyalties and cleavages. Like their classical predecessors, radical populists such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador polarized their polities and the academic community into those who regarded them as democratic innovators, and those who considered them a threat to democracy.

This chapter explains the commonalities and differences between the different subtypes of Latin American populism: classical, neoliberal, and radical. It examines why these different manifestations of populism emerged, and their democratizing and inclusionary promises while seeking power. Then it analyzes their impact on democracy after gaining office. Whereas populists seeking power promised to include the excluded, once in power populists attacked the institutions of liberal democracy, grabbed power, aimed to control social movements and civil society, and clashed with the privately owned media. The next section analyzes the mechanisms used by populist leaders to forge links with their followers: populist organizations, clientelism, the mass media, and discourse. Subsequently I explain why populism continues to reappear in some countries, whereas in others it is either confined to the margins of the political system or not present.

Before proceeding, and because populism is such a contested category, I will explain how I use this category. Borrowing from strategic and discursive-ideological approaches, I understand populism as a Manichaean discourse that divides politics and society as the struggle between two irreconcilable and antagonistic camps: the people and the oligarchy or the power block. Under populism a leader claims to embody the unitary will of the people in their

struggle for liberation. Populism produces strong popular identities and is a strategy of top-down mobilization that clashes with the autonomous demands of social movement organizations. However, populist glorification of common people and their attacks on elites could open spaces for common people to press for their agendas. The tension between top-down mobilization and autonomous mobilization from below is characteristic of populist episodes.

## CLASSICAL POPULISM

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In Latin America populism emerged in the 1930s and 1940s with the crisis of the oligarchical social order that combined liberal-inspired constitutions (division of powers, and elections) with patrimonial practices and values in predominantly rural societies. These estate-based societies had relations of domination and subordination characterized by unequal reciprocity. Institutional and everyday practices of domination excluded the majority of the population from politics and from the public sphere, which were kept in the hands of elites.

Processes of urbanization, industrialization, and a generalized crisis of paternal authority allowed populist leaders to emerge. Classical populist leaders of the 1930s and 1940s such as Juan Perón and José María Velasco Ibarra fought against electoral fraud, expanded the franchise, and were exalted as the embodiment of the nation's true, uncorrupted traditions and values against those of foreign-oriented elites. In more economically developed nations such as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, populist presidents pursued nationalist and redistributive social policies that coincided with the period of import substitution industrialization (ISI). Populism also emerged in agrarian contexts. In Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru, populism was not linked to industrialization, even though, as in the industrializing republics, it led to the political inclusion of previously excluded electors.

In some countries populist leaders built enduring political organizations, such as Peru's APRA (Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana), Bolivia's Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (Nationalist Revolutionary Movement, MNR), and Argentina's Peronist party. In other countries such as Ecuador, populist leaders did not create or institutionalize formal parties, and electoral coalitions were assembled for different electoral contests. Kenneth [Roberts \(2006\)](#) explained these different approaches to institution building in terms of the levels of polarization and confrontation provoked by different

populist experiences. In some cases, such as Argentina and Peru, the polarized construction of politics ended in a total and fundamental struggle or cleavage between “the people” and “the oligarchy.” To sustain conflict with the elite, leaders needed to organize followers in political parties and in civil society organizations. In other experiences, such as that of Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador, there was political but not social polarization. The level of confrontation was not as intense, and Velasco Ibarra did not feel impelled to create formal political and social organizations.

Populist leaders exalted workers as the soul of their nations while simultaneously repressing and co-opting existing labor groups. Social historians have shown how workers strategically used populist political openings to press for autonomous demands against specific bosses and elites. The labor historian Joel Wolfe (1994) described a form of workers’ populism under Vargas. Similarly, Daniel James (1988) showed how Argentine workers used the Peronist opening and discourse to attack the symbols of their exclusion from the public sphere and to demand their recognition as workers and citizens. Perón extended the notion of democracy from political rights to include workers’ participation in the social and economic life of the nation.

Latin American populists were famous for turning the stigmas of the poor into virtues. In the 1930s and 1940s the elites of Buenos Aires referred to the internal migrants using the term “cabecita negra” to refer to “the subject’s dark skin and black hair” (Milanesio, 2010: 55). They called them “black Peronists,” or “greasers”—evoking not only the dirt and oil on workers’ overalls, but all that is cheap or of bad taste. Juan and his wife Eva Perón transformed the stigmas of these terms. Eva, for instance, used “the term *grasita* to affectionately refer to the poor” (Milanesio, 2010: 57).

The democratic credentials of classical populists lies in their struggles for open and free elections, and their demands to incorporate the excluded. Peronism expanded the franchise, and voter turnout during Perón’s first government grew from 18 to 50 percent of the population. In 1951, under Perón, women won the right to vote, and 64 percent of women voted for the Peronist ticket (Plotkin, 2003: 165). “During Perón’s terms in office the share of the national GDP represented by wages increased from 37 to 47 per cent, while real wages increased by 40 per cent between 1946 and 1949” (Plotkin, 2010: 273).

Latin American populists privileged notions of democracy based on the aesthetic and liturgical incorporation of common people in mass rallies more than the institutionalization of popular participation through the rule of law.

This explains why the heyday of Latin American populism was associated with moments of collective action such as 17 October 1945 when crowds took over streets and plazas to show their support for Colonel Juan Perón, who claimed to be the embodiment of their will. However, as critics of populism have been arguing for a long time, mobilization and participation in mass rallies did not entail autonomy ([Germani, 1971](#)). Populist redemption was based on the authoritarian appropriation of the people's will. Because populist politicians claimed to embody the people, and the people's will was not given institutional channels to express itself, populist regimes replaced rational deliberation with plebiscitary acclamation. Moreover, due to their Manichean discourse and the resulting polarization of political and social cleavages, populist moments resembled situations of war. The foes and friends of populism saw each other as enemies and not as democratic rivals who seek negotiations and agreements.

One of the principal legacies of classical populism was its deep ambivalence toward liberal democracy. That is, classical populism was democratizing to the extent that previously excluded groups were brought into the political system; at the same time, however, populist leaders refused to accept the constraints and limitations of liberal constitutional principles that served to constrain state power, guarantee the political autonomy of civil society, and assure pluralism ([Peruzzotti, 2008](#)). After winning his first democratic election in 1946 Perón said: “we have given the people the opportunity to choose, in the cleanest election in the history of Argentina, between us and our opponents. The people have elected us, so the problem is resolved. What we want is now done in the Republic of Argentina” ([Peruzzotti, 2008](#): 109).

## NEOLIBERAL POPULISM

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Differently from classical populism, which brought marginalized people into the political community, neoliberal populism took place in the 1990s in nations where most had the right to vote and were already organized by political parties. Leaders such as Carlos Menem in Argentina and Alberto Fujimori in Peru were elected after the failure of import substitution industrialization led to economic catastrophes, as inflation reached levels of 30 to 50 percent per month. They blamed traditional politicians, arguing that they had appropriated the people's sovereignty and led their countries into economic chaos. Some neoliberal populists like Fujimori and Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil ran as political outsiders. Others like Menem got to power against the wishes of

their party's leadership, and Abdalá Bucaram in Ecuador used his personalistic party to challenge the political establishment.

Political parties and elites were portrayed not only as out of touch with the needs and desires of the electorate, but also as enemies of "the people." Fujimori and Bucaram were elected as symbols of the rejection of traditional white political elites. In January, 1990, when Fujimori appeared as the third contestant in opinion polls, the candidate of a coalition of right-wing forces, the internationally acclaimed novelist Mario Vargas Llosa was asked to give his opinion about Fujimori. He replied, "But nobody knows that *chinito* (little China man)." The next day Fujimori opened a major rally in a Lima shantytown with the phrase, "Here we are, the *chinitos* and the *cholitos*" [poor mestizos]. In this fashion, the election became a confrontation between the white elite (*blanquitos* and *pitucos*) and the non-white common people: *chinitos* and *cholitos* (Degregori, 1991: 115). Fujimori, like many Peruvians of indigenous background, was the son of immigrants who had to struggle with "deficient" Spanish, and was discriminated against by traditional white elites. Hence the allure of his simple slogan: "a president like you."

Similarly, after Ecuador's former right-wing president, León Febres Cordero, stated in 1996 that the voters for Bucaram were a "bunch of prostitutes and thieves," Bucaram transformed the meaning of these insults used to describe his base of support by saying that the only prostitutes and thieves were the members of the Ecuadorian oligarchy. During his presidential campaigns and short six-month term in office Bucaram claimed to embody the authentic values, cultures, and aspirations of the poor against those of foreign-oriented elites.

Fernando Collor cultivated the image of a young and energetic political outsider, a messiah acting above and beyond the interests of workers' unions or employers' associations. His mission was to destroy the privileges of inefficient bureaucrats, the *marajás*, to bring redemption to his followers. In the 1989 presidential campaign, Menem projected the image of a winner who has triumphed in two mythologized arenas of social mobility: sports and show business. That is why a few months after becoming president he declared, "I am the president of the nation and I play soccer with Maradona. What else can I ask in life?" (Novaro and Palerm, 1996: 213).

Illustrating how populism lacks an ideology and can be either right or left-wing, once in power these leaders abandoned the nationalist and statist policies of their classical predecessors. They shrank the size of the state and opened their economies. In many instances they privatized what their populist

predecessors had nationalized. Draconian shock treatments brought inflation down in Argentina and Peru. In Argentina it “fell from 3,079 percent to 8 percent between 1989 and 1994, while in Peru it declined from 7,650 percent to under 40 percent between 1990 and 1993” (Weyland, 1999: 188).

Neoliberal populists met with differing degrees of success in exercising and holding onto power. Abdalá Bucaram in Ecuador lasted scarcely six months; lacking an institutional base, he was removed by the Congress on the dubious legal grounds that he was mentally incapable of governing. Fernando Collor in Brazil similarly had a weak support base in the legislature and could not survive corruption scandals. By contrast, Carlos Menem and Alberto Fujimori were both reelected to second terms. Their success was explained by how they had lowered hyperinflation and the fact that the privatization of state-owned enterprises gave them funds to pursue patronage and clientelism. Ultimately, the Fujimori regime collapsed under the weight of scandals related to corruption and electoral fraud (he is currently serving time in a Peruvian prison for his involvement in corruption and human rights abuses). Menem’s quest for a third term was ruled unconstitutional.

Neoliberal populist leaders had a variety of effects on democratization in their respective countries. Under Menem, the transformation of Perónist identity from an antagonistic opposition between the people and the oligarchy into a more amorphous and less confrontational version with broader appeal made neoliberal populism, in Kurt Weyland’s (2001: 16) words, “more representative than classical populism and more compatible with liberal democracy.” In Fujimori’s Peru liberal democratic institutions were attacked and destroyed. Fujimori “denounced members of Congress as ‘unproductive charlatans,’ Congress as a ‘large, heavy, thick-skinned pachyderm,’ and judges as ‘jackals.’ Fujimori belittled not only existing political parties, but also the concept of parties; they were ‘*palabrería*’ (all talk and no action)” (McClintock, 2013: 223).

## **RADICAL POPULISM**

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The extensive bibliography on the turn to the left and the rebirth of radical populism in Latin America agrees that the emergence of the governments of Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, and Rafael Correa was explained by three endogenous factors (Weyland, Madrid, and Hunter, 2010; Levitsky and Roberts, 2011; de la Torre and Arnson, 2013). The first was a crisis of political



representation. Traditional political parties and the institutional framework of democracy were in crisis. Parties were perceived as instruments of local and foreign elites that implemented neoliberal policies that increased social inequality. These leaders rose to power with platforms that promised to wipe away corrupt politicians and traditional parties, to experiment with participatory forms of democracy, and to implement policies to redistribute income.

Radical populists brought back the old leftist utopias of socialism and revolution, but with a new twist. Instead of violence, these leaders advocated for the revolutionary role of constituent power. Yet similarly to the old left, they disdained constituted power. Constituent power was understood as a revolutionary force that ought to be permanently activated to found again from scratch all the corrupt political institutions that had served the interests of foreign powers and local elites. They were elected with the promise to convene constitutional assemblies that, with the participation of social movements and common citizens, were tasked to draft new constitutions. These new constitutions expanded citizens' rights while simultaneously concentrating power in the executive.

The second cause that explains the rebirth of radical populism in Latin America was widespread popular resistance to neoliberalism. On February 27, 1989, the Venezuelan Caracazo—a massive insurrection against the hike in the price of gasoline—took place. “Many cities were paralyzed by the multitudes who blocked roads and looted thousands of commercial establishments” (López Maya and Panzarelli, 2013: 224). This rebellion conveyed elite nightmares of a savage and uncivilized rabble that invaded the centers of civility. These constructions of the poor as the rabble and as the antithesis to reason and civilized behavior allowed or justified the state's fierce and brutal repression, which ended in at least four hundred deaths. Hugo Chávez, who led a failed coup in 1992, was elected in 1998 with the promise to get rid of neoliberalism and the cartel of corrupt politicians.

Between 1997 and 2005 the three elected presidents of Ecuador—Abdalá Bucaram (1996–1997), Jamil Mahuad (1998–2000), and Lucio Gutiérrez (2003–2005)—were deposed in events where social movements and citizens occupied public spaces to protest against neoliberalism and political corruption. Sociologist León Zamosc (2013: 265) interpreted these uprisings as instances of popular impeachment that applied “the ultimate accountability sanction for a president: removal from office.” Rafael Correa, a college professor who never belonged to a political party, was elected in 2006 with a



platform to reverse neoliberalism, convene a constituent assembly, and revive national sovereignty.

From 2000 to 2003 Bolivia underwent a cycle of protest and political turmoil that resulted in the collapse of the party system established in 1985, and of the neoliberal economic model. Coalitions of rural and urban indigenous organizations, coca growers, and middle-class sectors fought against water privatization, increasing taxation, the forced eradication of coca leaves, and the surrender of gas reserves to multinational interests. Democratic legitimacy was understood to lie in crowd action where the people directly expressed its sovereignty. The state increasingly relied on repression, in turn radicalizing protestors. In the end, President Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada was forced to leave Bolivia and was succeeded by his vice president Carlos Mesa. Insurgents refused to take power, and “Morales supported a constitutional exit from the crisis in 2003” ([Postero, 2010](#): 14). The insurgents accomplished their goals of getting rid of the neoliberal model, and defending Bolivia’s national resources.

A third cause was that citizens perceived that politicians and neoliberal elites had surrendered national sovereignty to the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the US government. Venezuela had changed its pro-third world foreign policy, and become an advocate of neoliberal reform and free trade. In a desperate move to stop hyperinflation in 2000 Ecuador had given up its national currency the Sucre for the US dollar. Bolivia had undergone social strife and human rights abuses as the military unsuccessfully followed US policies of forceful eradication of coca leaf production. Radical populists promised to bring back the interest of the nation state, and to build a multipolar world. They had anti-globalization and anti-United States postures at the core of their foreign policy rhetoric and strategies.

Despite important differences, the governments of Hugo Chávez–Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador represent a new and distinct phase of radical populism in the region ([de la Torre and Arnson, 2013](#)). First, these leaders engaged in permanent political campaigns, using the convening of frequent elections to displace older elites, rally supporters, and consolidate their hegemony. Second, these leaders claimed to be the embodiment of superior forms of democracy that would solve the participatory and representative deficits of liberal democracy, and fulfill the democratizing goal of promoting equality and social justice. For Correa, for example, the essence of democratic citizenship resided in the socio-economic sphere and depended on state policies to advance social justice. For Chávez and Maduro, advancing democracy depended on replacing the

unresponsive institutions of liberal democracy with new forms of direct, participatory democracy. And for Morales democracy meant replacing and/or complementing liberal institutions with forms of indigenous communal democracy designed to enhance indigenous participation.

Third, constituent assemblies drafted new constitutions in all three countries to “refound” the nation. The goal was to establish a different kind of democracy, based on elections, but also on a new constitutional order that concentrates power in the hands of the president. Majoritarian mobilization led by a personalistic leader took precedence over the checks and balances and respect for basic civil rights inherent in liberal democracy. Mechanisms of horizontal accountability by other branches of government and an independent press have been replaced by a variant of vertical accountability involving frequent elections, referendums, and plebiscites.

Fourth, in emphasizing substantive democracy, all three regimes relied on state intervention in the economy in the name of distributing wealth and reducing poverty and inequality. Although this statist, redistributionist aspect of populism is not new, governments in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador were rich in hydrocarbons and reaped huge benefits from the commodity boom of the 2000s that sent oil and natural gas prices to record levels. As a result of enhanced revenues, public investment and social spending skyrocketed and poverty rates and, to a lesser extent, inequality fell when the prices of oil and other commodities were high (Lusting, 2009). Populist social programs had the advantage of rapidly targeting the poor; such programs served to boost the popularity of presidents and functioned as a visible instrument for maintaining power. At the same time, however, they suffered from major flaws in design. Social programs were haphazard and politicized, lacking in efficiency, transparency, and institutionalization. Because they were tied to the persona of the president—who distributed benefits primarily to his or her political supporters rather than on the basis of universal, objective criteria—programs were unlikely to survive beyond the mandate of a particular government. The fiscal foundation of social programs, especially those that rely so heavily on oil and other windfall commodity rents, were unsustainable in the long run (Weyland, 2006). Falling prices of oil led to a dramatic increase of poverty in Venezuela. In 2015 the level of poverty was 45 percent, three points higher than it was when Chávez was first elected in 1998 (Arenas, 2016).

Despite similarities, there are important differences in how these governments were linked with social movements. Evo Morales came to power at the peak of indigenous-led popular protest against neoliberalism and pacted

democracy. His party was the political instrument of strong social movements. Participation in Bolivia was to a large extent grounded in communitarian traditions where all participate and deliberate until a decision is made. Leaders at all levels were accountable to their social base. Participation under Morales was more bottom-up, and organizations of the subaltern had the capacity to force the government to reverse policies (Crabtree, 2013).

Differently from Morales, who came to power at the peak of a cycle of protest, Correa was elected when the indigenous movement entered into a crisis, temporarily losing its capacity to engage in sustained collective action. The Ecuadorian opposition did not have the resources to engage in acts of collective defiance against Correa's administration, nor were the stakes perceived to be as high as in Bolivia or Venezuela. Coupled with Correa's technocratic leadership style, his government did not organize the subaltern beyond elections, and has not promoted mechanisms of participatory democracy at the local and community levels (de la Torre, 2013).

The relative weakness of social movements and the exclusion of the informal sector from corporatist organizations during the reign of the two party system known as *Punto fijo* democracy allowed Chávez to create organizations of the subaltern from the top down. The opposition had the organizational strength and the perception that the stakes were serious enough to use collective action to defy and even to try to topple Chávez. The government responded by further organizing popular sectors. Even though organizations of the subaltern were created from the top down, citizens used these organizations to try to push for their autonomous agendas.

The populist view of a homogeneous and inherently virtuous people contributed to the creation of authoritarian governments in Venezuela and Ecuador. Chávez claimed to be the embodiment of the Venezuelan people: "This is not about Hugo Chávez, this about a people" (Zúquete, 2008: 100). Because his mission was to redeem his people from oppression he could say: "I demand absolute loyalty to me. I am not an individual, I am the people" (Gómez Calcaño and Arenas, 2013: 20). Similarly, after winning his second presidential election in 2009 Rafael Correa asserted, "Ecuador voted for itself." He portrayed his struggle on behalf of the poor and the nation as heroic: "We defeated the representatives of the most reactionary sectors of the oligarchy, corrupt bankers, and the media that defend the past." He claimed that his revolution "is irreversible, and nobody would stop it." "We are ready to risk our lives to bring change" (de la Torre, 2012: 256–7).

Chávez did not face political rivals but the oligarchy defined as the enemies

of the people, “those self-serving elites who work against the homeland” (Zúquete, 2008: 105). He confronted the oligarchy using a polarizing discourse. He called traditional politicians imbeciles, squalid ones, and little Yankees. He referred to the owners of the media as the “four horsemen of the Apocalypse.” Similarly Rafael Correa faced a long list of enemies to his government, his people, and his nation. The list included traditional politicians, the owners of the privately owned media, journalists, the leadership of autonomous social movements, the infantile left, and almost anybody who questioned his policies.

The populist category of the people does not necessarily need to be imagined as one, and does not necessarily lead to the creation of an authoritarian government. In Bolivia, who can speak on behalf of the Bolivian people is contested between powerful social movements and Evo Morales, who at times has tried to embody the will of a unitary people. The Constitution of 2009 declared Bolivia a plurinational and communitarian state. The MAS did not use exclusionary ethnic appeals; on the contrary they constructed the notion of the people as multiethnic and plural (Madrid, 2012). Yet at times Evo Morales has attempted to be the only voice of the people. When indigenous people from the lowlands challenged his policies of mineral extraction they were depicted as manipulated by foreign NGOs, and as not truly indigenous. Morales’s regime attempted to impose a hegemonic vision of indigeneity as loyalty to his government. But because of the power of social movements Morales has not been able to impose visions of the people-as-one. In contemporary Bolivia, according to anthropologist Nancy Postero (2015: 422), we are witnessing an “ongoing struggle to define who counts as *el pueblo boliviano*, and what that means for Bolivian democracy.”

## **LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS: HOW ARE THEY LINKED, ORGANIZED, AND MOBILIZED?**

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Researchers have distinguished four linkages between leaders and followers in the three subtypes of populism discussed in this chapter: populist organization, clientelism, the mass media—particularly television—and populist discourse. Populist organizations are based on low levels of institutionalization (Hawkins, 2008). Leaders set their agendas and strategies, and it is difficult to build identities that differ from the image of the people as constructed by leaders. Even though populists actively organized supporters within their movements,

these organizations are based on insularity, as they do not promote solidarity with similar organizations in civil society. Populist organizations do not value pluralism because they adopt the idea of the popular as an undifferentiated fusion of “the romantic notion of the people—folk—with the Marxian idea of class ... transforming the people into a unified, homogeneous entity” (Avritzer, 2002: 72). Hence the people can only be organized under organizations that are loyal to the leaders. Yet sometimes, common people use populist organizations, the openings of the political system under populism, and the rhetorical claims that they are the true nation to present their own demands.

Populist organizations created by Chávez’s government such as Bolivarian Circles, Communal Councils, Urban Land Committees, and Technical Water Roundtables illustrate the tension between the autonomous organizations of the subaltern and their subordination to a charismatic leader. In order to promote the revolutionary process, President Chávez encouraged the formation of Bolivarian Circles in June, 2001. These were “small groups of seven to fifteen people ... intended to study the ideology of Bolivarianism, discuss local issues and defend the revolution” (Raby, 2006: 188). In their heyday, Bolivarian Circles boasted approximately 2.2 million members and had an active role in the massive demonstrations rescuing President Chávez when he was temporarily removed from office in an April, 2002, coup d’état. Kirk Hawkins and David Hansen (2006: 127) showed that mobilization of the Bolivarian Circles was not necessarily based in the “kind of autonomy that democracy requires.” Their study demonstrated that even though Bolivarian Circles did constitute forms of participation for poor people, they often worked as clientelar networks to transfer resources to neighborhoods where the president had supporters.

Communal Councils were conceived as institutions to promote popular power and were seen as the foundation for the future establishment of a socialist direct and pyramidal democracy. Critics and supporters of the Bolivarian Revolution agree that communal Councils so far have faced the same problems as the Bolivarian Circles, namely the persistence of clientelism in the exchange of social services for political support, and a charismatic style of rule that neutralizes or prevents autonomous grassroots inputs (Wilpert, 2007: 195–204).

Bolivarian Circles and Communal Councils may have experienced problems of autonomy because they were created from above. Other institutions such as the Urban Land Committees and Technical Water Roundtables, for example, accepted more autonomous grassroots inputs. The government gave squatter

settlements collective titles to land on which precarious self-built dwellings were situated. Through this process, “the community forms an urban land committee to administer its new collective property and to undertake and demand support for material improvement such as water, sewerage and electricity services or road paving” (Raby, 2006: 188–9). Similarly, local water committees “arrange the distribution of water between neighboring communities which share the same water mains” (Raby, 2006: 189). Nevertheless, Urban Land and Water Committees lacked autonomy from the charismatic leader, as Chávez was the guiding force for these institutions (García, 2007).

Populist parties and movements are organized through formal bureaucratic party networks and clientelist and informal networks that distribute resources, information, and jobs to the poor. The first round of studies on political clientelism showed that the poor were not irrational masses that voted for populist demagogic candidates. The poor voted instrumentally for the candidate with the best capacity to deliver goods and services (Menéndez Carrión, 1986).

The poor in Latin America live under conditions of material and legal deprivation, and in environments of dire violence and insecurity. Because their constitutionally prescribed civil rights are not always respected, the poor rely on politicians and their networks of brokers to have access to a bed in a public hospital, or a job. Brokers are the intermediaries between politicians and poor people. They hoard information and resources and are connected to wider networks and cliques of politicians and state officials. Formal bureaucratic rules work together with personalist cliques and networks of friends who dispense “favours,” including corruption.

Because the poor can choose to leave a broker and join a different network, brokers’ positions are unstable, and the poor cannot be seen as a manipulated and captive voting base. The poor can exit a network, they can also choose to not vote as the broker requested, or might feel compelled to repay a favor to the broker. The unreliable nature of political support gives certain advantages to the poor. For the system of exchanges to work, politicians have to deliver at least some resources.

Like other political parties, populists exchange services for votes. But in addition to offering material rewards, populist exchanges go together with a discourse that portrays common people as the essence of the nation. In addition to exchanging material goods for votes, populist networks also generate political identities (Auyero, 2001). The resilience of Peronism among the poor,



for example, was partially explained by the informal and clientelist networks of the Peronist Party, which in addition to delivering material resources to the poor recreated political and cultural identities (Auyero, 2001; Levitsky, 2001).

Latin American populists were media innovators. Eva Perón used the radio to communicate directly with her followers, transforming politics into a melodrama where she staged her love to the poor.

Her scenarios never changed and her characters were stereotyped by the same adjectives: Perón was always “glorious,” the people “marvelous,” the oligarchy *egoísta y vende patria* [selfish and corrupt], and she was a “humble” or “weak” woman, “burning her life for them” so that social justice could be achieved, *cueste lo que cueste y caiga quien caiga* [at whatever cost and regardless of consequences]. (Navarro, 1982: 59)

Television became one of the main venues used by populists to win elections, and to govern. Populists creatively blended exposure on television with traditional mechanisms of vote gathering, like mass rallies and clientelist networks. Some like Carlos Menem were innovators. Following the example of Pope John Paul II, he visited common people in their neighborhoods in his *menemovil*. His image had more in common with a “religious leader or a show business celebrity, than with a typical politician campaigning” (Novaro and Palermo, 1996: 207). Like Menem, Abdalá Bucaram used the media to represent his government as a televised show. With constant media exposure, Menem and Bucaram attempted to construct their personas as central political events. They used sports and popular culture to demonstrate that they were like the common man, and to simultaneously show that they were superior because they triumphed in these nonpolitical arenas. Menem played soccer with Maradona, and Bucaram sang and danced on television. While Menem was successful in using television to help him to secure his rule, Bucaram failed because upper- and middle-class publics read his performances as an eruption of vulgarity in the presidential palace (de la Torre, 2010).

Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa developed weekly television programs where they informed citizens about their governmental projects and policies, set the news agenda for the week, and simultaneously entertained the public by singing and mocking their political enemies. Like other populists, they had conflict with the privately owned media closing and censoring critical media venues. Fujimori used corruption to silence journalists and to create tabloids that supported his government (McClintock, 2013). Chávez and Correa were convinced that the media were the main tool used by the opposition, and that they have a big role in forging hegemony (Waisbord, 2013). They formed



state-owned media venues. In nations without traditions of public media, these venues functioned as tools of government propaganda in the hands of the executive. They created laws and state institutions to control what the private media could publish, and to sanction the infractions of journalists and media owners. As a result, journalists and media owners self-censored their publications, and the quality of debates in the public sphere deteriorated.

Post-structuralists argue that discourse is “the primary terrain within which the social is constituted” (Laclau, 2005: 49). Scholars who do not accept the epistemological and ontological assumptions of their post-structuralist peers also consider discourse as one of the defining traits of populism. They claim that this particular way of framing social reality produces antagonistic conflict between groups, and constitutes identities. Populism constructs the struggle between the people and the oligarchy as an ethical and moral confrontation between good and evil, redemption and downfall. The term “the people,” however, is profoundly vague and elastic. In order to disentangle its ambiguities it is important to start with Laclau’s (2005: 48) observation that the people “as operating in populist discourses is never a primary datum but a construct—populist discourse does not simply *express* some kind of original popular identity; it actually *constitutes* the latter.” What needs to be researched is: Who is excluded and included in these discursive constructs? Who has created these categories? And, what are the levels of social and or political polarization produced by populist discourse?

Populist rhetoric in Latin America historically constructed the people as urban and mestizo (ethnically and culturally mixed folk) who had an antagonistic relationship with the oligarchy. The exaltation of poor and mestizo as the essence of the nation repelled elites who were terrified by populist challenges. The populist creation of a virtuous and mestizo nation, however, excluded those of indigenous and African descent. In order to belong to the people and to the nation, indigenous and Afro-descendants were encouraged to adopt national-mestizo values, to reject their cultural specificity, and to whiten themselves.

During the 1952 Bolivian revolution, for example, the “Indian was erased in favor of a mestizo identity,” and languages of class tried to conceal ethnicity (Canessa, 2006: 245). Due to the strength of indigenous organizations the discursive elaborations of who belongs to the people changed. Evo Morales and his party Movimiento al Socialismo replaced “the mestizo as the iconic citizen with the indígena” (Canessa, 2006: 255). Morales’s success is explained, in part, by his ability to articulate anxieties provoked by

globalization while presenting indigenous people as the essence of the nation. Raúl Madrid (2012) uses the term ethnopopulism to explain the success of Morales's strategies in using populist and inclusionary ethnic appeals. The confrontation was between those who have struggled to defend Bolivia's natural resources—indigenous people—and the oligarchy that has transferred them to imperialist and foreign powers (Canessa, 2006).

The degree of social and political polarization produced by populist discourse allows for a differentiation between experiences. In some cases, such as in Chavismo as well as in the classical populist experience of Peronism, the Manichean construction of politics ends in a total and fundamental struggle between the people, as a social and political category, and the oligarchy. Chavez's nationalism, anti-imperialism, positive glorifications of *el pueblo* as *el soberano*, and his use of mass meetings and mobilization, are similar to the already mentioned classical populist experience. But most important is that his movement politicized economic, cultural, and ethnic cleavages. In other cases, for instance Alberto Fujimori in the 1990s in Peru or Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador in the 1940s, the terms *pueblo* and *oligarquía* had political but not necessarily social contents. Political polarization did not lead to social polarization. Finally, there are mixed cases, such as Abdalá Bucaram's and Lucio Gutiérrez's elections and short administrations in Ecuador. Despite their attempts to bring traditional elites aboard into their neoliberal project, their personas brought political, social, and even cultural polarization. All of their actions, words, and performances were read through class lines and were portrayed by the upper and middle class as the embodiment of the culture of the rabble.

Populism cannot be reduced to the words, actions, and strategies of leaders. The autonomous expectations, cultures, and discourses of followers are equally important in understanding the populist bond. In order to comprehend the appeal of populism, serious attention should be paid to the words, communications, and conversations between leaders and followers as they occur during political rallies. Populist narratives empowered common people who have to endure humiliations in their daily lives. Populist leaders have symbolically dignified the poor and the non-white who are portrayed by elites and the media as the rabble, the embodiment of barbarism.

## **WHY DOES POPULISM REAPPEAR IN SOME NATIONS AND NOT IN OTHERS?**

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Whereas populist leaders of different ideologies keep on reappearing in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela, in Chile, Uruguay, Colombia, and Costa Rica populist leaders did not get to power. When populism emerged in the latter nations, such as with Jorge Eliecer Gaitán in Colombia in the 1930s and 1940s, he did not win the 1946 presidential election, was assassinated in 1948, and a wave of violence erupted in the aftermath ([Braun, 1985](#)). The most common explanations for the absence of populism in some nations of Latin America are strong party systems and functioning liberal democracies upholding the rule of law.

Populism, as Kenneth [Roberts \(2015: 147–8\)](#) argues, is the result of a crisis of political representation. It first emerged when excluded people without partisan loyalty were enfranchised for the first time. In some countries, like in Colombia and Uruguay, traditional political parties incorporated the previously excluded. However, in most countries, like Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Venezuela, Mexico, and Peru, “new labor-based populist parties and political movements arose in opposition to the oligarchical political establishment reconfiguring party systems around an elite/popular sociopolitical cleavage.” In Ecuador populism emerged with Velasco Ibarra in the 1930s and 1940s but he did not organize followers in stable parties or organizations of civil society.

A second crisis of political representation was produced by political systems such as Venezuela’s two parties system, when it became unresponsive and unaccountable in the 1990s. Hugo Chávez rebelled against closed, self-interested, and self-reproducing cartel parties. A third scenario for a crises of political representation, according to [Roberts \(2015: 149\)](#), occurs when “political representation and political competition tend to become highly personalized, voters support and identify with leaders rather than party organizations or platforms, and the axes of political competition are likewise drawn between rival personalities who claim to better represent the true interests of the people.” Under these conditions a series of populist leaders, political outsiders, and personalist leaders as in Ecuador or Peru emerged and rose to power.

Another hypothesis to explain the attraction of populism has focused on the particular form of political incorporation in Latin America: one based on weak citizenship rights and strong rhetorical appeals to, and mobilization of, *el pueblo* ([de la Torre, 2010: 124–5](#)). In Latin America, there is a duality between the official recognition of rights in constitutions and the rhetoric of state officials and the weak implementation of these same rights in everyday life.

The rule of law is tenuous at best; at worst, the law appears to serve only the interests of the powerful few. A vast social science literature has explored these “deficits” in the quality of democracy in Latin America, the truncated nature of citizenship, and the difficulties of democratic deepening once democracy’s electoral dimensions have been established. Not all forms of legal, political, or socio-economic exclusion give rise to populism. But in the absence or discrediting of mechanisms of political mediation and institutions of representation, populist interventions that give name to and politicize people’s daily experiences of marginalization and humiliation remain a constant possibility. As Kirk Hawkins argues (2010: 149), “a Manichaeian discourse denouncing elite conspiracies and celebrating the eventual triumph of the popular will speaks to a real underlying problem of democratic failure in which the vast majority of citizens are poorly served by a dysfunctional or even predatory state.” Nations where citizens perceive that the rule of law protects them from the state and the powerful, such as Uruguay, Chile, and Costa Rica, are free of populism.

Populism occurred in three distinct historical waves, and as [Rovira Kaltwasser \(2015\)](#) argues we have to account for its mechanisms of diffusion and emulation. Perón and Chávez purposefully aimed to export their models of political transformation and their ideologies not only to Latin America, but also to the world at large, generously funding politicians and social movements. The current wave of radical populism was influenced by Chávez’s script of political transformation. Without denying the importance of endogenous factors it is evident that Chávez’s model was emulated and adapted in Ecuador and Bolivia where leaders conveyed constitutional assemblies, concentrated power in the executive, enacted laws to regulate the content of what the privately owned media could publish, regulated NGOs, and co-opted independent social movements. These self-described Bolivarian nations also claimed to be implementing policies to reach a different form of development based on the ideology of socialism in the twenty-first century, and forged the Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples as an alternative to US-led free trade agreements.

## CONCLUSIONS

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Populism is based on the discursive antagonistic confrontation between the people and the power block. Latin American populists shared understandings

of democracy as mass action on behalf of a leader constructed as the incarnation of democratic ideals, more than in the institutionalization of democracy through the rule of law. Populism is not tied to specific social and economic conditions, and might arise in nations with fragile institutions, and where the rule of law is weak. In nations where the poor have to endure humiliations by the rich and by state officials, the populist temptation to transform stigmas into sources of dignity and pride is always present.

Classical populism represented the first incorporation of previously excluded people into the national community. It was based on the exaltation of common people as the embodiment of true and uncorrupted national traditions and values against foreign-oriented elites. In the more developed nations such as Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil it built or co-opted labor organizations, and followed nationalist and redistributive social policies that coincided with import substitution industrialization. In more agrarian-based societies it was not linked to policies of industrialization, but represented the political inclusion of previously excluded electors. Populists expanded the franchise, and through mass rallies and demonstration gave a symbolic sense of inclusion and dignity to the poor and the marginalized. In many nations it built long-lasting organizations that created strong political loyalties.

Neoliberal populists used discourses against political parties portraying them as oligarchic cliques that have illegally appropriated the people's sovereignty. Differently from classical populist experiences where political schism led to social polarization, these movements and regimes were confined to political divisions. In some cases, such as Fujimori's Peru, neoliberal populism led to the destruction of previously existing political systems. Similarly to classical populism it included previously excluded people, this time those who made a living in the informal sector and were not part of working- or middle-class organizations. As with classical populism it led to the renewal of economic elites, as business people without social recognition sought to be accepted as equals by well-established elites. Even though in their rhetoric they focused on the values of common people portrayed as the essence of the nation, their policies abandoned nationalism, pursued the opening of their economies to international markets, and reduced the size of the state.

Radical populists of the twenty-first century are similar to classical populists in their politicization of social and economic exclusions. As in some classical populist experiences, political and social polarizations coincided. Similarly to neoliberal populists, they portrayed traditional political parties as the source of their country's ills, and contributed to the collapse of party systems. They

linked neoliberal economic policies directly with liberal politics, practices, and values. As a result the evils of “the long night of neoliberalism,” as Correa liked to say, were intimately tied to the failures of liberal democracy. Their nationalist and statist policies were similar to those of their classical predecessors. In mineral-rich nations such as Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, they reversed neoliberal policies, and implemented nationalist and redistributive policies based on mineral resources rent. Yet they kept policies of their neoliberal populist cousins that targeted the poor who make a living in the informal sector.

Radical populists of the twenty-first century differed in their leadership styles and in the type of relationship between leaders and social movement organizations. Rafael Correa, Hugo Chávez, and Nicolás Maduro resorted to a leadership style based on unity and command from above where the leader appears to be the condensation of diverse demands made from below. These leaders claimed to embody the demands of diverse constituencies, and to directly represent the sovereignty of the people. Evo Morales followed a different leadership strategy. He pursued convergence and persuasion, allowing more autonomy to his grassroots constituency ([French, 2009: 367](#)). Chávez, Maduro, and Correa followed top-down strategies of mobilization, and co-opted previously existing social movement organizations. Morales built his leadership on a network of autonomous movement organizations. It remains to be seen whether these organizations will keep their autonomy, or if they will be included and co-opted into corporatist structures like the ones built by the MNR in the 1950s. Like previous populists, they promised better democratic arrangements to improve on the failures of participation and representation in liberal democratic regimes. Yet, as in previous populism, popular organizations were subordinated to the will of leaders, and atmospheres of political confrontation and polarization were created. In Venezuela and Ecuador authoritarian tendencies prevailed. In Bolivia the strength of social movements and the inclusion of indigenous people might mitigate Morales’s authoritarian temptations.

As with the previous waves, radical populism was unstable. Its nationalism, anti-imperialism, and redistribution rested on the high prices of commodities. These were hyper-personalistic regimes, and as Chávez’s death illustrated, charisma could not be transferred to a hand-picked successor. Yet despite these vulnerabilities, radical populism had strong ideological appeals. In a world dominated by neoliberalism, and with increasing inequalities, it promised social justice, and the democratization of society via the transformative power

of constituent power. Yet, its views of the people as one, of rivals as enemies, and of popular sovereignty as one and undivided led to the creation of authoritarian governments.



## NOTE

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## CHAPTER 12

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# POPULISM IN THE UNITED STATES

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JOSEPH LOWNDES

## INTRODUCTION

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POPULISM in the United States today retains the features and contradictions of the late nineteenth-century movement which gave the term its name—the broad coalition of farmers and workers who came together in a variety of political and economic formations that culminated in the People’s Party. Nineteenth-century Populism has been the subject of continual historical argument, a debate that concerns the nature of US populism in the contemporary moment. Historian Richard Hofstadter depicted the movement as a provincial, moralistic form of agrarianism that was marked by xenophobia and a hatred of cities and cosmopolitanism ([Hofstadter, 1955](#)). Lawrence Goodwyn, on the other hand, saw populism as a revolt that created a culture of participatory democracy in its economic challenge to concentrated capital ([Goodwyn, 1976](#)). More recently, Charles Postel has argued that the small farmers and laborers at the movement’s core were progressive modernizers committed to opening up the market that they might better participate in it ([Postel, 2007](#)). Indeed, populism in the United States has been as intellectually confusing as it has politically generative precisely because it encompasses all of these elements.

While populist ire is typically aimed at wealthy elites, populists tend to prefer the language of popular sovereignty to class, blurring distinctions in a broad definition of *the people*. As Berlet and Lyons have argued, the representative figure of *the people* in the US since the Jacksonian era of the 1830s has been the virtuous, independent producer ([Berlet and Lyons, 2000](#)). Politically, Andrew Jackson’s Democratic party coalition was made up of farmers, emergent industrial wage workers, and slave owners, all depicted as the “producing classes” of society. “Producers” understood themselves in contrast to those seen as the idle rich above, such as bankers, and to people of color. The discursive link between whiteness and independence can be traced over time in contrast to those seen as parasitic on the body politic: black slaves, Chinese laborers, “welfare queens,” Latino immigrants, and others, marking off the white citizen as the bearer of republican virtue.

## A RECENT HISTORY OF US POPULISM

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While populism has had various iterations in the United States, it can be roughly divided between left-wing and right-wing variants according to how each defines the principal foe of the people: for left populists it is economic elites; for right populists it is non-white others and by extension the state itself. The left variant is more properly associated with the nineteenth-century People's Party, populist politics in the southern region of the United States in the early twentieth century, and finally elements of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. The most famous figure of southern populism is Huey Long, the Louisiana Governor and US Senator during the Great Depression. Under the slogan "Every Man a King," Long, an authoritarian figure more reminiscent of Latin American populism, pioneered a program called Share the Wealth aimed at curtailing the wealth of the very rich and redistributing it to the "little man." Prior to his assassination in 1935, Long was considering a third party presidential run ([White, 2006](#)).

Since the mid-twentieth century populism has been a far more potent force on the right. This is the case, I argue, because for most of US history whiteness and masculinity defined the contours of the political imaginary of those who promoted visions of producerism and popular sovereignty. These identity positions came under severe challenge in the 1960s and 1970s as social movements aimed at white racism, patriarchy, and homophobia rocked US society and made demands on the state. Opportunities thus opened for the generation of a right populism that demonized the state as opposed to the wealthy (Self, 2013).

In the midst of the social conflicts of the 1960s the arch-segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace ran for president in 1968 on a third party ticket. Although Wallace was a former New Deal Democrat who emerged from a tradition of left-leaning southern populism, he forged a racist and antistatist politics that attacked "pointy-headed bureaucrats" and social meddlers in rants against school integration, welfare, crime, and civil rights protest. Such themes proved popular not just in the white South, but also among white working- and middle-class voters in the Northeast, Midwest, and West ([Carter, 1996](#)). The 1968 Republican presidential nominee Richard Nixon saw the political potential of Wallace's populist rhetoric, and began using the terms *Silent Majority*, *Forgotten Americans*, and *Middle America* to describe an aggrieved white majority squeezed by both the unruly, dependent poor below and government elites above ([Lowndes, 2008](#)).

This populist political identity was revived in Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign through his simultaneous demonization of government and "welfare queens." Reagan and other conservative populists also argued that the liberal state's intrusion into the traditional realm of family (through abortion, moral permissiveness, and women's rights) was of a piece with its intrusions into the natural functions of the market.

However, populism did not entirely comfortably exist within the Republican Party. Reagan's successor George H. W. Bush conveyed the image of a more privileged elite committed to the central role of the US in building a cosmopolitan "new world order" which helped nurture a renewed populism outside the party. In 1992 former Nixon speechwriter and columnist Pat Buchanan ran a campaign that railed against the idea of the US as an empire, attacked banks and big business, courted labor through protectionism and opposition to immigration, and excoriated feminism, gays and lesbians, and multiculturalism. "Pitchfork Pat's" campaign to spark a populist insurrection could not be achieved, but Buchanan gave an infamous keynote address at the 1992 Republican Convention, calling for a "cultural war" for the "soul of America." The 1992 presidential election cycle saw the emergence of an independent candidate who evinced populist frustration with the political establishment in general terms: business tycoon Ross Perot. Running against both George H. W. Bush and Democrat Bill Clinton, Perot campaigned against Washington insiders, describing this elite group as "a political nobility that is immune to the people's will," a contemporary version of "the British aristocracy we drove out in our Revolution" ([Wilentz, 1993](#)). Perot polled well among middle-class voters with some college education, and received 19 percent of the popular vote in that election. His United We Stand Party ran again in 1996, but was rent by infighting and lack of sustained organization. Clinton, who won that election and was re-elected in 1996, was dogged throughout by populist attacks from the right on the issues of gays in the military, national health care, and ultimately his own sexual behavior.

From the Great Recession of 2008 came a movement initially aimed at federal mortgage lenders, and overweening state power more generally opened the possibility for new articulations of right-wing populism from a group that could nurture a sense of angry outsidership. The Tea Party movement was brought into being by anti-government rage through protests against anti-recessionary spending, most of which were organized by FreedomWorks and Americans For Prosperity—corporate-funded organizations—and given ample coverage on the conservative cable television network Fox News. The nascent



movement solidified over the summer of 2009, through the public spectacle of protests at town hall meetings across the country where elected officials at public fora discussed federal health care reform legislation (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, 2013; [Zernike, 2010](#)).

The Tea Party movement attacked increased state spending on infrastructure, loans to failing banks and automobile companies, and health care reform. Tea Party leaders described the movement as driven first and foremost by a concern to stave off encroaching state power over the lives of individuals. The mission statement of the Tea Party Patriots, the largest network of the Tea Party organizations, states: “The impetus for the Tea Party movement is excessive government spending and taxation. Our mission is to attract, educate, organize, and mobilize our fellow citizens to secure public policy consistent with our three core values of Fiscal Responsibility, Constitutionally Limited Government, and Free Markets” ([Tea Party Patriots, 2011](#)). FreedomWorks says in its mission statement that it “fights for lower taxes, less government and more economic freedom for all Americans” ([FreedomWorks, 2011](#)). Similarly, Tea Party Express advertises on its website that its aim is to “speak out against the out-of-control spending, higher taxes, bailouts, and growth in the size and power of government!” (Tea Party Express, 2011). The movement has pushed Republicans in Congress past their comfort zone to radically reduce spending on programs for the poor as well as on middle-class entitlements such as Medicare and Social Security.

Although the main thrust of US populism from the 1960s onward was rightward, there were populist phenomena on the left. Jesse Jackson’s presidential campaigns in 1984 and 1988 sought to revive an older economic language of populism and link it to emergent struggles for racial equality. These campaigns drew from a legacy of black exclusion and protest politics from outside the system, and extended it to include marginalized rural whites and Latinos as well. Jackson sought to overcome the racial divide that had fragmented left populism, but was unable to create the conditions for a sustainable movement beyond the Democratic primaries and outside his self-presentation as the embodiment of the movement.

Left populism emerged again, like the Tea Party movement, in the wake of the 2008 recession, in the form of Occupy Wall Street ([Gould-Wartofsky, 2015](#)). The moment it engaged in an extralegal direct action in the heart of New York’s financial district, Occupy Wall Street enacted a notion of the people in antagonistic relationship with elites. It performed the rage felt by millions of Americans about the economic and political wreckage wrought by

the financial sector producing a constituent moment—the 99 percent. The occupation symbolically broke out of the business-as-usual, incremental reform politics that typify progressivism today, offering instead a protest that indicts not just Wall Street but both major parties for the crisis. The militancy of the occupation inevitably resulted in police violence early on, which served to underscore the drama of the action and the conviction of the actors involved, while metaphorically playing out the brutality of the system being protected. Through social media Occupy Wall Street created its own compelling and easily digestible spectacle, and, like the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street announced itself through antagonism. Yet while Tea Partiers aggressively confronted representatives of state power at health care town halls and at the US capitol, Occupiers performed the role of recipients of state violence.

Occupy Wall Street's claim to populism was greatly enhanced by the "99 percent" meme, helping it skirt a major difficulty for the left since the 1960s: nationalism. The post-1960s left opposed US imperialism abroad and racism at home, opening up space on the right to lay popular claim to American patriotism. But the 99 percent could be viewed in a patriotic light: a national identification insofar as it demands changes in the US political system, yet vague enough to include both the citizen and the noncitizen immigrant. And by identifying Wall Street as the enemy in an era of neoliberalism, the 99 percent could also stand for humanity across borders in alliance against a common global foe.

The anti-authoritarian orientation of many of the first Occupiers contributed not only to Occupy Wall Street's militancy but also to a horizontal, egalitarian, and creative style of protest, which made clear its autonomy from the institutions that currently run politics—including progressive institutions such as unions and other inside-the-beltway groups. For Occupy Wall Street, the people was rendered in public space in a performance of democratic experience. The general assembly model, which let any participant speak, the insistence on consensus decision-making, and the human amplifier model of enunciation enacted a Rousseauian fantasy that there could be unanimity.

Like the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street was in some sense a short-lived movement. But its brevity may be attributed to diametrically opposed reasons. While the Tea Party followed up its initial autonomous political action with incorporation into the structures of existing conservative organizations, Occupy travelled in the opposite direction. At the beginning, the direct democratic ethos of Occupy Wall Street and its refusal to make concrete demands was an enormous strength, as it allowed a broad range of people to

see themselves within the 99 percent. Over time, however, the organizational structure (or lack thereof), along with the geographic model of holding free space, made it virtually impossible for Occupy to assert any specific program.

## THE PARADOX OF THE UNPRESENTABLE OTHER

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The populist politics of the contemporary right articulate the “flaunting of the low,” in Ostiguy’s terms. As such, this populism has been that of “an antagonistic appropriation for political purposes of an ‘unpresentable Other,’ ” produced in relation to progressive liberalism, particularly in regard to the black freedom struggle in the United States. This Other is thrust into the political realm in disruptive ways—as a poke in the eye to liberal proceduralism, bipartisan compromise, state bureaucracy, and “political correctness.”

However, this figure of the outsider, or “unpresentable Other,” is presented as the true “national self,” the “true people.” As Ostiguy puts it, “The ‘Other’ is in fact not an ‘Other,’ but rather the ‘truest’ Self of the nation, of ‘the people.’ ” In the (lower case “r”) republican logic that has always shaped US populism, this figure of the “Other” is contrasted to what are seen as unruly and dependent elements below, and controlling elites above. Ostiguy describes this as the populist facing a three-way coalition of resented minority, a government that supports that minority’s interest, and powerful international forces. Of the three, international or global forces have been the least intense rhetorically in the US, which may have something to do with the global reach of US power itself. But it is present nevertheless in anti-communism, anti-Islam, and anti-UN discourse.

However, this relational positioning of the populist between minorities below and government elites above fundamentally shapes the politics of the low. In this sense then I would modify Ostiguy’s notion. Right-wing populism in the US is indeed folksy, colorful, self-consciously crude, and corporeally demonstrative. But because of the history of slavery and white supremacy in the US, within the co-constitutive cultural production of whiteness and blackness, this populism often emphasizes a republican figure of autonomy that is sharply defined against elements seen as low or uncontrolled. American populism dwells ambivalently in the discursive lineage of the classical/grotesque binary as it has always been couched in beliefs in Enlightenment ideals of progress, and in celebration more of bourgeois

understandings of the production of wealth than the redistribution thereof. As historian Michael Kazin has argued, “Through populism, Americans have been able to protest social and economic inequalities without calling the entire system into question ... To maintain that most citizens—whatever their occupation or income—are moral, hardworking people denies the rigorous categories of Marxism and the condescension of the traditional Right” (Kazin, 1995). Populist identity thus distinguishes itself against those seen as exploitive elites above and parasitic dependents below, which are depicted as imprudent, excessive, wasteful, and indolent.

George Wallace often spoke about the “average citizen” and “the common man” in order to claim a majoritarian bloc in the American electorate; yet he claimed that these people were not represented by their political leaders. Rather, he said that his Americans were the outsiders, the scorned, those who were distant from centers of power. Yet in order for Wallace supporters to see themselves as average citizens, their enemies had to be cast as the real outsiders; not people with whom they simply had political disagreements, but parasites on the national body. In other words, in order to make his outsiders insiders, Wallace rhetorically connected the liberal center to those he described as unproductive and decadent. Thus as his rhetoric evolved, he invoked bureaucrats, “permissive” judges, the decadent ultra-wealthy, protesters, rioters, welfare recipients, and criminals alike as threats to the nation to establish a fundamental unity among the groups he claimed to represent (Lowndes, 2008). This particular populist logic was embraced by Nixon afterwards. As Nixon speechwriter Pat Buchanan put it, “We were the vanguard of Middle America and they were the liberal elite. It’s a schism that’s cultural, political, social, emotional. When we came in 1968, they dominated all American society—the media, the Supreme Court, the bureaucracy, the foundations. They left us with our cities burning, and inflation going, our students rioting on campus” (White, 1973).

By 1980, Reagan shepherded right-wing populism to the center of US politics as a leader who could stand as a homology for *Middle America*. He conveyed the image of a political outsider who would fight against the corruption and overreach of government. He presented himself as an innocent—someone who lived and governed by quotidian truths available to anyone. At the end of his time in office he referred to what was now called the “Reagan Revolution” as simply “common sense.”

Jesse Jackson’s campaigns on the left expressed the unrepresentable other by bestowing dignity on the labor of those whose work is largely unseen. “We

work every day,” he would tell crowds, in the cadence of the Black church:

and we are still poor. We pick up your garbage; we work every day. We drive your cars, we take care of your children, we empty your bedpans, we sweep your apartments; we work every day. We cook your food, and we don’t have time to cook our own. We change your hospital beds and wipe your fevered brow, and we can’t afford to lie in that bed when we get sick. We work every day. (*The Nation*, 1988)

Yet the outsiders he sought to represent—coal miners in Appalachia, African Americans in urban slums, migrant workers in agricultural production—did not have the same claims to the “truest Self” of the nation because they did not fit the historic figure of the American producer—the white, male skilled laborer.

In sympathetic portraits, the Tea Party has been described as a spontaneous people’s movement that has come together to wrest power from corrupt elites, “triggered by the growing sense that politics has become a cozy game for insiders, and that the interests of most Americans are ignored” (Reynolds, 2010). The very name “Tea Party” was taken from the 1773 direct action by American colonists against British taxation. The popular Tea Party icon of the Gadsden Flag, also from the American Revolution, depicts a coiled rattlesnake over the caption “Don’t Tread on Me.”

Occupy Wall Street also sought to speak on behalf of the unrepresentable other—to use the power of anonymity to represent those who were at once excluded and yet the true *people*. The phrase “We are the 99 percent” was given shape by a Tumblr site early on, where an unknown blogger decided that a way to demonstrate the effects of the recession on everyday people was to “[g]et a bunch of people to submit their pictures with a hand-written sign explaining how these harsh financial times have been affecting them, have them identify themselves as the ‘99 percent’, and then write ‘[occupywallst.org](http://occupywallst.org)’ at the end” (Weinstein, 2011). Less than a month later, the blog was getting more than 100 pictures a day from a broad heterogeneity of figures: faces from across the phenotypic spectrum identifying as nurses, war veterans, couples in their 50s, students, doctors. The faces were generally accompanied by hand-written testimonies describing challenging medical conditions, untenable financial situations, being forced out of work, or school, or their homes. The very diversity of posts displays a chain of equivalents in what Ernesto Laclau calls an empty signifier (Laclau, 1996). As Priscilla Grim, one of the Tumblr site editors, told *Mother Jones Magazine*, “I submitted one of the first photos on the site, and I chose to obscure my face because I did not want to be recognized. I saw it as a way to anonymize myself: I am only one of many.”

## PERFORMANCE OF THE LOW

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Political enunciations of the people are always performative utterances, to use J. L. Austin's term, an assertion from the outside meant to act on the political realm generally. Political theorist Jason Frank calls these "constituent moments." "The people," he writes, "have been the central authorizing fiction in post-revolutionary American political culture and the figure that reveals its underlying contingency, its persistent exposure to transformative contestation and change" (Frank, 2010). Similarly, political theorist Jacques Ranciere argues that politics does not take place between constituted groups within a regime, but rather by the actions of a "part with no part" or the struggle of unrecognized elements who, in the name of the people, aim to redefine the terms of the political realm (Ranciere, 1998; 2010). The part with no part does not refer to the poor, or other excluded or disenfranchised groups, because by their very exclusion these groups are already made intelligible by the extant political realm. It is rather the emergence of a new set of demands, a new notion of the people with previously unarticulated identifications and interests.

Populist movements have impact at moments when powerful institutions can be convincingly cast as corrupt or parasitic on the body politic. It is then when the rhetoric of *the people* has more resonance, it is then that myths of the latent power that reside in *the people* become more powerful. Such performances can focus on the leader as the identificatory figure through which people see themselves. Alternatively, they can be performances of *the people* themselves.

In distinctions drawn between the productive and the unproductive through producerism, populism draws on a dominant structuring of Western thought on questions of both the polity and the autonomous political subject, and Greek and Roman taxonomies of high and low. Indeed, the Roman term from which the adjective "classical" is drawn was originally meant to distinguish the taxpaying citizen from the proletarian. In his famous study of the carnivalesque, semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin argued that the classical body was produced in contrast to a grotesque body marked by impurity, heterogeneity, physical needs, and pleasures of the lower bodily stratum (Bakhtin, 2009). Populism traverses this line even as it defends it—depending on the disruptive, rageful articulation of race and gender truths repressed by "politically correct" liberalism even as it claims to stand for law and order, hard work, piety, and responsible citizenship.

Fueled simultaneously by resentment and the pleasure of transgression, the populist right has, since the 1960s, drawn on a performative image of the

outsider. This dynamic is not solely one of populism: in his study of culturally liminal figures, anthropologist Victor Turner highlights the role of the jester as a privileged arbiter of a kind of *communitas* against the reigning stratifications of a given social and political structure (Turner, 1969). But outsider identity is key to the populist politics of the low.

Wallace accepted invitations to speak at elite institutions such as Harvard and Yale, where long-haired, bearded students were sure to shout him down. Wallace would provoke them, knowing that such confrontations would play well to those who would see the students as spoiled, foul-mouthed children of privilege. Wallace played up this role of anti-establishment trickster, describing himself as a poor Southerner and even purposely mispronouncing words (Lowndes, 2008). This helped craft an image as someone whose authority was gleaned from his very distance from the centers of power.

In 1992 Pat Buchanan, one of the rhetorical architects of the Silent Majority, fashioned himself as a scrappy working-class Irish American outsider on the campaign trail to Bush's wealthy WASP New England pedigree. He repeatedly attacked George H. W. Bush's manhood, and his class background. In an insurgent gesture anticipating the Tea Party, he repeatedly called Bush "King George" (Decker, 1992).

Tea Partiers asserted their political authority by naming themselves by reference to the illegal direct action that preceded the American Revolution, the Boston Tea Party. In rallies that featured Revolutionary era iconography and dress, Tea Partiers identified as both rebels and regime-founders. Such gestures provided a language and set of practices through which agents could see themselves as an aggrieved people, as a Ranciorean part with no part.

Donald Trump, adored by supporters as a disruptive teller of unvarnished truths, watched his poll numbers rise with each outrageous statement—be it about Latin American immigrants, Muslims, women, or his political opponents. Yet again, this performance of the low was also loaded with its own visceral sense of abjection. "Disgusting" is perhaps his most common term of disparagement, whether talking about breastfeeding, terrorism, or protests. Similarly, Trump often employs metaphors of bodily weakness or lack of control. Referring to Democratic candidate Martin O'Malley's response to black demonstrators, Trump said, "he apologized like a little baby, like a disgusting, little, weak, pathetic baby." Extending the description to the national body he went on, "[a]nd that's the problem with our country" (Johnson, 2015).



## TRANSGRESSION

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In the right-wing context of US populism rage against government officials on behalf of an aggrieved majority is a well-developed pleasure, and one that evinces not only a “return of the repressed,” but what psychoanalytic theorist Melanie Klein called projective identification. In other words, the violent rhetoric of populism depends on the notion that you are responding to threats of violence. Ostiguy discusses what he calls a “combative pleasure principle,” expressed in the sociocultural dimension of populism. This transgression can be rhetoric that provides fantasies of violence, or an outsider’s playful mockery.

George Wallace promised retribution against demonstrators and rioters, and as noted, in his rallies supporters and opponents would often be encouraged to clash. When Wallace campaigned, his aides would often set up rallies in venues that were too small to hold his audiences, almost ensuring that violence would erupt ([Jones, 1966](#)). These riveting expressions of mostly symbolic violence helped shape the identity of modern US populism—as they at once held the allure of transgressing the norms of respectable political behavior, and a return of what was felt to be repressed by a liberal power structure that right-wing populists saw as scolding, condescending, and coercive.

In one illustrative example, singer Merle Haggard made country and western music both nationally popular and part of right-wing populist identity with his 1968 song, “Okie from Muscogee.” The song champions hard-working, modest “squares” who eschew drugs, keep their hair short, and do not demonstrate. As he sings, “[f]ootball’s still the roughest thing on campus, and the kids here still respect the college dean.” This paeon to decency in opposition to “rough” behavior was followed by a popular 1969 single, “The Fightin’ Side of Me,” in which Haggard openly threatened violence against anti-war demonstrators on behalf of his country.

The normally staid Richard Nixon sought to secure populist credentials by courting working-class whites whom he called “hardhats” through just such appeals to aggression. In May of 1970, immediately after the widely reported savage clubbing of anti-war demonstrators in New York City’s financial district by construction workers, Nixon—who praised “silent,” law-abiding citizens—invited the head of the construction union to a ceremony in the Oval Office where he posed for photographs in a hard hat.

A number of films in the 1970s and 1980s evinced this populist transgression as well. Clint Eastwood’s popular “Dirty Harry” movies for

example featured a police officer in San Francisco who faces a city falling into violent degeneracy, but who is constrained by a liberal city bureaucracy that panders to criminals. Taking justice into his own hands, “Dirty Harry” Callahan blows away gangsters, rapists, and hold-up men with his enormous Magnum pistol, indulging fantasies of both racial vengeance and immediate justice. In 1985 President Reagan taunted Congress by quoting Dirty Harry from the film *Sudden Impact*. “I have my veto pen drawn and ready for any tax increase that Congress might even think of sending up. And I have only one thing to say to the tax increasers. Go ahead—make my day.” In the film, Dirty Harry has his gun trained on a black robber who has a knife at the throat of a white waitress when he utters those words.

A notorious commercial produced by the Buchanan campaign in 1992 showed slow-moving images of a film depicting gay black men in chains, criticizing Bush for allowing the National Endowment for the Arts to fund such art. “It’s tasteless, and it’s going to hurt Pat Buchanan,” said one consultant for Bush. “If Pat wants to be the leader of the conservative movement, this is suicidal,” said another. “It’s like throwing acid around.” Buchanan made the most of the transgression. On the campaign he would tell audiences, “I’d clean house at the NEA.... If I am elected, the place would be shut down, padlocked and fumigated” ([Kurtz, 1992](#)).

As McCain’s vice presidential candidate in the race against Barack Obama in 2008, Sarah Palin whipped up crowds by telling them that Obama was “palling around with terrorists,” to which audience members would respond with shouts of “kill him!” and “Off with his head!” “Mama Grizzly,” as she began calling herself, built a subsequent political career as a figure of populist aggression for the Tea Party, going as far as to place targeted districts for Tea Party candidates in a rifle’s crosshairs on her political action committee website.

Transgressive rage was foundational for the Tea Party, which became a viable social movement in the summer of 2009 when members began showing up at “town hall meetings” across the country organized by members of Congress to discuss federal health care legislation. Disruptions at these events were turned into tumultuous spectacles where members of Congress were shouted down, taunted by crowds, and hanged in effigy. Fistfights were frequent, some resulting in hospitalization. And demonstrators often openly carried firearms. Conservative media encouraged this response, as did newly formed Tea Party organizations. “Become a part of the mob!” was an exhortation on a banner of the Web site of talk show host Sean Hannity

([Zernike, 2010](#)). This phenomenon intensified during protests in Washington DC the following March. While walking to the Capitol, Representatives André Carson of Indiana, Emanuel Cleaver II of Missouri, and John Lewis of Georgia, all black, were subject to racial epithets and spitting by Tea Partiers who were there to protest the passage of federal health care reform ([Pear, 2011](#)).

The 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump was marked by violence in his rhetoric, at his rallies, and among white nationalists more generally. Negative comments about Latino immigrants and Muslims drew people to his rallies, where physical assaults on black and Latino protesters were common. His rhetoric also inspired attacks, including two men severely beating and urinating on a homeless Latino man in Boston, one of whom said afterward, “Donald Trump was right; all these illegals need to be deported.” Far from denouncing the assault, Trump said when asked about it, “I will say that people who are following me are very passionate. They love this country and they want this country to be great again. They are passionate” ([Walker, 2015](#)).

The relationship between transgressive rage and racism is complex. As Ostiguy points out, populism expresses repressed desires ([Ostiguy, this volume](#)). Right-wing populism in the US, as we have discussed, was conceived principally in opposition to the black freedom struggle of the 1960s, but also in opposition to changing politics of gender and family. The representative figure of populism was an aggrieved white man displaced from his centrality in politics, the workplace, and the home. The moral force of what came to be called identity politics forbade this figure from expressions of racism, chauvinism, etc. This explains the extraordinary popularity of the phrase “politically correct.” This term, originally used in debates among Communists and Socialists in the 1930s in relation to proximity to the “party line,” became a chiding in-joke among leftists in the 1970s over the use of racist or sexist language. In the 1990s the term was picked up by the right as a way of demonstrating the authoritarianism of feminists, anti-racists, and liberals in general. Within this logic, any opposition to expressions of racism, misogyny, or homophobia is an act of repression—indeed of repressed truths.

## **THE POLITICAL-CULTURAL AND THE IMMEDIACY OF REPRESENTATION**

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Populist discourse assumes a homogeneous notion of the people and their right

to self-rule. Ostiguy correctly connects the low to the fantasy of politics as direct and personal as opposed to remote and institutional. Populism has an egalitarian as well as an intolerant legacy, but even populist movements driven by democratic impulses have ultimately foundered on their excessive concern for homogeneity. Political actors who employ populist language deemphasize differences among the group on whose behalf they claim to speak, depicting group members as wholly equivalent with each other, and utterly different than those outside the collective identity. Moreover, populist leaders claim an immediate identification between themselves and those they represent. As tribunes of the people, they are meant to translate popular will directly into governance. The actual content of popular sovereignty is not distinct. What is crucial is that the people see themselves reflected in those who speak in their behalf. Wallace's campaign slogan "Stand Up for America" was just this sort of claim.

Nixon's famous "Vietnamization" speech, wherein he first invoked the silent majority, was initially met with strong criticism from television commentators. Nixon, who had always believed that the press, Congress, courts, and protesters stood between him and the vast majority of Americans, reacted angrily, as did his staff. Vice President Spiro Agnew denounced what he called "instant analysis," claiming that the president had a right to speak to the people without interference of "a small band of network commentators and self-appointed analysts, the majority of whom expressed in one way or another their hostility to what he had to say." He went on to suggest that "the networks be made to be more responsive to the views of the nation." Nixon speechwriter William Safire later wrote, "Many of us felt strongly that no unelected personality clothed in the garb of network objectivity should be interposed between the elected leader in the 'bully pulpit' and the people" ([Safire, 1975](#)). The president's populist showdown with the press began the era of what political scientist Stephen Skowronek has called "the plebiscitary presidency," in which presidents regularly appeal to the public "over the heads of the elites of the Washington establishment, hoping to use their public standing to compel that establishment into following their lead" ([Skowronek, 1993](#)). Indeed, the very notion of a silent majority implies that they do not speak for themselves and must thus be spoken for.

The populist notion that presidents should wield direct power over and against the Courts and Congress can be traced to Andrew Jackson in the American case, but had special resonance for the populist right of the late twentieth century. Decisiveness by a leader indulges the populist fantasy that a

decision has been made on behalf of the people by its representative without mediation through or compromise with other forces and institutions. Although leaders, presidents in particular, can easily overreach in the authority they believe they have been granted, after 9/11 George W. Bush would enhance his sole decision-making power as president, going as far as to employ a radical Constitutional interpretation of executive power called “the unitary executive,” which holds that executive authority cannot be abridged by Congress or the courts. And Bush was impatient with criticism of his administration on either domestic or foreign policy matters. As he once said to journalists in response to waning confidence in his Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, “I hear the voices, and I read the front page, and I know the speculation. But I’m the decider, and I decide what is best” ([Henry and Starr, 2006](#)).

The immediacy of populist politics can be expressed through deep identification with a leader, and the decisiveness of that leader. But it can also nurture fantasies of direct political participation of the people as such. This, of course, is the flip side of the populist feeling of being an outsider, of feeling powerless. Hence the moniker “Tea Party,” a reference to direct political action aimed at the British government to demonstrate lack of representation.

Today, the economic gap between the very wealthy and everyone else is more vast than at any time in US history. This gap is a political one as well. The last four decades have seen a wholesale shift of what were formerly public functions into private hands. Meanwhile the absence of campaign finance regulations gives ever greater influence to corporations and billionaires. Large sectors of the US population are falling out of the middle class, and awash in debt. New forms of populism may continue to emerge as public trust in institutions continues to decline, and popular power continues its rapid erosion. New enunciations of *the people* in contrast to anti-democratic rule may become more common. Yet articulating hegemonic versions of the people will probably continue to prove elusive in a time of both increasing inequality and shifting racial demographics.

Right-wing populism draws on rage and resentment in an affective way as we saw in the Trump campaign expressing what Elizabeth Anker has called “orgies of feeling”—the generation of intense emotional states that displace “ordinary experiences of political powerlessness” ([Anker, 2014](#)). Trump may in this way indicate a shift in US populism. The Trump brand is primarily associated with enormous wealth and luxury, not modesty and hard work. While Wallace bestowed dignity on those working people he sought to represent and Buchanan saw himself as a working-class representative of labor,

Trump talks not like a worker but like an owner. This echoes Mitt Romney's Republican presidential campaign in 2012 wherein the candidate used the producerist language of "makers and takers" in such a way as to assign almost half of the US population to the parasitic category. This trend gives perverse evidence, perhaps, of neoliberalism's total absorption into American political culture today.

Yet what did Trump offer besides a promise to build a wall around the US and purge it of immigrants? In an era that has seen the long-term decline of economic security and standing in the world, disgust and self-defeat express perhaps an even more intense "politics of the low," a deep belief in the national weakness that Trump continually talked about on the campaign trail, even titling his most recent book *Crippled America* (Trump, 2015). Sounding a kind of lament of the end of producerism, Trump regularly said on the campaign trail, "We don't make anything anymore."

If populism on the right now expresses melancholia, perhaps on the left it expresses mourning. The public response to the killing of African Americans by law enforcement has erupted with sharp militancy since 2014. This movement, sometimes referred to as Black Lives Matter, mobilized massive street demonstrations and direct actions in cities across the United States, and confronted national political candidates. The movement, which had queer women and men at the forefront, was a radical departure from the representative figures of producerist populism in the US historically, in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and class position. This broadened representation of who constitutes the people, forged in sharp conflict with both the state and the US racial order, may open new vistas of populist identification beyond this particular set of issues to broader counterhegemonic concerns over poverty, state violence, and political powerlessness.

## CONCLUSION

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Populist phenomena in the United States differ from those elsewhere in two distinct respects—one institutional, the other historical. Institutionally, the constitutional frame of US politics constrains and fragments political expression. Indeed, where populism demands popular sovereignty and unmediated representation of the people, the Constitution separates governance between three branches of government, breaks up representation over time and space (staggered elections, overlapping electoral units), divides sovereignty



between the national government and the states, and filters popular political expression into two great parties. Thus there are, on the one hand, no durable “populist” parties as one finds in Europe, nor the possibility of populist majoritarian control of government as one finds in Latin America. Rather, populism in the United States is expressed in the discourse of political candidates to a greater or lesser degree, and within social movements, or as Laura Grattan has argued, in extra-institutional formations such as economic cooperatives (Grattan, 2016). It is perhaps better then to analyze not what populism is but what populism does.

To say that populism occupies no formal space in the US political system is not to diminish its power, however, and this leads to its second distinguishing feature. As Michael Kazin described it, US populism is a “mode of persuasion.” This mode can be quite powerful because it invokes *the people*—which in the US context is the greatest form of legitimation. This notion of the people is rooted in republicanism—which has been an authorizing form of political discourse since the founding.

For this reason US populism remains open politically, because authorizing definitions of the people cannot be given in advance. Populist movements emerge at moments when powerful institutions can be convincingly cast as corrupt or parasitic on the body politic. It is then that myths of the latent authority that resides in the people become more powerful. Legible articulations of the people draw on prior framings of peoplehood, which bear the traces of race, gender, class, etc. But each new enunciation of the people creates newly rendered political identities.

This then is the tension at the heart of US populism—at moments of populist upheaval, the boundaries around *the people* can be fluid and unstable. Yet the intelligibility of populist claims require an idea of the people that can credibly be narrated within identifiable logics. In the United States, this logic has employed the binary of producer and parasite—one that is often rendered in raced and gendered associations, yet need not be. Its expressions can be egalitarian and inclusive, or hierarchical and exclusive, or some of both.

To the degree that populism is a mode of persuasion, future research should focus on how persuasion happens. Populist political identifications occur as subjectification—a coming into being of new identities. We must better understand the ways in which this happens, which necessitates analyses of political culture. Recent work in affect theory can help us understand how new media shape political passions. Political theory that attends to genre can offer insights into how actors become situated within political narratives. Lived



categories such as race, gender, and sexuality must be examined not merely as political variables but as fundamental features in the production of populist identities. In other words, the study of populism should push researchers to widen the horizons of what constitutes the political, and therefore what constitutes notions of *the people*.

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## CHAPTER 13

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# POPULISM IN WESTERN EUROPE

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PAUL TAGGART

IN their 1969 volume on populism Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner argued that there was a specter of populism haunting the world ([Ionescu and Gellner, 1969](#)).<sup>1</sup> As with this volume, they therefore surveyed populism across the world. They had chapters on North America, Latin America, Russia, and Eastern Europe. They did not include Western Europe. Today not including Western Europe in a consideration of populism would be almost unthinkable. The proliferation of parties, mainly on the radical right end of the ideological spectrum, has become one of the key features of contemporary Western European party politics ([Betz, 1994](#); von [Beyme, 1988](#); [Kitschelt, 1995](#); [Ignazi, 2003](#); [Carter, 2005](#); [Norris, 2005](#); [Mudde, 2007](#)). And for some populism has become almost synonymous with its Western European form.

Populism in contemporary Western Europe is manifested in the form of a multitude of political parties. Often these parties have been insurgent forces but with the passage of time some of these have moved into being established parts of their respective party systems. The contemporary phenomenon is not a new one, with its origins as far back as the early 1970s in Denmark and France.<sup>2</sup> But there has been, in recent decades, a growing trend in terms of rising support and a growing heterogeneity in the forms of these forces. There has also been a coming in from the cold as some of these parties have been included in governments such as in Austria, Greece, Italy, and Switzerland ([Heinisch, 2003](#); [Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015](#); [Aslanidis and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016](#)) or their support has been vital to survival of governments, such as in the Netherlands and Denmark, leading some to ask if they have entered the mainstream ([Akkerman et al., 2016](#)).

Populist parties in Western Europe now exist as new and old, as insurgent and government and as left- and right-wing parties. This chapter argues that we need to understand this diverse group in terms of their populism and in terms of their ideology as a whole, and that the understanding of this collective group of parties allows us also to understand the changes in contemporary Western European politics in general.

Populist parties in Western Europe are here being defined in ideological terms with a broad adherence to the approach advocated by [Mudde](#) (this

volume). This means we are considering political parties whose approach sets them in an antagonistic relationship to elites, with the parties fetishizing the purity of the people as an undifferentiated mass and contrasting this with the nature of the elite and the establishment as tainted, unrepresentative, and indeed often corrupt. But, although the approach is largely ideological, I would also suggest that there is real purchase in seeing the populism in contemporary Western Europe in [Ostiguy's](#) (this volume) terms as being framed in the terms of “low” politics. This chapter argues that the issue basis of populism needs to be differentiated but that the totality of populism can only be discerned in terms of surveying the range of issue basis. And what unifies that range of issue basis is the way in which they are framed in low politics terms.

This description of the populism of these political parties is very abstract. In practice political parties do not articulate these positions per se but express these broader sentiments in terms of positions and issues that are more tangible and more focused around issues that mobilize voters and citizens. There is a variety in terms of the issues that Western European parties focus upon but that variety can obscure the underlying similarity that can be identified if we focus upon their populism. Specifically this chapter suggests that there are four issues that are touchstones for contemporary Western European populism. They are immigration, regionalism, corruption, and European integration. The chapter will consider each in turn.

The reason for focusing on each of these issues is not to provide a cumulative comprehensive picture of all the populist parties but rather it is to illustrate how populism emerges in diverse forms and to show that this diversity can be understood partly in terms of its underlying populism.

It is a common assertion of populist studies that populism is characterized by its thin-centered nature ([Taggart, 2000](#); [Stanley, 2008](#); [Mudde, 2004](#)). This means that populism attaches to other ideologies. It is also a reflection of the chameleonic nature of populism that means that it is fundamentally colored by its environment. The nature of populism, the issues it focuses on, and what it celebrates as “low” politics derive from the context. This is why populism is particularly given to variation and makes it difficult to integrate the studies of populism from very different contexts. But its thin-centered nature is what means that in contrasting contexts, even within Western Europe, it emerges with different issue bases. Teun [Pauwels \(2014\)](#) argues that the thin-centered nature means that populism should be categorized, in Western Europe, according to the type of ideology to which it is adjacent (neo-liberal, social or national). However, the focus here on issues deliberately eschews such an

approach as ideologies are more static and less fluid than issues. Issues can be, and are, framed differently, constructed with different emphases, and subject to change according to differences in the political environment.

In this chapter I use the range of cases of populist parties in contemporary Western Europe to illustrate the themes and issues used by populist parties. The chapter is not designed to be a comprehensive survey of the cases but rather uses the cases illustratively and somewhat selectively. In many of these cases, the parties can and have been analysed in other terms—as regional (De Winter and Tursan, 2003), as radical right (e.g. Mudde, 2007), as anti-immigrant parties (e.g. Van der Brug, Fennema, and Tillie, 2005) or as Euroskeptical parties (e.g. Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008). Such categorizations are not incorrect and not unhelpful. But what I am suggesting here is that the parties can be understood also as populist parties and that populism in Western Europe can only be fully understood if we consider the range of populist forces.

What underlies the four issue foci of these parties is that these issues are framed in populist terms. The issues themselves are not inherently populist. For the immigration issue, the emphasis is on the people as a homogeneous entity. Furthermore the people embody wisdom and virtue and, by implication, these attributes are diluted and dulled when the homogeneity of the people is undermined by immigration and particularly when that immigration is the function of an elite-driven project to create multiculturalism. Those parties that load on regionalism are using a meshing of a “heartland” (Taggart, 2000) based on a sub-national community with a wider critique of central state politics. Neatly embodied in calls for devolution or independence are the virtuous people and the national elites that deny them access to that virtue. Where corruption is the driver it draws a fundamental aspect of populism, in its distaste for politics and the sneaking suspicion that politics as an activity inherently corrupts the virtue of the ordinary people. An antipathy towards the European Union presses the populist buttons of remote complex detached political institutions par excellence.

In effect what we see is a populist politicization of the issues involved. This means that the issues are appropriated by populist actors but also that the issues act as vehicles for mobilizing a sort of latent populist possibility. By using these issues and by building an agenda, and then support of them, these parties bring the issues into wider contention. This then forces other actors in the party systems to react to them. The importance of populism often lies in the reactions that it engenders in others.

The idea of focusing on issues is not to see these parties as single-issue parties.<sup>3</sup> It is also not to argue that the issues are mutually exclusive. Indeed, they are very often mutually reinforcing. It is also not to see the issue focus of the parties as immutable. In fact, if anything we can see a tendency for those issues to change in terms of how they are framed; we often see the parties emerging with one particular focus but as they come to develop longevity they tend to broaden out their focus and sometimes shift in terms of what their primary emphasis is. Identifying the four issues that the parties focus on is a way of putting into relief the context of West European politics that shapes the manifestation of their populism. But it shows that the relief is uneven: that different politics and the different patterns of competition within them push some issues further forward than others.

## THE POPULIST POLITICS OF IMMIGRATION

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The focus on immigration is the clearest and most widespread of the four different issues. Indeed there has been an almost universal tendency to treat the parties that focus on this issue as being synonymous with populist parties in Western Europe. This is, in part, defensible. The cluster of populist parties that focus on immigration as a primary issue have been researched as populist radical right parties (Betz, 1993; Taggart, 1995; Mudde, 2007) and as anti-immigration parties (Van der Brug, Fennema, and Tillie, 2000; 2005; Art, 2011) but less often as populist parties.

The identification of populism with immigration is down largely to the prominence, longevity, and success of the French National Front. The party was formed and mobilized largely around the issue of opposition to immigration (Hainsworth and Mitchell, 2000). Central to its identity was the focus on the nature of French society and the defence of that against the alleged challenge of immigration. The party has been through many internal conflicts and fluctuating electoral fortunes, with the party entering the second round of the French presidential election in 2002, and, more recently, with the succession of Marine Le Pen to the leadership of her father's party. She has significantly changed the party in an attempt to de-demonize it but there is still a strong emphasis on French national identity, opposition to immigration, and a policy of national preference designed to oppose multiculturalism (Shields, 2013). In many senses, the party can be seen as a trail blazer for populist parties primarily focusing on immigration and its sustained presence in



European politics has served as a flag-bearer for populist parties with immigration at the top of their agenda.

From the rise of the French National Front, there have been a series of high profile populist parties that emphasize immigration and fit clearly into the category of the radical right. The entry of Jorg Haider's Freedom Party into government in coalition with the Christian Democrats in Austria marked for many a high-water mark for this party but it has proved able, even without Haider, to maintain a significant section of the vote in Austria over the years.

In recent years the Netherlands has come from being a case with a very little populism to one that is a well-spring of populism (see [van Kessel, 2011](#)). The most prominent case is that of Geert Wilders who has come to represent the face of Dutch populism in contemporary Europe. But Wilders's success and prominence is built on the development of other forms of populism in the Netherlands. The most important of these is the List Pim Fortuyn. Pim Fortuyn was a politician who started to raise the issue of Islamic immigration as a challenge for Dutch society and social values with his party List Pim Fortuyn ([Van Holsteyn and Irwin, 2003](#); [Akkerman, 2005](#)). Fortuyn was a gay sociology professor and so hardly what we would consider a "poster boy" for the extreme right. Indeed, Fortuyn's critique of Islamic immigration was that it was at odds with the social liberalism of Dutch society. So, in some senses, Fortuyn was defending a pluralist inclusive version of a tolerant society against what he saw as a non-pluralist and exclusionary version of Islam. Fortuyn was assassinated in 2002 and although his party won the subsequent election, the party imploded without his leadership. It was onto this agenda and on this constituency that Wilders then started to build his base with his Freedom Party ([Vossen, 2011](#)). It is clear that Wilders has certainly moved Dutch populism to a position that is more clearly on the extreme right but it is still the case that elements of his position reflect the defence of liberalism.

In Nordic countries we have clear cases of early populist mobilization not around immigration but around a more diffuse attack on the welfare state and taxation, only using immigration as a sub-text. This was the case with the Progress Parties in Norway and Denmark and with New Democracy in Sweden ([Taggart, 1995](#)). In Denmark the Progress Party has evolved into the Danish People's Party. In Sweden, New Democracy faded and was succeeded by the Sweden Democrats who have performed electorally more successfully ([Erlingsson et al., 2014](#)). And in Finland the Finns (formerly the True Finns) have become a significant presence, developing out of the Rural Party ([Arter, 2010](#)). Populist parties in the Nordic region have now emerged to champion

the politics of immigration ([Jungar and Jupskås, 2014](#)). It is not coincidental that, with the politicization of immigration in recent years, earlier forms of populist mobilization which did not champion immigration, such as New Democracy in Sweden, have now faded and been superseded by new anti-immigration populist parties such as Sweden Democrats.

The focus on immigration has led many to characterize West European populism as right-wing. Indeed, in this context (and in contrast to Central and East Europe) populism is seen as synonymous with right-wing populism. There is no doubt that the vast majority of these parties are on the right. However, it is important to bear in mind that there are significant variations in what sort of position these parties take on the right. On the economy, the parties vary considerably between economic protectionism and free-market policies. And there is even evidence to suggest that there are important forms of West European populism that can be considered as either on the left, or, at least, not unequivocally on the right, even where immigration is a primary issue.

To say that there is a group of populist parties focusing on immigration is not to say the same thing concerns them. In fact, what we see is that immigration means different things to different parties ([Mudde, 2013](#): 8). The politics of immigration is framed differently in different states. We can also see that some of the variety comes as immigration has been re-framed in European politics by new challenges. The emergence of Islamophobia has offered a new set of demons for populists and a powerful mobilizing tool for populists in some countries like the Netherlands and France. It is also important to note that there are populist parties in Europe, like the Five Star Movement in Italy or Podemos in Spain, that have no concern with immigration politics. What this variety shows is that there is nothing necessary about the equation of populism and immigration politics in contemporary Europe. It demonstrates how the issue is a carrier for deeper concerns about politics and that where the issue is salient in the politics of the country there may be successful populist actors that channel their frustrations through the politics of immigration.

## **THE IDENTITY POLITICS OF POPULISM AND THE ROLE OF REGIONALISM**

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The issue of identity is a broad topic in contemporary European politics. The politics of identity has many different contemporary manifestations. But in terms of populism the politics of identity, in certain cases, fuses with the

assertion of sub-national identities. The cases of parties asserting different identities against larger national identities and structures are becoming more common. The cases of the Flemish Block in Belgium and the Northern Leagues in Italy exemplify this fusing of sub-national identity politics with populism. They do not represent all the cases as we may also look to the Lega de Ticinesi in Switzerland as another similar case; but the Belgian and the Italian cases offer us emblematic cases with some contrasting facets. The rejection of central state structures and the assertion of regional identities is not enough to characterize these as populist actors. There has been a proliferation of regional movements and parties. The populist cases only exist as a sub-set of this group. Taking both [Mudde](#) (this volume) and [Ostiguy](#) (this volume) as our guide, the regionalist forces that frame their demands for regional autonomy in the ideological terms of the rejection of the elite and the wider rejection of the rules of the game, and in the cultural terms of asserting low politics, are those that we consider populist. Indeed it may even be possible to analyse these cases more in terms of being a reactive response to rejection of the core state structures and less as a bottom-up assertion of regional identities. The rise of regionalist parties has thrown up many cases of parties that assert regional identity but broadly do so without rejecting the wider political game. We should here note that the vernacular usage of populism ([Bale, van Kessel, and Taggart, 2011](#)) has often characterized regionalist parties such as the Scottish Nationalist Party in the UK as populist but this does not square with the tighter academic definitions of populism as they conform to more social democratic models of politics. Of course, there is a natural tendency to see parties that reject central structures in favor of devolving or seeking independence as inherently rejectionist. But I would suggest that there is a key difference between those parties that use sub-regional identities as a way of framing a wider rejection of politics and those parties that reject political structures because of their assertion of alternative identities. The former represents a populist form of mobilizing identity but there are other ways in which these identities can be framed. Looking at the Flemish Block and the Northern League we can see that both parties' discourses feed on the difficulties of the central state. In the case of the Flemish Block this critique resonates in a state already composed of a profoundly divided society in Belgium based on historical, linguistic, and cultural identities in terms of Wallonia and Flanders ([Lucardie, Akkerman, and Pauwels, 2016](#)). Largely as a consequence of this, the nature of politics and the functioning of the central states has faced profound difficulties in recent years as perhaps exemplified in the challenge of

forming coalition governments that have both to span an ideological range and also to do so in a way that spans the Flemish-Walloon divide. The parallel for the Flemish block with the Northern League is that the Northern League represents a development that reflects the profound transformation of Italian politics in the early 1990s with the collapse of the party system in the wake of corruption scandals. The failure of central Italian politics is also twinned, in the case of the Northern League, with a critique of the regional disparity between the (in the eyes of the Northern League) industrious North of Italy and the feckless, corruption-ridden South. This critique is embodied in calls for greater autonomy for the North to free itself from the ineffective Italian state and from the need to support the South. There is a key difference between the Flemish and Italian cases. In the case of Flanders the assertion of a regional identity represents an established historical identity. In the case of the Northern League, regional identity has been constructed and crystallized around the invention of Padania as a new entity ([Giordano, 2000](#)). What this demonstrates is just how the identity can, in an extreme case, become almost invented in order to act as a weapon to beat up on the real object of fury—the established political system.

There is a sense in which other Western European populist parties that are not primarily regionalist parties can be seen to have adopted forms of regional identity. The Left Party in Germany has moved a long way from its origins as a regional party representing the former East Germany but it still has a residual element that sees regional identity as important ([Hough, Koß, and Olsen, 2007](#)).

For populists, the politics of regional identity have served as a vehicle for the expression of a more diffuse frustration with the wider functioning of politics in general. We need to be careful to not see all politics of regional identity as populist. The overwhelming majority of regionalist parties are not, in fact, populist. But where the assertion of regional identity is combined with the wider rejection of the functioning of politics we can identify a distinct populist politics.

## THE POPULIST POLITICS OF CORRUPTION

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There is very often a link between populists and a view of the world that focuses on the corrupt nature of politics. For some commentators, the focus on corruption is due to populism's tendency to moralism ([Mény, 1996](#)). For others

it is linked to the Manichaeism of populism ([Hawkins, 2010](#)). It features in [Mudde's \(2004: 543\)](#) definition in the form of a belief in a "corrupt elite." But to see it as a consequence of other aspects of populism, or as simply a leitmotif, misses the point that an emphasis on corruption can be traced to a fundamental feature of populism and this is the view of politics. Central to populist thinking is a fundamental ambivalence about the very activity and process of politics. Although seeing politics as necessary, populism implicitly views corruption as an almost endemic and inevitable consequence of politics.

Strict definitions of corruption focus on the use of public office for private gain ([Nye, 1967](#)). But, more broadly understood, and in a way that is much more amenable to the understanding of populism, corruption entails a process of deterioration. It implies a loss of purity. In this sense, populism has a strong theme of antagonism to the process of politics which it sees as inherently corrupting ([Taggart, 2000](#)). It is this which explains both the characterization by populists of elites as corrupt(ed) and also therefore the antagonism between them and the pure uncorrupted people whom they are supposed to be representing.

The corruption that Western European populists in practice focus on is two-fold. First there is the corruption of the elites themselves. Politicians and establishment figures of various types are taken to be detached from those they are supposed to represent and, by implication, to be in politics for less than honorable motives. This sort of critique is both fostered by and feeds populism when there are explosions of interest. For example, the scandal about the expenses of UK MPs in 2009 represented one such moment where a whole political class was seen to be tainted by charges that public money had been misused for private gain.

The second way that corruption manifests itself for Western European populists is, in practice, the most frequent form. This is where the institutions are seen as corrupting. The critique is very often, therefore, of the failure of political parties. For parties like the Freedom Party in Austria, much of their initial success was based on the appeal of their critique of the collusion between the major parties and their tendency to act together in ways that placed them at a distance from the constituencies of citizens, making the established political parties such objects of scorn ([Heinisch, 2003](#); [Fallend, 2004](#)). The Austrian case with its consociational aspects, of course, particularly lends itself to the idea of parties divorced from their constituencies, but this critique of the corrupting nature of parties is widespread.

The observation of the failure of established parties runs throughout all of

the populist parties in Western Europe. However, in states that have consociational structures, there is a greater emphasis on this critique. We can see the strong vein of criticism in the Wilders' Freedom Party in the Netherlands and the Flemish Block in Belgium. But it is by no means confined to these states as it has been a significant mobilizing issue for a number of parties ([Ivarsflaten, 2008](#)). The issue of institutional corruption has been a leitmotif of most Western European populists. But it is with the emergence of Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement in Italy that we can see the clearest articulation of a charge of corruption. The link here is made specifically with the elite and their relationship to the Mafia.

In Grillo's Five Star Movement we have one of the few examples of a party mobilizing explicitly on the issue of opposition to corruption ([Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013](#); [Lanzone and Woods, 2015](#); [Conti and Memoli, 2015](#)). And more recently the emergence of Podemos in Spain also reflects a focus on the corruption of "la caste" ([Kioupkiolis, 2016](#)). We can even see the Greek SYRIZA party in this light. Of course, the dire economic crisis and the imposition of austerity made the circumstances special for SYRIZA to come to power advocating hostility to the settlement and the actors that had imposed this on Greece, but still pervasive in the discourse was a sense of confronting a powerful "establishment" ([Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014](#): 128–31).

In practice, what we can observe is that there is often an elision between the charges of elite corruption and institutional corruption in the populist discourse in Western Europe. Although there is something inherently Manichaean in populism's tendency to see the world as divided between the two forces of the people and the elites, between the good and the bad, it is striking that in Western Europe, the discourse has generally shied away from dismissing politicians (as the elite) as inherently evil or bad. More often the discourse is framed in terms of the politicians *becoming* unrepresentative and divorced from the concerns of their electoral constituency. Once again, this illustrates a fundamental ambivalence towards the processes and institutions of politics from the populists.

## THE POPULIST POLITICS OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND EUROSKEPTICISM

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The issue of opposition to the European Union is nothing new. And it is not a new phenomenon for populist parties in Europe. For parties motivated by their



opposition to domestic elites, portrayed as disconnected from the concerns of their citizens and corrupted by the process of politics, the distant and complex architecture of the EU makes it a natural extension for such sentiments. Taking pot shots at national capitals is easy. But taking pot shots at those in Brussels has been even easier. Populist parties in Europe have nearly always had opposition to the EU as part of their ideological weaponry. But, in reality, this remained a minor component of their appeal.

Two developments have increased the importance of Euroskepticism to West European populists. The first is the increasing politicization of the European issue as a facet of domestic politics. The roots of this lie in the collapse of the so-called permissive consensus after the process of ratifying the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. The permissive consensus held that European integration was essentially an elite-driven process and that elites proceeded on the basis that there was a broad social consensus in favor of integration. The process of ratifying the Maastricht Treaty had the effect of dispelling the idea that the EU was an uncontested project.

The second occurrence that increased the politicization of the issue of the EU has been a series of crises kicked off by the economic crisis and particularly the crisis of the Euro that has unfolded since 2009. Unsurprisingly the unsettling of politics that has occurred in times of austerity has increased many divisions within states but it has also had a particular effect in undermining European solidarity where EU member-states like Germany are seen to bail out other member-states such as Greece, Ireland, Spain, and Portugal for the sake of ensuring the survival of the Euro. The paradox is therefore that Euroskepticism emerges in those donor states where a common sentiment may be frustration at providing the means and it also emerges in recipient states where the conditions of the bail-out are perceived as overly austere. At both extremes, populist parties advocating hostility towards aspects of European integration have not only emerged but prospered electorally. The subsequent crises of the refugee crisis and the trauma of the UK's Brexit decision have overlaid issues of immigration and legitimacy on top of the profound economic travails of the EU.

It comes then as no surprise that we see the emergence of populist parties whose primary issue base has been Euroskepticism. The most prominent example of this is the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) ([Ford and Goodwin, 2014](#)). The party has emerged and developed as a party committed to British withdrawal from the EU and is seen by many to have played a key role in facilitating the referendum that gave rise to the Brexit decision. In a



sense this has not been surprising as the UK has had one of the highest levels of public opposition to the EU among all the member states. But it has meant that the party has in fact often been analysed only as a Euroskeptic party, whereas, as the party has developed, it has developed a broader issue base with a very strong emphasis on the issue of immigration ([Usherwood, 2016](#)). Its critique of politics is not restricted to the EU and the position of the party as a critic of the political class makes it far more useful to think of the party as a populist party with a Euroskeptic agenda rather than as simply a Euroskeptical party.

The United Kingdom has a peculiarly hostile position to the European Union and yet in other countries with a very different relationship to the EU, populist parties with a primary issue focus on Europe have emerged. Germany lies at the heart of the EU project and has strong support for the EU among its population. It is striking then that a Euroskeptic party has emerged in the form of the Alternative for Germany, a party that advocates withdrawal from the Euro. While this is clearly not as extreme as advocating withdrawal from the EU, the very fact that a party in the most un-Euroskeptical state questions the legitimacy of a key component of the European project shows that Euroskepticism is not the sole preserve of the UK. As the Alternative for Germany has developed, and indeed won significant support in elections, it has broadened its base. The confluence of anti-Euro sentiment combined with the politics of immigration in the wake of the refugee crisis proved a powerful cocktail in generating support for this new party, with commentators sharing the idea that “finally” it constituted a right-wing populist party for Germany ([Berbair et al., 2015](#); [Arzheimer, 2015](#)).

The issue of Euroskepticism has been a hardy perennial for populist parties in Western Europe. While UKIP and the Alternative for Germany are relatively recent phenomena, the issue of Europe has always been on the agenda of populist forces—even if it has been rather low down. The French National Front has always maintained a hostile position as the EU has been seen to compromise national identity. The reason for the common advocacy of Euroskepticism by populists lies in the nature of the integration process itself: a project of elites that is, at best, complex and remote and, at worst, democratically deficient is too easy a target for populists. It is not a coincidence that it is hard to think of a contemporary West European populist party that does not exhibit a degree of Euroskepticism. For very few it is the primary focus but for almost all it is one part of their armory of issues.

## POPULISM IN WESTERN EUROPE

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Using the themes discussed above to examine populism in Western Europe allows us to see a diverse set of issues. But, as will have been clear, the issues often intersect for the populist parties: immigration is often linked to European integration and regionalism is often linked with corruption. Most populist parties in contemporary Western Europe do focus on most of the four issues (albeit in different ways). These issues serve as a sort of issue palate that parties select from and then emphasize one issue over the others.

The analysis above assumes that for populist parties there is often one primary issue that the party focuses on. This issue will often be the initial rationale for mobilization (e.g. Europe for UKIP, regionalism for the Northern League, immigration for the National Front) but it is clear that all these parties over time develop fuller policy agendas that tend to circulate around the other issues. There is a clear sense in which the early lives of the parties have been superseded by a broadening of their agenda such that it allows us to discern the populism that underlies them. This is not simply instrumentalism on the part of the parties but is rather part of a natural process of both the development of the parties and a reaction to the changing nature of the political context in which they find themselves.

There is also the phenomenon of parties switching their primary issue focus. We can see this clearly in the case of the transformation of the French National Front that has occurred with the change of leadership from Jean-Marie Le Pen to his daughter Marine Le Pen. The attempt has been made to shift the party away from an over-emphasis on immigration in order to de-demonize it ([Shields, 2013](#)). Concomitantly the issue of Euroskepticism has increased in importance. This assumes a central instrumentalism in terms of the parties themselves. But this is not to suggest that parties necessarily cynically pick up issues to increase their popularity; it is to suggest that the changing emphasis of the parties on certain issues is indicative of widespread change in the issue agenda.

There is nothing inherent in the issues that make them populist. Certainly there are issues that seem to lend themselves to populist mobilization but this is a function of the nature of Western European society and politics more than a function of populism. The collective issue portfolio of contemporary Western European populists provides a way into understanding Western European societies and politics. This means that, if we are to have a long-term perspective, then it is certainly possible that, as the nature of society and

politics in Western Europe changes, so will the issue base. We can already see this in evidence as Islam was not an issue for the populist parties in the 1970s and 1980s but emerged as a key driver for populist parties in the late 1990s and 2000s ([Betz and Meret, 2009](#)), as it increased in salience both nationally and internationally.

## CONCLUSION

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This chapter has argued that populism in contemporary Western Europe needs to be understood comprehensively—that we need to consider all the elements of populism together. The four issue areas that we have used to look at populism, taken at their broadest meaning, constitute attacks on the core pillars of contemporary Western Europe. Together then they tell us about Western Europe as well as about populism there. That issues of identity—be it ethnic (immigration), regional (European), or national (minority nationalism)—and of corruption have political purchase tells us about how West European politics are changing. They are not immutable and unchangeable but their mutations and changes tell us about the dynamics of politics in contemporary Western Europe.

The focus on immigration and opposition to both the general principle of multiculturalism and the specific phenomenon of Islamic immigration constitutes a challenge to the diversification of Western European societies and it is an attack on the pluralism of the post-war settlement (see [Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012](#)). Whether this attack is justified or not is an irrelevance to us here. What is relevant is that this attack has real resonance and has found significant electoral support. It has had implications for both the positions of major parties ([Bale, 2003](#)) and the policy process itself.

The issue of corruption feeds into and from a wider discourse about democratic disconnect. What is striking about Western Europe is that the discourse of corruption in this context is not so much about the illegality of corruption as about the discourses of moral decline and particularly about the institutional effects on politics. Whereas in other parts of the world such as India, China, and Latin America ([Hawkins, 2010](#)), the terminology of corruption is more explicit and more salient, the sort of corruption that is focused on in Western Europe is more moral than financial and more political than economic. In a sense this can be read as a consequence of the strength of democratic politics in Western Europe. Politics in this part of the world, as an

activity, is rarely seen as criminal but is very often perceived as unethical and as unrepresentative. It is upon this diffuse but pervasive sentiment that populism in Western Europe builds.

Regionalism and the politics of identity constitute an attack on the power and authority of the central nation-states in Western Europe. It is common to talk of the attack on the nation-state from above and below but, in the case of populism, where regionalism is significant, the attack is more on the state as the institution of power. The challenge of populism in Western Europe is more against the sort of politics that the nation-state embodies than against the nation-state itself.

The ubiquity of Euroskepticism in Western European populism is a testimony to the difficulty of constructing an integrated Europe. A complex, opaque, and distant political architecture has fed the populist distrust of the political institutions in general. But the ubiquity of Euroskepticism among populists is also a consequence of the elite-driven nature of the European project for its first four decades. For member-states the consensus that existed between particularly the center-left and center-right major parties fed the idea that European integration was the result of political collusion. And where elites are unified a populist critique will often prosper. The populist politics of Euroskepticism are therefore a critique of what the European Union has become but also how it became this way.

For Kriesi and his co-authors ([Kriesi, 2014](#); [Kriesi et al., 2006](#); [Kriesi et al., 2008](#)), the cleavage lines of contemporary Europe have been transformed with an economic and cultural cleavage becoming ascendant. Populism in this context mobilizes globalization “losers” against globalization “winners” through the defence of the nation-state and national community. The focus on European integration is therefore linked to larger globalizing tendencies. However, it is important to stress that we need to take account of the role of powerful domestic political structures in shaping the context into which populists emerge and in determining the sorts of issues that they will mobilize their discontent around. Identifying these issues is therefore another way of highlighting fundamental fault-lines within politics in contemporary Western Europe.

What is also striking about three out of the four issues is the way in which the same issue can be mobilized in either a left-wing or a right-wing form. The issue of regionalism or minority nationalism can potentially be used by the left and right. There are minority nationalist parties that have adopted a social democratic agenda and there are those that have taken a more conservative

focus. This may be partly a function of whether ethnic or civic nationalism is adopted ([Keating, 2004](#)), but whatever the differentiation, it is the outcome that minority nationalist forces are located on very different parts of the left-right spectrum. Hostility to their respective central states may unite these parties but much divides them.

Euroskepticism is a position that has always been taken up by the right and the left, and more at the poles than towards the center ([Taggart, 1998](#)). The project of European integration can be demonized as a project of rich capitalists as much as a project of regulatory state-loving idealists. And both arguments exist. Even among populist Euroskeptics on the right there are very different versions of critique as exemplified by the libertarian, free-trading UKIPers as against the protectionist nationalists in France's Front National.

The critique of corruption and the focus on unrepresentative elites and an embedded "establishment" can also be drawn with different connotations. On the left, the elite can be vilified for its wealth and links to finance and corporate power centers ([March and Keith, 2016](#)). For the right, the elite can be attacked for being unrepresentative of "ordinary people" and as being cosmopolitan and out of touch. Using Ostiguy's terms both sides will implicitly attack elites for being "high" and disconnected from the virtuous "low." The composition of those elites may vary on either side but there is quite a similarity in the discourse used by both sides.

Populism and its popularity are an indicator of either structural problems or legitimacy issues for a Europe that is socially and politically pluralist, state-centered, and integrated. We need to take disparate elements of populist politics together if we are to understand populist politics in Western Europe. But we also need to reflect on the fact that the criticisms that they make go to the heart of some of the key issues of contemporary Europe today—and that these criticisms have significant electoral currency. Populism, love it or loathe it, may be an important barometer of the health of politics in the contexts in which it arises.

## NOTE

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- 1 The author would like to thank Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser and Neil Dooley for their comments on drafts of this chapter.
- 2 There were populists in Western Europe before the 1970s; one of the best cases is that of the Poujadists in France in the 1950s.
- 3 Indeed there is something of a consensus in the literature on these parties that rejects the single-issue party label. See [Fennema \(1997\)](#); [Mudde \(1999\)](#); [Erlingsson et al. \(2014\)](#).

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