

Tony Wood
**Some Theses on
“Populism”**

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1. *Populism is in the air.* Establishment media outlets have struggled to make sense of the unaccustomed turbulence that has seized hold of politics in the US and UK this past twelve months. Trump, Sanders, Corbyn, Brexit: these things were not supposed to even stand a *chance* of happening. One term a great many pundits and analysts have fastened onto, like an analytical life jacket, is “populism.” Columnists and political reporters in the US have described both Trump’s and Sanders’s campaigns as being fueled by “populist sentiment”; they are “two populist peas in a pod,” “populism peddlers” – much like Corbyn, who according to the *Financial Times* has tapped into “a rising mood of populism.”¹ Brexit, too, was interpreted both inside the UK and beyond it as part of a “populist backlash,” a worrying harbinger of “nativist populism,” and so on.² This rush to apply the populist label has several meanings, only a few of which have anything to do with the word itself.

2. *Populism is a cypher.* As a category of political analysis, the term is famously malleable, its definition so vague that it has been applied to a huge range of movements and phenomena, from Atatürk to Mao, Perón to Thatcher. Minimally, “populism” is supposed to involve a leader or party making direct appeals to “the people” – as if this were a strange thing for a politician or a party to do. Most attempts to list its identifying traits end up trapped in a circular logic: x movement is populist because it possesses y features, and we can classify y features as specific to populism because we have seen them in x movement. But what if this slipperiness is precisely the point? One of the more useful interpretations of the instability of the term remains that of the late Argentine political theorist Ernesto Laclau, who described populism not as an ideology but a discursive strategy, forged in the midst of crises in the ruling order. Amid this kind of breakdown, one or other social group might try to forge a new hegemonic bloc, and for this they would need to cobble together an ideological discourse capable of drawing in the different parts of their coalition. Laclau’s work as a whole explored the politics of discursivity in a range of contexts, but his initial concern in the 1970s was to explain the uncanny successes of Peronism. As he put it then, “A class is hegemonic not so much to the extent that it is able to impose a uniform conception of the world on the rest of society, but to the extent that it can articulate different visions of the world in such a way that their potential antagonism is neutralized.”³ Populism, for Laclau, is effectively the name for this strategy of articulation: the attempt to absorb and neutralize social antagonisms by appealing to the larger abstraction of “the people.” But this



Hollis Frampton, *Spaghetti*, 1964. From the series "Ordinary Pictures"

also means that it can have no particular ideological or political content: it is not a system of beliefs, not an *-ism* at all, but a set of rhetorical maneuvers, deployed from behind any one of several masks. Its actual political substance, then, always comes from somewhere else.

3. *Populism is a floating signifier.* Since it need not refer to any specific political content, does the concept of populism serve any purpose at all? No and yes. Its usage in contemporary political discourse seems to be so broad as to announce its futility: in the last decade and a half, the *Economist*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, and others have applied the tag to figures as different as Silvio Berlusconi, Hugo Chávez, Vladimir Putin, Néstor Kirchner, Marine Le Pen, Evo Morales, Alexis Tsipras, and Viktor Orbán.⁴ As if to prove the capaciousness of the concept, they have now done the same to Sanders, Trump, Corbyn, and Farage. In the US context, of course, “populism” has an actual historical referent: the agrarian leftist People’s Party of the 1890s. Sanders’s verbal attacks on Wall Street might hold some echo of the Populists’ hostility to “the money power,” but Trump’s bizarre hate-vortex bears no substantive relation to their prairie progressivism (as opposed, say, to the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the mid-nineteenth-century Know-Nothings). What seems to be happening instead, at least rhetorically, is the extension to US domestic politics of what has long been standard practice for the Western mainstream media with regard to Latin America and Europe: the use of “populism” to describe politicians or governments that don’t fit the standard mold. Indeed, this basic nonconformity, despite the many sharp ideological differences that actually divide them, is what unites “populists” in the establishment mind. “Populism,” in other words, is the name for everything that falls outside the neoliberal consensus – a floating signifier for the disapproval of respectable opinion.

4. *Populism is a mirror.* The very emptiness and flexibility of “populism” is what makes it polemically useful to Western elites and opinion makers. It is a catch-all label for everything they dislike. It is predominantly a term of abuse. As Italian journalist Marco d’Eramo has pointed out, today “no one defines themselves as populist; it is an epithet pinned on you by your political enemies.”⁵ That being so, d’Eramo argues in a neat reversal, “then the term populism defines those who use it rather than those who are branded with it.” In that sense, the recurrent deployment of “populism” tells us more about those using it than about the phenomena it purports to describe. What had been an empty

concept becomes a kind of trick two-way mirror, through which global elites think they are looking out at their enemies, when in fact they are seeing their own prejudices and fears reflected back to them in the form of assorted “populists.”

5. *Populism is a screen.* Not just a term of abuse for ideas the neoliberal consensus finds uncongenial, “populism” also actively misdescribes – and thus attempts to conceal – what has been happening in Latin America, Europe, the US, and elsewhere. By labelling so much of what lies outside the accepted spectrum as “populism,” Western elites and the pundit class lump together political developments that are fundamentally dissimilar, depicting them as equivalent or symmetrical challenges to the existing setup from left and right – and as if the differences between left and right don’t matter. But the underlying logic of these tendencies is not the same at all. To take only current examples from the US and UK, the movements of which Sanders and Corbyn have become the figureheads represent the return of a politics that consciously seeks to undo systemic inequalities. This has involved a reassertion of the language of class, not as a deterministic predictor of political sympathies, but as a coherent vocabulary for describing different but nonetheless shared experiences of exploitation. It has also involved a partial rehabilitation of the New Deal in the US and ideas of state ownership in the UK – both gestures at a kind of social-democratic statism thought to have been banished by the combined efforts of Reagan and Thatcher, Clinton and Blair. Trump and the Brexiteers, by contrast, couching their campaigns in the language of patriotism and sovereignty, are resolutely uninterested in such policies, veering instead towards a heightened neoliberalism – effectively promising voters even bigger doses of what has been harming them, in a kind of reverse homeopathy. Behind the fog created by the term “populism” lie political alternatives that lead in very different directions. This is one of the other purposes served by the term’s recurrent usage: to hide from public view the fact that such meaningful choices are even possible.

6. *“Populism” against “the people.”* The term “populism” has possessed all these overlapping functions – cypher, floating signifier, mirror, screen – to varying degrees for decades now. But its use has increased noticeably in the years since the 2008 financial crisis. The spread of recession and, with it, a widening array of discontents, is surely part of the reason for this. In the context of a stubborn global downturn, with unemployment, precarious employment, and poverty multiplying, the frequency with which elite and mainstream media deploy the

term “populism” betrays a mounting nervousness about potential challenges from below. The use of “populism” is designed to meet this elite need for ideological defenses: it is a rhetorical weapon to be used against “the people” as and when they show signs of resistance to their continuing expropriation and exploitation. Here, d’Eramo is surely right to note a correlation between the increased use of the term “populism” and the rollout of distinctly antipopular austerity programs across much of the industrialized world. Any opposition to these policies has been painted as irresponsible demagoguery: “You want health care for everyone? You are a populist. You want your pension linked to inflation? But what a bunch of populists! You want your children to go to university, without carrying a lifelong burden of debt? I knew you were a populist on the quiet!”⁶ When elites talk about “populism,” then, what they are really expressing are their own antipopular convictions. “Populism” is a preemptive anathema on “the people” as a collective political actor.

7. *“The people” against “populism.”* In seeking to head off any assertion of collective popular agency, the world’s elites are trying to conjure away a shape-shifting ghost. They are not wrong to be frightened: something is changing out there, beyond the walls of their socioeconomic Green Zones. The turmoil that has gripped world politics in the last few years has, among its many other consequences, thrown up increasingly urgent attempts to recompose or redefine a collective political subjecthood. Who exactly are “the people” now – who might the category include or exclude, and what difference might these definitions make to what it can then do? Occupy’s “We Are the 99 percent” and the Arab Spring’s *ash-sha‘b* represent wishfully maximal aggregations; others have sought out the nuclei of a new collectivity in transformative moments of protest, as in the Greek and Spanish anti-austerity movements, which had hoped to turn Syntagma Square and Puerta del Sol into spaces of constitutive power. There have been, too, projects driven from above, which have tended to take more divisive forms, based on an assertion of ethnic over civic or other kinds of belonging: Orbán’s vision of a Greater Hungary, Modi’s Hindutva supremacism, to some extent Putin’s embrace of a Russian nationalism entwined with Orthodoxy. As well as blurring distinctions between left and right, the use of the term “populism” obscures the very real differences between, on the one hand, top-down bids to set the boundaries of the collective, and on the other, those that are driven from below, by encounters between popular protests, mass

movements, labor unions, and other organizations; between elite simulacra of “the people” and the political and social experimentation that can set a real one in motion.

8. *“You can’t even imagine us.”* The post-2008 economic crisis has been one of the motors behind these various attempts at political recomposition. But they are not simply a reflex response to short-term material decline: they have emerged out of a longer-run process of social and political decomposition, which brought the hollowing-out of the structures of representative democracy across the industrialized world: declining party membership, sluggish voter turnout, a broad sense of disengagement between rulers and governed.⁷ In the West these scleroses could be seen as symptoms of deindustrialization and the unmooring of financialized economies from the social landscape, taking with them secure jobs and swathes of the welfare state. Similar crises of representation have struck in countries where voters didn’t have these things in the first place, and have wearied of the local imitations of Western liberal democracy: after the wave of “Color Revolutions” in Eastern Europe came the Arab Spring, as well as the 2011 protests in Russia against the seemingly infinite extension of Putin’s reign. One of these demonstrations featured a slogan – apparently coined by the poet Pavel Arsen’ev – that summed up the crisis of existing forms of democratic legitimation in a single phrase with a double meaning: “*Vy nas dazhe ne predstavliaete*” – meaning both “You don’t even represent us” and “You can’t even imagine us.” The gap between systems of representation and the unmapped collectivities they misserve is not only a failure of the imagination, however: it is built into the structures of representative democracy itself, in the particular ways modern capitalist states have chosen to mediate the popular will. It is these mediations that have been slowly undermined over the past few decades, raising the specter of a sudden avalanche of popular forces they were designed to contain. What is at stake in attempts to redefine “the people” is partly the fate of these mediating structures, but also the forms of what might in the future come to replace them. Behind elite fears of “populism” looms the threatening, but as yet still dim, possibility of a larger recasting of political power as a whole – what it is used for, by whom, and for whose benefit.

9. *The people is not the sum of its parts.* One of the most glaring symptoms of the current political turbulence is the inability of established liberal-democratic structures to put out the fires flickering at their feet. Again, this is partly

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because these are more crisis-ridden times, and partly the product of complacency or incompetence; but it is also rooted in the widening mismatch between hollowed-out political forms and elusive, multiform collectivities. These have been given a variety of names – the people, the masses, the multitude, the precariat; in a sense, the very multiplication of concepts points to an immanent plurality. What we call this collective actor will depend on why we are talking about it; who it is will vary according to what it does. The mechanisms of Western liberal democracy find this ambiguity unbearable. The entire electoral process is based on slicing “the people” into discrete, identifiable blocs, clearly labelled according to specific geographic and sociological markers – with campaign messages duly tailored to white males in Kansas, middle-class homeowners in Northampton, Latinas in Nevada, and so on. The underlying pattern of political mobilization this is based on works according to an additive logic: focus groups find out what will pull in one set of voters, then another one, then another. The Clinton campaign slogan “I’m with Her” expresses the essence of this logic: rather than naming or identifying a meaningful collective of supporters, it instead summons one individual after another to pledge allegiance to the candidate. The real disparities or commonalities between the concrete people who may or may not be voting are of no interest here, as long as there are enough of them, taken together. This is politics as arithmetic, a monotonous summing of quantities. But given that contemporary societies are not made up of such clearly identifiable and predictable actors – given the complexities and cross-cutting forms of belonging that characterize so many people’s actual lives – it’s not surprising that such calculations are so often confounded.

10. *Algorithms for the people.* For the Left, the problems of building a coalition that could carry out a transformative social and political breakthrough have often been presented as similarly additive ones: how do we get $x + y + z$ to sign up for the revolution? (While avoiding factional splits by j , k , and l [Marxist]?) Hito Steyerl has discussed this as a problem of montage – at the programmatic level, “in the form of inclusions and exclusions based on subject matter, priorities and blind spots,” but also at the organizational level, through “concatenations or conjunctions of different interest groups, NGOs, political parties, associations, individuals or groups.” This kind of political montage, however, carries clear risks: “The additive *and* of the montage is far from innocent and unproblematic,” she argues; “what if the *and* should really be *or*, *because*, or even

instead of?”⁸ Steyerl is effectively questioning the strategic value of arithmetical thinking, of the accumulation of known political integers, suggesting instead that room be made for other kinds of logical operation. Perhaps, indeed, what is needed is more of an algebraic understanding, capable of combining unknown social and political quantities, their dimensions and shapes uneven and unstable, now swelling with the unity of broad consensus, now jagged with the antagonism of class conflict. This kind of political algebra would involve the retrieval of older alliances and solidarities, in line with the term’s original derivation from the Arabic *al-jabr*, “the restoration of broken parts.” But it would also mean writing out new equations, making “the people” anew every time we seek an answer.

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1

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6

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7

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8

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