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Populism in the U.S.

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Introduction

What does it mean to refer to ‘populism’ in the United States? In a spectrum of usages from the journalistic to the academic, ‘U.S. populism’ is most commonly defined as a style of rhetoric, language, or discourse that pits the people against the elite, with historical roots in the 1890s People’s Party. Does populism then begin as a socialist-oriented ‘farmers’ movement?’ Where does the history of politicians’ populism found in controversial rightwing or racist figures, such as McCarthy and Wallace, fit into this typology? How does one explain the emergence of the Tea Party – as a grassroots movement, cluster of special interest groups, and reactionary wing of the Republican Party, simultaneously, not to mention President Trump?

This chapter employs a structuralist conception of both left and rightwing populism as a retrograde discourse, in order to distill the essence of a phenomenon splayed out across the different levels of the political Lebenswelt – from movements to heads of state. Following Ernesto Laclau (2005), it is evident that cases of populist discourse, especially on the left side of the spectrum, often employ future-oriented positive-laden signifiers to construct and unify a conception of ‘the people’ such as the notion of the ‘plain people’ in the People’s Party, Huey Long’s ‘Share our Wealth,’ Obama’s ‘Hope,’ Occupy’s ‘We Are the 99%,’ and Bernie Sanders’ ‘A Future to Believe In.’ Yet in comparing left and right populist discourses, this chapter stresses the distinctive structural feature they both share, which is the dual discursive emphasis placed on a more retrograde demonization of the enemy. In the left cases one finds the People’s Party’s emphasis on big business, Long’s attack on the Federal Reserve, Obama’s brief campaign strategy of admonishing Wall Street fat cats, Occupy’s 1%, and Sanders’ general attack on banks and the elite corporate structure of power in American politics.

On the right, one finds Coughlin’s demonization of Jews, Wallace’s racist discourse targeting African-Americans, Nixon’s ‘Law and Order Society,’ the Tea Party’s ‘socialism,’ and Trump’s demonization of Muslims, Mexicans, Latinos, Jews, immigrants, and terrorists and his pronounced inaugural return to the ‘Law and Order Society.’ In placing the emergence of both left and right U.S. populism in its proper historical context, a structural discursive analysis emerges capable of navigating between these cases. This emphasis on the legacy of the People’s Party in particular as the historical root of populism in the U.S.
reveals the demonized enemy that is commonly invoked across left and right cases – the monetary/banking structure, whether it be big banks, the Federal Reserve (for Long, libertarians, and the Tea Party), taxes, trade deals, and corporate elitism. From the People’s Party on, I argue that this discursive feature has often manifested itself, in psychoanalytic terms, from an analysis of Hofstadter to Lacan retrospectively, as a kind of ‘paranoia’ and ‘fantasy.’

**Historical overview**

The history of populist parties, politicians, and movements has continued to be a constitutive feature of both left and rightwing American politics up until today. The first party to be characterized as ‘populist,’ as previously mentioned, was the People’s Party of the 1890s. The party was composed primarily of farmers who banded together against the crop lien system (farmer struggles under furnishing merchants) and the threat of other economic hardships they encountered in the post-Civil War South. They articulated an anti-big business discourse, including a greenback doctrine calling for the introduction of a fiat currency, and they mobilized to form cooperatives. In the 1896 elections, the People’s Party backed the Democratic candidate, William Jennings Bryan. Although Bryan was defeated by William McKinley, his famous ‘Cross of Gold’ speech, in which he argued against the gold standard, is regarded as one of the most famous political speeches in history and contained populist overtones.

This left-oriented populist legacy was invoked later in the 1930s in the speeches of Louisiana Governor and later Senator Huey Long, who opposed the Federal Reserve and demonized the banks and wealthy in his ‘Share Our Wealth’ plan. During the late 1930s, Father Charles Coughlin became the first populist to disseminate his calls for monetary and labor reform as well as the nationalization of industries over radio broadcasts, which also had a starkly anti-Semitic tone. This ‘paranoid style in American politics’ (Hofstadter, 1964) present throughout the history of U.S. populism has been theorized to link the earlier cases of left populism to the rightward populist turn first evident in the anti-communist speeches of Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy during the late 1940s and early 1950s, and later in the racist and anti-segregationist populist rhetoric of Alabama Governor and Democrat Senator George Wallace during the 1960s and 1970s.

American historians have thus traced out a ‘populist persuasion’ from these figures through the presidential history of Nixon, Reagan, Bush, Clinton and G.W. Bush, which oscillates between the left and right ends of the political spectrum. Populism then, taken in general as discursive elements that invoke the ‘people’ against the ‘elite’ or ‘enemy’ are present in the more current institutionalized Democratic politics of Obama’s first 2008 presidential campaign in slogans, such as ‘Yes We Can,’ and in the anti-corporate, anti-elite politics of Bernie Sanders.

Reacting against Obama’s election and later healthcare reform, the Tea Party and other rightward leaning libertarian movements have emerged in a ‘complex network’ of grassroots movements, non-profit organizations, political advocacy groups and think tanks, combined with funding from billionaire donors such as the Koch brothers (Skocpol and Williamson, 2012). The Tea Party appeals to diverse bases oriented around taxpayer identity politics, evangelicalism, and anti-immigration and cultivates a populist discourse against government spending and socialism alongside mutual relationships of support with Republican political figures.

In the wake of the 2011 global protests, Occupy Wall Street emerged as a left-oriented grassroots political movement with a populist discourse of the ‘99%’ versus the ‘1%’ in a critique of the contemporary forces of global capitalism, ushering in a new era of American...
left movements on the ground including ‘Strike Debt!’ ‘People’s Climate March,’ ‘Flood Wall Street,’ and ‘Black Lives Matter.’

Finally, emerging out of a true (white) multiclass coalition and the superior grassroots and institutional organizational skills of the Republican Party, Donald Trump promises to be the first populist president with overt authoritarian tendencies in the history of the U.S.

Perspectives

One of the more prominent historical accounts of populism in America is provided by Lawrence Goodwyn. Similar to most other analysts of American populism (Hicks, 1961; Hofstadter, 1964; Szasz, 1982; McMath, 1992; Kazin, 1995) and including my above description, Goodwyn historically situates the emergence of populism in the economic destitution experienced by farmers in the post-Civil War period. Goodwyn (1978) suggests that populism in America consisted of a movement culture that really began when the farmers of Lampasas County, Texas, reacting against economic hardships, banded together in 1877 to form the ‘Knights of Reliance,’ a group which later became known as ‘The Farmers Alliance’ (25, 26). This movement culture was a complex and multi-layered set of ideologies and practices that consisted of three sets of processes often intermingling: the farmers’ emphasis on self-help, education and the formation of cooperatives; the farmers’ view that they were part of a larger industrial class leading to boycotts and coordination of efforts with other movements such as the Knights of Labor; and the acceptance of the greenback doctrine calling for the introduction of fiat currency in conjunction with C. W. Macune’s subtreasury system.

Goodwyn’s historical account of the formation of the Populist Party has encountered substantial critiques. Concerning the emphasis that Goodwyn places on the greenback ideology, Clanton (1991) comments, ‘Not all historians of Populism would agree that greenback ideology was quite that fundamental, but it figured prominently in the thought of a significant segment of the leadership, in Texas and elsewhere’ (18). McMath (1992) has suggested that Goodwyn’s analysis of the origins of populism is too narrowly focused on a radical type of Alliance action exhibited in the formation of cooperatives, which occurred only to a large extent in Texas, and that Goodwyn’s study overemphasizes a distinctive and local movement culture that dismisses the broader reception of populism by the nation (15).

Whereas Goodwyn suggests that the core of the populist movement revolved around the attempted formation of cooperatives and the dissemination of the greenback ideology, Szasz (1982) argues that it was the moment at which cooperatives proved unsuccessful and the Populists began to support other issues when populism began to broaden its appeal as a movement. Thus, as the issues that the Populists supported became diversified so too did their social base of support. The Populist party ‘provided the only real political alternative to the Republicans or Democrats . . . In addition to agrarians, the famous 1896 Populist convention at St. Louis bounded with Single Taxers, Bellamyite Nationalists, Socialists, Prohibitionists, Greenbackers, and Suffragettes’ (Szasz, 1982: 194). Furthermore, the fact that ‘much of the Populist vote in the western mining states of Colorado and Montana relied on labor support’ justifies Szasz’s (1982) claim that, not unlike Latin American forms of populism, populism in the United States could be described as ‘multiclass, expansive, electoral, socially reformist, and led by charismatic figures’ (195, 191).

Authors such as Szasz and Kazin build from a historical account of the populist movement of the 1890s to show that this political heritage, in the form of a language of the ‘people’, has been adopted by a myriad of political figures in the subsequent decades of American history,
extending all the way to the present. Although exhibiting some basic rhetorical affinities with
the initial movement, insofar as there is always an appeal to the common people, the history
of populist discourse in the U.S., much like in Latin America and now Europe, reveals an
articulation of diverse ideological contents that oscillates between left and right: ‘thus, the
Populist heritage has been ambiguous: it provided ammunition for both liberals and con-
servatives’ (Szasz, 1982: 203). Accordingly Szasz and Kazin have traced a populist discourse
that runs through the rhetoric of such diverse political figures as Bryan, McCarthy, Wallace,
Nixon, Reagan, and Bill Clinton. However, most analysts agree that there is still a common
element in American populism, which Kazin (1995) defines as ‘a language whose speakers
conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their
elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the
latter’ (1). Both these factors of the people’s disenchantment with institutionalized politics and
the anti-system/‘outside politics’ orientation shed light on such phenomena as the brief

Debates: left or right?

Richard Hofstadter was the first to suggest an affinity between the Populist Party and
McCarthyism. For instance, in ‘The Paranoid Style in American Politics,’ Hofstadter (1964)
writes about the paranoid style of politics that ‘the feeling of persecution is central, and it is
indeed systematized into grandiose theories of conspiracy,’ and he goes on to give side-by-side
examples, first of a 1951 speech by McCarthy and then an 1895 Populist Party manifesto,
which proclaim conspiracies ‘by men high in government’ and ‘the international gold ring’
respectively (4, 7–8).

Other authors attempting to trace out the history of American populism, such as Szasz and
Kazin, have followed suit and also included McCarthyism as a case of populism in the United
States. Although for them, McCarthyism does not represent a perfect fit with the legacy of
populist reform dating back to the 1890s. Szasz (1982), choosing to define populism in reference
to a type of politician, writes the following about McCarthy and Hofstadter’s treatment of him:

McCarthy was not exactly a ‘populist,’ but the atmosphere his accusations created so
influenced Richard Hofstadter that he formulated in his brilliant Age of Reform (1955) a
view of the original Populist movement that dominated a generation of scholarship.
Populism, according to his interpretation, was basically a retrograde movement. It
fostered isolationism, demagoguery, anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, and a general anti-
intellectualism. Its legacy could be seen in McCarthyism.

For Kazin (1995), who defines populism as a type of language that pits ‘ordinary people’
against ‘elites’ and attempts to ‘mobilize the former against the latter,’ the strength of
McCarthy’s populism emanated from his demeanor when appearing on television and his
penchant for catchy sound bites (1, 188). Much like Szasz, Kazin has his own reservations
about directly linking McCarthy’s legacy to the contrastingly reformist impulse of the 1890s
Populist Party. Kazin notes that the novelty of the Red Scare was that it signified the
pronounced shift of populist language from the left to the right, and he critiques authors
such as Hofstadter and Bell (1963) accordingly for forging such reductive comparisons, yet he
admits that ‘there was a close resemblance between the “rhetoric of Populist campaigners and
that of conservative anti-Communists”’ (4–5, 192).
Just as there is this precedent in the literature for analyzing McCarthyism in light of the history and tradition of American populism despite some key ideological differences between the People’s Party and the impetus behind the Red Scare, representations of the Tea Party in the liberal media have also relied on the term ‘populism’ as a means for understanding the discourse of this political movement in historical perspective. And once again, despite the vast ideological differences between the Tea Party and the original Populist Party, the characteristics which purportedly link these movements revolve around the use of a certain political language and rhetoric.

Since the first protests in 2009, the Tea Party has often been labeled as a ‘populist’ movement by various news and media sources. But once again, this label is usually applied loosely with little attention to historical detail. One could argue that the Tea Party is tied to this historical tradition, insofar as it seems to entail micro movements that are spontaneous, perform emotions of outrage and anger, and can be located on the left or right of the political spectrum. Many news sources accordingly associate populism with strong rhetoric and emotions, and as they trace out the current incarnations of the populist ‘geist,’ the source of the ‘outbreak’ is most often tied to the fallout from 2008 economic crisis. It is evidence enough to point to magazine headlines, such as Newsweek’s ‘The Thinking Man’s Guide to Populist Rage,’ and Time’s ‘Why Main Street Hates Wall Street.’

The media would also frequently single out Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann as Republican representatives of the Tea Party sentiment by pointing to their pronounced anti-elitist rhetoric as endorsement of populist convictions. In another New York Times article, titled ‘The Populist Addiction,’ op-ed columnist David Brooks, makes the argument that populism emerges from both sides of the political spectrum, and mentions John Edward’s ‘Main Street vs. Wall Street’ rhetoric after referring to how Palin rhetorically divides America ‘between the real Americans and the cultural elites.’ Similarly, an Al Jazeera Opinion written by Naomi Wolf, ‘America’s Reactionary Feminists,’ inquires into the appeal of Palin and Bachmann – only to find it in the ‘American tradition of populist demagoguery’ from which other notable figures have emerged such as ‘the anti-communist witch-hunter Joe McCarthy.’ It follows that one of Bachmann’s throwbacks to McCarthyite rhetoric was her condemnation of members of the GOP as ‘frugal socialists.’ Even more novel, and perhaps alarming, is the fact that prominent Tea Party figures themselves have identified with McCarthy and tried to reinstate his once revered patriotism, as evidenced by Glenn Beck’s glowing endorsement of Evan’s (2007) Blacklisted by History.

From this analysis, it is clear that certain strands of the both the academic literature on McCarthyism and the media focus on the Tea Party tend to classify these movements as ‘populist,’ seeing in American history a tradition of ideologically divergent political movements fostering anti-elitist rhetoric and psychological/emotional states ranging from paranoia to simple anger and outrage. But are these the only characteristics of the American populist tradition? Is it enough to point to emotionally charged, anti-elitist rhetoric and end the analysis there?

The aforementioned authors in the American tradition have been right to hone in on the ‘language’ of populism, but their analysis of the constituent features of this language is not nearly as in-depth or complex as a structural analysis of populist discourse can reveal. Identifying populism as a discursive phenomenon with recurring structural components solves further problems with the ambiguity of the concept and provides a framework for more insightful comparisons between the People’s Party, McCarthyism, the Tea Party, and Trump.

I argue that one must analyze the basic components of Ernesto Laclau’s (2005) theory of populism and evaluate their relevance in terms of how they measure up against the
characteristics of the People’s Party, McCarthyism, Tea Party, and Trump’s discourse. The first component necessary in Laclau’s recipe for populism is the formation of an antagonism between the people and the power bloc or enemy: we have seen this feature of populist discourse in the People’s Party, McCarthyism, the Tea Party and Trumpism. In the People’s Party it was the ‘big city’ elite and big business, and in both the People’s Party and McCarthy’s speeches it was the political elites, ‘men in high levels of government,’ and specifically regarding McCarthyism, men from prominent East Coast Anglo-Saxon families that were the effeminate communist enemies threatening the values of hardworking, middle-class, Midwestern, German and Irish Catholic, common tough guys like ‘Joe’ himself. For Tea Party-courting politicians such as Palin, this antagonist rift is evident in how she divided ‘the country between the real Americans and the cultural elites.’ Accordingly, Trump owes much of his electoral success to his demonization of Clinton/Obama/Clinton administrations and democratic politics in general as part of the pejoratively viewed ‘establishment.’

The second aspect of populist discourse for Laclau is the formation of empty signifiers such as the ‘people.’ Clearly all of the movements in the tradition of American populism have exalted the common people, not to mention those we are analyzing here, but there is a potential problem with examples of empty signifiers that Laclau often repeats, such as ‘people,’ ‘nation,’ and ‘revolution,’ insofar as they are all overwhelmingly positive-laden signifiers. From an examination of the discourses of the People’s Party, McCarthyism, the Tea Party and Trumpism, it is clear that the respective signifiers ‘elite,’ ‘communist,’ ‘socialist,’ ‘immigrant,’ ‘illegal,’ ‘alien,’ ‘terrorist,’ ‘Mexicans,’ ‘Muslims,’ and ‘Crooked Hillary’ play a much more salient role in organizing the discourse. As McCarthy stated in a speech published in 1950, ‘In my opinion the State Department, which is one of the most important government departments, is thoroughly infested with communists.’ The main theme of the speech does construct an antagonistic rift ‘in a final, all-out battle between communistic atheism and Christianity,’ but where words Christian and Christianity are only mentioned five times, communist and communism are mentioned a total of 21 times in a 2,332-word excerpt from the speech. In the same way one is reminded of how Bachmann had admonished the ‘frugal socialists’ in the Republican Party or how the Tea Party in general views Obama as a ‘socialist’ and a ‘statist’ – not to mention the way in which Trump seems to attack everyone who is not white and everyone else who attacks him.

The third feature of Laclau’s notion of populism is that empty signifiers such as the ‘people’ organize and link together a series of democratic demands that were previously isolated. This is evident in the People’s Party, which brought together Single Taxers, Bellamyite Nationalists, Socialists, Prohibitionists, Greenbackers, and Suffragettes and eventually sought alliance with the industrial Knights of Labor. There is no clear evidence of this in McCarthyism insofar as it was based more directly on a conspiracy theory that resonated with people’s anxieties, fears, and fantasies rather than a positive slogan that embodied their democratic demands. Laclau’s theory is consistent with the Tea Party case insofar as there top ten demands can be found right on the homepage of one of their popular websites, Contract from America, and the Tea Party’s demands to reduce taxes are clearly related to the experience of the original Boston Tea Party. Yet once again, the demands of the movement are not so much organized around a positive slogan, such as the role ‘99%’ has played in Occupy for instance, and neither emancipatory signifiers nor democratic demands are the central organizing features of these discourses. The ironic characteristic of Trumpism, however, is that it links together democratic demands that oscillate between left and right ideological positions: bringing back manufacturing, critiquing free trade, building walls, and deporting ‘illegals.’
People’s Party, McCarthyite, Tea Party and Trumpist discourses have more distinctly Manichean themes than simply pitting the people against a common enemy; these discourses demonize the enemy, and this demonization, which represents opponents or enemies as illegitimate political actors, organizes their discourses. Laclau has fallen short of articulating this in his theory of empty signifiers. To be sure, ‘elite,’ ‘fat cat,’ ‘communist,’ ‘socialist,’ ‘immigrant,’ and ‘1%’ are empty signifiers in the sense of their correspondence to the central tenets of Saussurean, Lacanian, and Althusserian theory, but they do not embody positive hopes and demands. Rather, they signify disorder, infection, and in McCarthy’s language, ‘infestation.’ It follows that what ‘elitism,’ ‘communism,’ ‘socialism,’ and ‘immigration’ infest, corrupt, disrupt, and disrupt is an American tradition of values tied to the collective memory of the nation’s founding moment, and it is this salient memorializing aspect of populist discourse that is not strongly emphasized in Laclau’s theory.

An analysis of People’s Party, McCarthyism, Tea Party, Occupy, and Trumpism and their specific discursive attributes necessitates the following reformulated and thereby applicable theory of the structural components of populist discourse. Through a synthesis and modification of the first two aspects of Laclau’s theory (antagonism and empty signifier) I substitute a conception of the enemy as the central organizing trope of populist discourse, found in signifiers such as ‘elite,’ ‘communist,’ ‘socialist,’ ‘immigrant,’ ‘establishment,’ and ‘1%’ as it concerns at least five of our cases. These signifiers reveal the ‘anti-establishment’ orientation of our cases, taking into consideration that the enemy is only relationally defined in opposition to the founding democratic legacy, and thus is not fixed by any specific content. Hence, the second modification constitutes the most substantial break from Laclau’s concept of discourse and is found in the trope of the ‘founding moment’ of the nation. This founding moment is a fabrication constituted through the social construction of a collective memory recalling key events in the American Revolution and framing of the constitution that signify the development of a unique American legacy and tradition of strong democratic values. These values are represented in signifiers such as ‘liberty,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘independence,’ and they are linked together in a narrative that traces itself back to America’s point of origin in events such as the revolutionary break from England, the Boston Tea Party, the writing of the constitution, and the desire to ‘make America great again.’

This modified populist discursive framework explains key aspects of People’s Party McCarthyite, Tea Party, and Trumpist logic with more empirical depth. By linking together the structural components of the enemy and the founding moment, we can begin to understand how the enemy/disorder is constructed as the disruption of the legacy emanating from the founding moment. This provides new insight into phenomena such as Bachmann’s self-branding as a ‘constitutional conservative,’ which conjures up the framers’ concerns with limiting state power as a way to de-legitimate and demonize federal spending and government-based social services under the rubric of ‘socialism.’ It also sheds some light on possible interpretations of why McCarthy’s attacks were leveled at ‘Anglo-Saxons’ like Hiss and Acheson rather than Jews, Italians and other southern and eastern European immigrants as in the first Red Scare. Just as our Anglo-Saxon forefathers provided the constitutional framework guaranteeing the rights to economic liberties and private property that secured the prosperity of subsequent generations of immigrant groups, including McCarthy’s own ancestors, so too were the ancestors of our forefathers, including elites such as Hiss and Acheson, responsible for keeping ‘the true aliens – the southern and eastern European immigrants and their progeny – in line’ (Gerstle, 2001: 255). Thus their alleged communist actions were even more deplorable than the anarchist activities of Jewish and Italian immigrants targeted during the first Red Scare.
This constant reference back to the ‘founding moment,’ which characterizes these cases, reveals the significance of the ‘backward-looking’ nature that dominates many instances of populist discourse. It might also remind one of the ‘mytho-historical’ character that Claude Lefort (1986) attributes to the social imaginary in ‘Novelty and the Appeal of Repetition’:

Thought may well be able to free itself from certain images; but what resists this attempt is the relation that we maintain with the representation of the past, the mythical function that we make it play in order to assure ourselves of a truth which is already given and which will not betray us, in order to conjure away, in sum, the indeterminacy which constantly re-emerges in the history that we live.

(124)

In this sense, perhaps Hofstadter was not so far off base in insisting on the ‘retrograde’ character of populist movements, as a feature that united both the People’s Party and the later Red Scare, despite their ideologically divergent progressive and conservative tendencies. Perhaps any political movement that constructs this mythical founding moment out of the past, no matter how progressive, will always contain a kernel of this ‘conservative’ character – not in the sense of wanting to return to the past per se, but rather that the ‘founding moment’ corresponds to Lacan’s (1966/2006) conception of ‘fantasy’, which, in Žižek’s (1989) political reading, constructs a pure moment out of the illusion of a once existing unified society that would otherwise be perfect if not for the disruption or disorder represented by the ‘enemy.’

Let us proceed from this modified discursive structure of populism, located in the fabricated ‘enemy,’ which threatens the legacy of the nation’s mythical ‘founding moment,’ to other comparisons, in terms of similarities and differences, between the discursive and ideological characteristics of McCarthyism, the Tea Party, and Trumpism. If there is a set of consistently posited external threats articulated by Tea Party and Trumpist constituents, they are represented by Islamism and immigration and the purposeful construction of their metonymic contiguity, and we have seen this discourse endorsed from the more fascist-leaning Tea Party enthusiasts in the Christian and evangelical right, including Glenn Beck, Brigitte Gabriel, and Pat Robertson, as well as in the political ideologies purported by Steve Bannon and Trump. Within this context, we can understand why Glenn Beck would write about Evans’s (2007) glorification of McCarthy, ‘America, please read this book,’ insofar as Beck’s defense of Christianity against the threat of Islamism is not too far removed from McCarthy’s defense of Christianity against ‘communist atheism.’

The Tea Party had one initial problem when compared with the relative success of the McCarthy contagion, which is the inability to link up the internal and external threats posited in their discourse. If the Tea Party could directly link up government socialism with Islamism, they might be more effective in inducing a McCarthyite paranoia. One can gather that something of this sort was attempted by Donald Trump, who proclaimed, ‘I’m with the Tea Party,’ on the Today Show, when he suspiciously inquired into the credibility of Obama’s American citizenship. It is particular moments like these that reinforce the fact that the Tea Party is a fluid phenomenon and a moving target for any analytical construction that would apprehend it. Insofar as the Tea Party overlaps with ‘Birthers,’ there is concern for an external enemy constructed as ‘radical Islam,’ yet whether this concern resonates in a consensus or functions as a consistent position among Tea Partiers is more difficult to determine. On a symbolic and discursive level, however, it is clear that Obama’s citizenship functioned to bolster the fear of a socialist conspiracy at home insofar as his ‘uncertain’ citizenship and religious faith added credence to the belief in the ‘foreignness’ of his administration’s policies, e.g. ‘ObamaCare.’ This demonization and externalization of the enemy
is a key feature of the movement and point of comparison between these cases, but Tea Party and Trumpist discourses reveal something beyond the level of paranoia traditionally attributed to McCarthyism. More than movements that simply employ a Manichean discourse, the Tea Party and Trumpism represent two of many cases that signal a transformation in the nature of institutionalized politics in the United States and beyond. The Tea Party reflects an institutional transition on the level of democratic participation, which is capable of oscillating between the three levels of the grassroots, well-funded special interest groups, and elected representatives. The Trump administration, however, represents a transition into an institutionalized post-democratic politics, in which groups of undocumented national immigrants are hunted down and immigration from particular ‘Muslim-majority’ countries is banned, based on series of executive orders and highly centralized political rule typically associated with more authoritarian forms of populism.

Reflections: between movements and the state, the rational and the irrational

When dealing with populism there is a pronounced limitation in conceiving of the state inherent in those cases categorized as ‘social movements,’ just as internal movement dynamics are lost in the difficult task of bridging the gap between state and civil society in the analysis of populist leaders from Maduro and Trump. It is at this point that part of what is conceived of as the alleged ‘problem of American populism,’ which is the difficulty of locating populism in a fixed position relative to actors, movements, and administrations, actually becomes an advantage. However, this advantage is only revealed, once again, when populism is treated structurally as a discourse, which is present in a more ubiquitous sense both within and between the domains of actor, group, movement, and state. The point here, following Laclau (2005), is that populist discourse itself is more or less concomitant with the unconscious structure of the political (p.67) in its Schmittian distinction between the ‘friend/enemy’. In this chapter, the advantage is most explicitly revealed in dealing with the discourse of Trump, which now simultaneously occupies the position of movement (given the persistence of hate crimes, support rallies, and the rebranding of white supremacy groups under the ‘alt-right’) and state.

After an empirical analysis of the populist discourse found in the cases of the People’s Party, McCarthy, the Tea Party, Occupy, and Trump, the salience of signifiers, such as, ‘elite,’ ‘1%,’ ‘communism,’ ‘socialism,’ ‘illegals,’ ‘immigrants,’ ‘Muslims,’ ‘Mexicans,’ and ‘terrorists,’ not to mention the slogan, ‘Make America Great Again,’ necessitate a reformulation of the division Laclau creates between empty signifiers and democratic demands on the one hand, and the antagonism between the people and the power bloc on the other. I argue that the central signifier that anchors each instance of populist discourse (and arrests the play of substitutions) is not so much a positive term, such as the ‘people,’ which links together a series of democratic demands (rendered now as popular demands), but overwhelmingly negative conceptions of the ‘enemy’ that represent the destruction of the democratic foundation of the ‘nation,’ constructed through collective memory. Thus, the positive-laden signifiers, such as ‘people,’ ‘nation,’ and ‘revolution,’ to which Laclau is repeatedly referring, are only invoked after a thorough explication of the role the ‘enemy’ has played in dismantling the fabric of society.

In order to account for the more central role that antagonism plays in the discursive structure, I call for a reordering of the tropological functions that Laclau attributes to populist discourse. Laclau has referred to role of synonymy, metaphor, and metonymy to account for the substitutions and links between empty signifiers and democratic demands. As my analysis of populist discourse points to the fact that any such positive discursive formations are completely ancillary, I coin the term ‘antonymy’ to refer to the relationship between the ‘enemy’ and the ‘founding moment,’
insofar as the instance and presence of the former within the populist discursive construction of reality implies the complete inversion of the latter. The salience of this theme regarding the impossibility of society and the enemy as the root cause of the problem led me to turn to Žižek’s (1989, 2006) critique of Laclau through a political reading of Lacan’s notion of fantasy.

The reformulation of this model of the symbolic structure of populist discourse, common to all U.S. populist cases, allows one to conceive of the implicit horizon of understanding fostered in these instances of Manichean discourse, and through a reading of Lefort (1988), how these populist movements seek to institutionalize this symbolic structure within different forms of democratic and post-democratic politics. My main argument, then, is that whereas the People’s Party and McCarthy were relatively unsuccessful in reproducing this discourse within a stable and enduring set of democratic institutions, the Tea Party has had more success in structuring forms of participatory democracy and multidirectional lines of funding and influence. Still yet, Trumpism has, so far at least, has been successful in instilling and perpetuating the discursive contours of its Weltanschauung on the level of policy (ICE agents and travel bans) and with violence in the streets.

Insofar as the discursive model relies heavily on structural linguistics and involves breaking discourse down into language, and language down into the constitutive elements of signifiers, it proves to be very effective in isolating those signifiers that structure populist expressions, such as when the ‘people’ are invoked, or in my cases, particular conceptions of the enemy, such as ‘elite,’ ‘1%,’ ‘communism,’ ‘socialism,’ ‘Mexicans,’ ‘Muslims,’ ‘illegals,’ ‘terrorists,’ ‘establishment,’ etc. The notion of the ‘empty signifier’ in particular reveals the general functioning of populist language in how it can employ these signifiers in different contexts with a meaning that becomes saturated or ‘overdetermined’ — in which unconscious mechanisms, such as the point de capiton and fantasy are revealed.

That is, the negative signifier or conception of the enemy becomes the umbrella term that provides a kind of explanation on the level of the ‘Imaginary’ for why society is not functioning properly. The ‘fantasy’ is always one of the ‘Other’ that is responsible for the antagonisms or problems in society. In Lacanian theory, the fantasy is constructed in the presence of a crisis (as in many of our cases, an economic recession or geopolitical crisis), which as an expression or outbreak of the ‘Real,’ resists signification or capability of being represented within the ‘Symbolic’ order. Rather than acknowledging that the problem perhaps exists on the level of language itself or the fact that a truly cohesive society itself is impossible, the fantasy in which the enemy is responsible for the problems in society hinges on the false premise that there was some better time in the past — a kind of false collective memory or nostalgia for when society was actually cohesive and functioned properly. It constructs out of its remembrance of the past a false utopia, which, of course, never actually existed. Viewing the formation of the ‘political’ from the Archimedean point of a psychoanalytic and structural discursive orientation provides one with a glimpse of the general terrain of language before particular positions are represented, such as the ideological content of right or left, or the degree to which the discourse in question upholds or subverts the ‘democratic.’

Focusing on discourse in this manner, in which the unconscious is revealed in the fantasy that links the enemy to the disruption of the founding moment, circumvents the tension between locating populism along movements and administrations and between the supposed irrational or rational character of movement or leadership dynamics. This is the path to reviving some aspects of cultural and psychoanalytic theories of the 19th-century ‘crowd theorists,’ without falling victim to the notion of the ‘crowd.’ My argument here is that in the formation of the populist identities corresponding to my cases, there is an unconscious level of identification with, for instance, ‘Make America Great Again’ that involves the invocation of
the Lacanian fantasy of ‘nonwhites’ destroying the legacy of independence going back to the drafting of the constitution by the founding fathers. Although one identifies with Trumpism through this unconscious mechanism, this is not the same as the claim that the Trump supporter is falling victim to some irrational form of group formation. This goes back to the Freudian/Lacanian argument that the manifestation of the unconscious in parapraxis does not reveal the ‘abnormal,’ but something more in line with regular functioning. It is populism, then, in its connection to the unconscious, which reveals something about the regular functioning of politics, just as it follows that in the entire world history of politics it would be difficult to argue that ‘democracy’ has been the norm or most recurrent form of political organization against which other forms, such as authoritarianism, could be measured.

Therefore, such a discursive appeal need not be considered irrational in its relation to the unconscious mechanism of fantasy, nor does the role of the unconscious preclude the possibility that the discursive appeal can be employed in a strategic capacity. This discursive appeal to the unconscious mechanism of fantasy clearly moves beyond what social movement theorists might refer to as ‘rational,’ yet its strategic wielding also moves beyond any allusion to an irrational ‘crowd.’

Part of the problem here involves the inability to jump between the perspectives of, for instance, Trump and the American (white) ‘people’ and realize that populist discourse as a cultural phenomenon implies an independent context, which is neither reducible to a ‘tool’ to be strategically wielded or a ‘frame of meaning.’ Populist discourse is always already there as a symbolic and cultural phenomenon, or as a possible representation of the social itself, before it finds a particular expression, and it exists in a manner that transcends the levels (or limits) of the individual and the social. This link between the unconscious, the symbolic, and the social, is a key structuralist insight derived from Levi-Strauss’s synthesis of Freud and Saussure, and carried on in Laclau’s notion of the political.

Locating populist discourse on this ontological level also provides a means of unifying different levels of phenomena from actors to movements to administrations. The populist discursive appeal to the unconscious mechanism of fantasy, in a case such as Trump, reveals insights on the level of internal movement dynamics just as it does on the level of the state. With this particular case of populist discourse, much like cases of state-sponsored fascism, the state oversteps the boundaries of the social and civil society. Yet part of the added success of Trumpism, is that the state, in the double entendre as ‘establishment,’ is also constructed as the force that hinders ‘making America great again.’ Trumpism thus functions in an organicist metaphor that can blame a part of itself when it falters, as Trump makes clear that ‘Obama owns Obamacare’ implying that Obama also owns the future crises that ‘repeal and replace’ will bring about.

The strongest argument against the ontologizing of populist discourse here is based on the claim that if one is to locate populist discourse on the unconscious and symbolic level of the political, following Laclau, they risk losing the object of analysis. However, it should be noted that the movement against ontologizing discourse in Hegelian fashion is in part derived from the Kantian/epistemological concern for normatively distinguishing between cases of normal/abnormal and democratic/undemocratic politics. The contribution my chapter makes to analytical syntheses of left and right forms of populism can only be realized in the momentary suspension or bracketing of the normative debate.

I think that this last point is especially important to consider when analyzing populism. Although Laclau constructs his theory of populism from the normative and Gramscian position that the left should ultimately appropriate this discourse, an analysis of the structural discursive components of signifiers and how they are employed in order to foster political identities does not necessarily have to facilitate a particular normative agenda. Furthermore,
I would argue that the attempt to analyze populism from a normative standpoint often causes theorists to overlook key similarities between populist movements that are found on the opposite ends of the left/right continuum. My analysis of cases here is constructed precisely to make this point—that it is worth comparing cases such as the People’s Party and Trump, which not only bear discursive similarities, but also share some success due to the manner in which they were either able to establish a tradition of discursive repertory in the past or are able to institutionalize their respective Manichean discourses in the present.

**Conclusion: moving forward (or backward?)**

Anyone who says nothing like Trumpism has ever happened is both right and wrong, and most certainly ‘bereft of historical knowledge.’ Problems occurring within the relationship between democracy and capitalism eventually lead to populism (as seen in cases from Tsipras to Le Pen), just as these two great historical structures were forged out of great populist revolutions of the past (from Solon to Spartacus, Sieyès to the *Période française*). Populism operates, once again, as the unconscious symbolic structure of the political (Laclau, 2005), and as such manifests itself in a plethora of forms on a spectrum spanning from discursive elements to forms of mobilization. In this sense, we’ve been slow to catch up with something that has always already been there: it’s in the way that groups form in partially structured ways around those who constitute the inside and outside of the group, e.g. us/them, friend/enemy (Schmitt, 1932/2007), people/power.

Prior to the advent of Trumpism, however, when scholars looked at populism in the U.S., they associated it with a rich tradition of anti-elitist and sometimes conspiratorial rhetoric detailed in Goodwyn and Hofstadter’s accounts, which, as aforementioned, linked movements from the People’s Party all the way to the McCarthyism of his generation. Is the Trump phenomenon new? If we compare him to other U.S. politicians already labeled populist, he has Father Coughlin’s fascism, McCarthy’s impulsivity and penchant for conspiracy, and Ross Perot’s model of government as a profitable business.

Although aspects of nationalism, isolationism, and xenophobia have always been present in the tradition of U.S. populist rhetoric, Trumpism stands to turn these discursive elements into policy and practice in a way reminiscent of rightwing populist parties in Europe, spanning from Haider in Austria during the 80s to Orban’s walls now in Hungary. Yet closer to the ‘center’ of Europe, Wilders in the Netherlands has a similar haircut and stance on Muslims, just as Berlusconi is another business-clad phallus-trickster of the orange persuasion.

Simultaneously and sprouting up across Europe and South American countries during the late 80s and early 90s, the marriage between populism and neoliberalism was sealed – Fujimori in Peru comes to mind in light of the present, as this sort of white-collar criminal, man of the people, with his business-style politics of anti-politics. One need only consider Ivanka Trump’s ‘style alert’ and other instances in which Trump’s business interests will ultimately benefit from a Trump presidency. As we watch Trump’s Cabinet fill up (or remain empty), there is no longer any question that ‘The leadership of a state or party by men who (in the economic sense of the word) live exclusively for politics and not off politics means necessarily “plutocratic” recruitment of the leading political strata’ (Weber, 1919/1998, 85–86).

If this is ‘old’ so to speak, then what is new is that we have a president as an empirical type blending all three regional definitions of populism. With a strong appeal to the (white) ‘people’ in the best U.S. tradition of rhetoric, and a European-style anti-immigrant stance, Trump has mobilized large unincorporated sectors (the Rust Belt) and formed a (white) multiclass coalition. Populists in power are already known for their centralized and personalistic forms of charismatic leadership. With control of both chambers and most state legislatures and governorships of the
greatest super power in the world, this man, who embodies all of the worst blunders of right and left populisms combined, will surely not disappoint.

Like Stalin, we fear his ‘red pen(cil)’ in the double sense: reversing/issuing executive orders and making lists. Riding in on a wave of discontent like Brexit, Trumpism is the protest of white isolationism. But whereas protests function as vanishing mediators, Trump as Mediator, won’t vanish, as his ‘spectacular’ Cabinet promises to dismantle itself, surrendering to the states, and fulfilling Jefferson’s promise.

Putin, Correa, and finally Žižek would have had Americans vote for Trump in a perverse Trotskyite phantasy – a vote of ‘historical necessity’ – intended to destabilize U.S. empire and global capitalism (Nancy Fraser also invites this). Yet all that can be seen so far is that the presidency and business are functioning more perfectly together than during the Eisenhower and Reagan administrations combined. This merger between the Trump Organization and administration exemplifies everything that Weber warned us against, with a ‘clash of civilizations’ cherry on top – much to the delight of Sloterdijk and Žižek, I’m sure. Still yet, whereas Trump’s campaign promises signified a shakeup of the ‘neo-liberal’ consensus, the manner in which he has vacillated on key issues of foreign economic and political relations makes this uncertain. Tax cuts for the one-percent remain in place.

Scholars have long argued that the conditions of capitalism are eroding our democratic institutions and that capitalism can only perpetuate itself and the levels of social inequality it generates through more forms of authoritarianism. What they could not have foreseen is the reemergence of authoritarianism in the name of the ‘people.’

Notes
1 Newsweek, 30 March 2009.
6 Speech on Communists in the State Department, by Joseph () (www.civics-online.org/library/formatted/texts/mccarthy.html) accessed January 2012.

References
Populism in the U.S.


