

# POPULISM: THE NEW FORM OF RADICALISM?

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*Populism is often little more than a 'figure of excitable speech' used to disparage and discredit. But can it — should it — also be more than this?*

“Populism” is very much a trope of our times: sometimes, it can serve as a term of social analysis and critique, but more often it is a figure of excitable speech (to invoke Judith Butler’s phrase), one used to disparage and discredit. Populism is generally less an identity we claim than one attached to us by others. We might profess to be “of the people, or for the people” (that is, “popular”). But seldom do we dub ourselves “populist” as such, for the word carries associations of crowd-pleasing and cheap emotionalism. Yet it is precisely its intrinsic slipperiness that makes the term so productive in political rhetoric. In the run-up to last year’s US election, Sarah Palin was frequently accused of “shameless” populism in claiming to be the voice of “Main Street America”, an accusation she almost invariably countered with the charge of “elitism” – no matter that such slanging matches took place among rival factions of the unabashedly empowered and endowed.

If Palin’s populism was of the right wing, “call it like I see it” kind, there were those who as readily dubbed Barack Obama a populist (a term often used



Un discours de Lula à Salvador  
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interchangeably with Socialism on the US right). As this suggests, “populism” is what linguists call a *shifter*: though it is almost always used in opposition to that deemed “elite” or “establishment”, its meaning is in fact highly relative to the context in which it is deployed. It is often totally reversible in “pot calling the kettle black” debate (vide the slanging matches between Clinton and Obama in the US democratic primaries of 2007, in which they vied for *echt* blue collar credentials; also the speed with which Obama was dubbed an “elitist” when overheard to remark that those chronically without work in small-town America were “embittered”, clinging to “guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them”). Similar sorts of accusations circulated in the run up to the 2009 South African elections, to be sure, especially in respect of the campaign style of the avuncular Jacob Zuma, described in an *Agence France-Presse* article of September 12, 2008, as having an “avowedly populist approach to politics”. Those who have decried Zuma’s willingness to court supporters who insist that they will “take up arms and kill”

on his behalf have been dismissed as “elitist”, even “counter-revolutionary”. A piece in the *Cape Argus* of November 14, 2008, aptly captured the ambivalence inherent in the term: “Is he an astute politician who speaks to ordinary people’s concerns, or a dangerous populist who may be undermining the Constitution?”

Of course, excitable speech is one thing, the business of actual governance is another. A graffiti on a wall on the South Side of Chicago, also dating back to November 2008, read: “Obama will change everything!” Once Obama actually took power, op-ed-writers, bloggers, and media chatterers of all persuasions primed each other for the onset of the disappointment and compromise. And so it has been of course – although thus far the *realpolitik* has been more nuanced, and less cynically instrumental than many had feared. Likewise, we await with interest to see how the sweeping campaign promises of Jacob Zuma will translate into pragmatic policy now that he has taken office; how the inevitable failure to work miracles in hard times will play among those who have vested in him the capacity to bring about a millennium, long postponed. Commentators the world over have juggled irreconcilable images of Zuma: of a likeable chauvinist conjuring perilously with mob-rule, or plain-spoken champion of economic equalization, whose real offence to the comfortable classes is the threat of material redistribution, also long overdue. In practice, these images are often not all that easy to separate – for justifiable reasons, having to do with the passion and power inherent in mass action itself. Yet precisely because of their sublime, transformative potential, these popular forces require critical assessment, leadership and institutional channelling if reflexivity, and



Lula: 25'000 persones  
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critical assessment are to generate effective, sustainable politics. And this entails careful, ongoing analysis and argument; it requires work that goes beyond simple reductionism, or dismissive labeling – like the easy, combative application of terms like “populism” itself. This need not necessarily be the task of scholars or vanguards: some of the most clear-sighted understanding comes from those directly affected by oppressive conditions, those who live the discrepancy between rhetoric and reality, political ideals and palpable actualities. But we must also be wary of making a fetish of real, “concrete experience”. As Gayatri Spivak insisted in “Can the Subaltern Speak”, we cannot let go of the concept of ideology: consciousness is mediated by social and economic conditions, and cannot simply be taken at face value. To do this is to be complicit with the kind of realism that denies the effects of historical conditions. It is also to renege on what Edward Said called the “critics institutional responsibility”.

Despite (or perhaps, because of) these ambiguities, “populism” is more than ever a concept to be con-

jured with across a wide spectrum of public debate in our present world, notably – but not uniquely – in post-colonial, post-totalitarian contexts (in Latin America, Russia, and Zimbabwe, but also arguably in the Italy of Berlusconi or in Sarkozy’s France). In South Africa, the term is currently much in play: scholarly reports, such as one by Ari Sitas, decry the rise of “populism and mutinous energy” that threatens to abort the process of “national democratic revolution”; and unashamedly interested pieces take aim at the spectre of rising redistribution (like an article in the *Cape Times* on July 3, 2009, that headlined: “Populists abuse us by forcing a few to pay for all” – this from the Director of the Free Market Foundation in defence of privatized health care). Why the seemingly heightened appeal of the term at this juncture? And on such contentious terrain, can the construct retain any usefulness as tool of analysis – even critical assessment – or is it irretrievably immersed in the rhetoric of reciprocal defamation?

If what characterizes modern democratic politics is the sovereignty of the people (rather than of God or the King), then it is hardly surprising that most modern political movements – democratic and totalitarian alike – claim to act in the name of the populace – even though, as Jacques Rancière has caustically noted, “the people” themselves tend to disappear at precisely the point at which they are being invoked. If we take populism to mean that form of mobilization that invokes the people as its main alibi, then we need to understand it as conjuring with a fetish – a fetish with two faces: one progressive, the other reactionary. Thus, the recurring contrast between the general will and the fascist volk, the demos and the lumpen horde. Under late liberal conditions, when the old coordinates of left, right,

and centre seem to have been profoundly undermined, it is increasingly difficult to set these faces apart in any thoroughgoing sense. The ambiguous politics of populist leaders in Latin America, for example, is hardly unprecedented, building on the enduring legacies of Peron and Bolivar. But it has flourished under late liberal conditions, presenting an ever more confusing amalgam of progressive and proto-fascist elements.

### [a fetish with two faces: one progressive, the other reactionary](#)

As scholars and citizens, however, it is incumbent on us to make such principled discriminations – to gauge the effectiveness of the “socialism” practiced by Lula in what is in many ways a neoliberal Brazil, for instance, or of the *indigenismo* on which Morales seeks to base state-craft in contemporary Bolivia. Also, it is important to distinguish the real redistributive gains of these populist regimes from the more self-serving autocracy of the likes of Hugo Chávez. We must, by the same token, be ready to make clear-eyed distinctions between the rumbustious rise of Zuma to the South African presidency, and the possibility that his common touch may become an equalizing hand. Making these judgements is no easy task; we cannot simply copy populism’s own strategy of blithely separating friend from enemy, or proclaiming global axes of good and evil. Neither will ready-made liberal benchmarks – like “respect for property”, “due process”, and the “rule of law” – provide unequivocal markers for distinguishing democrat from demagogue. For such normative measures require careful contextualization, especially in postcolonial, post-revolutionary situ-

ations, where property and the law have long been sites of struggle, having served the cause of oppressors and liberators alike. In Latin America, populist leaders (both authoritarian and otherwise) *have* tended to push for greater politico-economic inclusion. Their efforts to reverse entrenched neocolonial hierarchies have put them on collision course with domestic elites and proponents of the Washington consensus. But, as Claudio Lomnitz and Rafael Sánchez point out, they have also generated the excesses of Chavismo, in terms of which all dissent is “alien and monstrous”, and opposition routinely reduced to the terms of “Zionist-Fascist-Euro-Gringo Imperialism”.

While populism is most frequently understood as the embodiment – often, the literal incorporation – of power in the person of the charismatic leader, it can also be a salient dimension of grass-roots mobilization, of organizations of more or less routinized kind. In post-Apartheid South Africa, a populist thrust animates a range of social movements: from the manifestly anti-elitist struggles of the Anti-Eviction Campaign, *Abahlale*, and the “Poors” (which, suggests Ashwin Desai, are all directed toward the struggle for the minimal conditions of a dignified life) to the rights-based civil activism of the Treatment Action Campaign; from the vibrant profession of born-again faith and prosperity gospels to the quest to reinstate the death penalty; from progressive labour activism to boisterous thuggery that dismisses all critique as “counter-revolution”.

About all this, I make three points.

First, a certain populist radicalism – an opposition to the dictatorship and doxa of elites, whether they be the Ancien Regime, Tsarist autocracy, the capitalist classes, colonial rulers, the established church,



Presidente de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, Hugo Chávez Frías  
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intellectual vanguards or whatever – is a *necessary*, if not *sufficient* condition of mass transformative movements in all times and places. Such populist mobilization forces a clear line between “the people” and those who oppose their interests; it shatters the thrall of regnant ideologies and endorses popular experience as a basis for valid knowledge, desire, intention. It can also serve to debunk pious cant and sophistry, to unmask self-serving ideologies and illegitimate representations. In the history of South African struggle against apartheid, mass action has had a defiantly populist strain, ordinary people refusing domination in the street, the workplace, in church and state in the name of incontrovertible human freedoms. The colonized, here, have had a keen understanding of the agents and the means of dispossession. In this sense, unmasking the brutality of imperial rule involved a relatively clear, dualistic politics; in this situation, the lines of class/race oppression were closely overlapping and relatively clearly drawn. In the postcolony, things are more confusing. As ever, a 1990’s Zapiro cartoon captures

this shift succinctly: It features Joe Slovo, one of the drafters of the South African Freedom Charter, a leader of the anti-colonial *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, and Minister of Housing in the first democratic government. Surveying the sea of newly enfranchised citizens, all looking to him to cure a raft of deep-seated ills, he quips: “Oi Vey, do I miss the Struggle”. In fact, the Freedom Charter was itself a populist document – too populist, some would subsequently claim. The new postcolonial constitution, with its capacious, late modern stress on individual rights, is perhaps not populist enough.

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But in itself (and this is my second point) the white heat of populism has never been enough. This is because, in itself, it thrives on radical reductionism. The line between the populace and its enemies fails (often, deliberately) to acknowledge difference within the ranks of the people. In fact, populism often seeks to suppress such differences – inequalities in terms of power, wealth, sexuality, culture – in the interest of dominant stereotypes, of parts that stand in for wholes. Populism also often fails to account, in any nuanced fashion, for the actual terms of relationship between people and elites in given times and places, or to consider adequately the complex collaborations and contradictions that shape the totality of which they are part. These structural features (the shifting relation of state and capital, for instance, or the implications of such shifts for the position of labour, or the precise imbrication of

class, race, gender, and age) give historical form to particular fields, particular kinds of social action. Taking account of these features is an essential requirement for a meaningfully conceived, adequately directed politics.

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Indeed, in its strident rage, populism often fails to generate terms capable of explaining its own conditions of existence. In place of careful analysis of social and historical circumstances, it relies on more uncompromising emotive dualisms – those standing for, or against, the leader, “the people”, or the “revolution”. In the service of such polarizing calls-to-arms, populism often enlists mechanisms like scape-goating, witch-finding and conspiracy theory – that collapse structural forces into blood and guts passions, like love, jealousy, hatred. Thus it frequently traffics in tropes like anti-Semitism, homophobia, xenophobia: unrepentant attacks on Jews and homosexuals have been an integral dimension of Chávez’s politics, for example. The fire of populism often excoriates the putative “sophistry” of analysis, theorization, complexification. In that sense, it is often anti-political (remember the anti-political rhetoric of Ross Perot and his electronic town hall; it is mirrored in a host of recent right wing attacks on the abuses of “big government”). Populism favours direct, putatively unmediated action, based on compelling emotions and self-evident truths. It encourages leaders and followers to by-pass the more cumbersome apparatus

of democratic consultation and participatory governance for demagoguery – in which leader and masses feed off each other, conspiring in reciprocal fantasy that substitutes the simple line between friend and enemy for more careful consideration of the forms and forces that reproduce inequality. In their fatal dependency on dualism, populist movements often resurrect the patriarch in place of the vanquished “elite” hence the troubling return to language of the *pater familias*, blood, and male dominance among some of the more avid followers of Jacob Zuma. For this kind of populace, the leader serves as fetish, a *deus-ex-machina* who short-circuits the more sustained structures of democratic participation, governance, the patient pursuit of justice.

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Thirdly, populism has taken on greater salience under late-liberal conditions, and is ever more in danger of reinforcing the reductionist tendencies inherent in much current politics (or “anti-politics”) – that is to reinforce the tendencies fostered by popular identitarian movements, by born-again faith, and by militant liberalism that champion market forces sans state regulation. As John Comaroff and I argue in *Ethnicity, Inc.*, current world conditions have undermined allegiances of class and party in many contexts, substituting other bases of identity above and below the level of the nation-state, identities that focus on essences rather than relations, on “culture” rather than “politics”. And while such shifts have opened the door to novel possibilities, new coalitions, and vibrant trans-local networks,



Con el Comandante por la Enmienda  
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they have also fostered fundamentalism, the “end of ideology”, and the deflection of politics into the market, technicism, and the law. It remains to be seen whether the current recession – and the radical call in many quarters for more regulation – will stem the anti-political tide – in the US, or anywhere else; whether it will reinforce the need for collective institutions of control and redistribution. For there are also signs of the opposite: as anger has risen across the US and UK at the spectacle of profligate bankers bailed out by public money, there has been much talk of the return of an “old-fashioned populism” that implies a plummeting faith in *all* major social institutions. In addition, as Vincent Crapanzano shows in *Serving the Word: Literalism in America from Pulpit to Bench* (2000), the rise of religious renewal and a fervent fundamentalism in both economics and the law in many places has reinforced a distrust of liberal humanist visions of world making, of the uses of socio-historical analysis and critique. The “crisis” has called forth a spate of moral opprobrium, to be sure, as if the current chaos were the work of excessive greed, rather than the thor-

oughgoing rapaciousness of finance capitalism *qua* system. But there is little evidence that current state interventions, at least among dominant Western powers, will institute significant breaks on this rapaciousness, or revert, as some suggest, to a modified Keynesianism. Signs are that current interventions will do little more than “save Capitalism” (as an article in *Harper’s*, September 2008, puts it) – probably in leaner, meaner form.

### the voice of the people is often not pretty, or loving, or democratic

Meanwhile, shifts in the nature of public culture – its means of communication and modes of production – have had an important impact on the nature of late modern populism. The continuing hegemony of free-market values and the commercialization of formerly national media across the world have uncoupled mass communication from state projects, ceding popular representation ever more to whoever and whatever generates profit. As unregulated special interests, marketing, and low-cost programming have flooded broadcast networks, those insisting on the necessity, in a democratic society, of lively political-aesthetic criticism are branded as elitist by custodians of mass-marketed programming. Typical, here, is the false democratism used to rationalize the signature genres of late liberal popular media – like talk radio and reality TV – that profess to deliver unmediated truths in a manner that also happens to be a cheap mode of producing culture for profit, and of ostensibly dispensing with “elite professionalism” (that is the craft of creative cultural production).

### populist energy without any social consciousness, any ethics of social responsibility. From this no truly progressive politics can emerge.

But the voice of the people is often not pretty, or loving, or democratic: democracy, after all, is a complex social idea, and an even more complex social formation, whose ways and means require constant review and reinvention. It is not simply the right to give vent one’s authentic (even, one’s unabashedly chauvinist) self in the name of unvarnished truth. The talk radio populism of American media titans like Rush Limbaugh, Bill O’Reilly, and Lou Dobbs (“we want to hear from you, the listener”) encourages hate-speech as the real *vox populi*. And it is now a global genre: similar anti-immigrant (sometimes, frankly racist) rhetoric spews out unchallenged by editorial comment or counter-argument on BBC feedback programs, and on South Africa talk radio; and likewise on so-called reality TV across planet. This clamour of disembodied opinion might build an upsurge of emotion, but it is seldom structured to permit engaged dialogue, or vectors of accountability. Mass-mediated populism, identity politics, and libertarianism all reinforce in each other an essentially post-humanist, post-sociological, post-political tendency that allows the vitality of popular sentiment to fall to the lowest common denominator – that of the uncivil rant. It encourage us to seek nothing more in politics other than our own narcissistic reflection – for all else (critique, struggle for more encompassing insight and justice) is dubbed spoiling, elitist, unpatriotic, counter-revolutionary. This is populist energy without any social consciousness, any ethics of social responsibility. From this no

truly progressive politics can emerge.

All this is well-captured in a sequence from the film made by Pierre Carles about the life and work of Pierre Bourdieu – *Sociology as a Martial Art*. In one of the closing scenes, Bourdieu seeks to persuade a group of angry Beur youth in a Paris banlieu that they need to understand the concept of social inequality in order to formulate a politics to counter exclusion. Amidst cynical dismissal and accusations of being a bourgeois parasite, he persists, wearily: “You need to understand social inequality”. Exclusion, he implied, was a complex social fact. Understanding its social composition then was not a matter of elitism: it the essential starting point of any effective politics. This seems to be a lesson well worth repeating.

*This text was written as an opening statement for a Roundtable on Populism, held at WISER, the University of the Witwatersrand, on July 6, 2009; as part of the Johannesburg Workshop in Theory of Criticism.*