Populism

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Populism is a conception of political representation that views ‘the people’ as the primary political actor and the basis of political sovereignty. As populism does not refer to a specific ideology, ideologically diverse movements can fall under it. Thus, populism is not intrinsically conservative or progressive, left-wing or right-wing. However, populists’ insistence that their movement, leader, and party should represent ‘the people’ puts populist politics at odds with liberal democracy’s insistence on a public sphere characterised by rational deliberation—the model of deliberative democracy and liberal constitutionalism that has been celebrated throughout Western Europe and gained hegemony in the majority of the Northern Hemisphere since the French Revolution. Populism tends to reject consensus politics, even if it believes in democratic elections—as shown by most populist political parties. While the first populist party came about in the United States, populist parties and movements are prominent across all continents.

Anthropologists have studied populism within highly distinct cultural contexts, often foregrounding the very overt role of emotion and feelings of socioeconomic disenfranchisement in populist rhetoric. They have also investigated the relationship between populism and democracy, and the seemingly unique role of the leader in populist movements, which seem to equate a political movement with a singular figure. Ethnographic methods, which allow us to come closer to understanding the lives of others, have challenged hegemonic narratives about populism, questioning its assumed ties to specific ideologies and pushing back against the notion that populism disqualifies itself just because it relies on emotions. Thereby, anthropology provides us with a critical lens on populism that still helps us grasp its seemingly global appeal in the twenty-first century.

Introduction: What is populism?

The twenty-first century has been characterised by an upsurge in the popularity of populist movements across the globe. If it is possible to identify the first formal populist movement in history, we could arguably start with the United States, which, in the 1890s, saw the establishment of the People’s Party, or Populist Party. The American People’s Party never enjoyed significant electoral success, but its platform, which generally sought to improve the lives of labourers and regulate the concentration of capital, remains relevant in American politics. Historian Federico Finchelstein has claimed that Peronism, which came to power in Argentina in 1946, is the first populist regime in global history. Peronism emerged as a workers’ movement in 1945 but has evolved to take on many ideological iterations since then. Beyond Peronism, which within a single populist movement has taken on varying policy positions, in other places, such as the United States, different parties of opposing views may be labelled as ‘populist’, such as the followers of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the United States. As a result, ‘populism’ is difficult to define; it is a very broad concept—or an ‘overdetermined signifier’ (Stavrakakis et al. 2017, 425)—that stands for a plethora of political movements, which seem quite different from each other.

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Because so many different political moments representing diverse and even conflicting views have been called ‘populist’, a question of great scholarly importance, including for anthropologists, is what exactly the term stands for. Many scholars of populism have argued that the term does not refer to a specific political platform, but rather, in the words of Ernesto Laclau, one of the most influential theorists of populism, to a ‘political logic’ or form of political discourse that can be adapted to any ideological program or political platform (2005). Populist movements, parties, and regimes can thus be on the left or right or anywhere in between. For example, the New Left leaders of Latin America that emerged in the 2000s, which included Evo Morales in Bolivia, Néstor and Cristina Kirchner in Argentina, Lula Ignacio da Silva in Brazil, and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, represented a populist turn to progressive politics in South America. In contrast, Viktor Orban in Hungary and Donald Trump in the United States (as well as several other leaders in the Global North) are right-wing populists related to fascism, as they overtly celebrate xenophobia and anti-immigrant policies.

Further inspired by the work of Laclau (2005), anthropologists tend to think of populism as a style of political discourse that employs a polarising logic. This logic positions ‘the people’—the protagonist of populist politics—against an ‘enemy’, often internal to the nation-state or wider populace. In populism, ‘the people must be extracted from within the people’, as political theorist Jan Werner-Müller has stated (2014). This means that popular sovereignty does not extend to everyone, but only to ‘the people’ that populism celebrates, as opposed to others. Thus, for populist parties, which are often nationalist, not all citizens can be said to truly belong to the nation-state. The frontier that populism creates between ‘the people’ and their others is an antagonistic one. Thus, ‘the people’ are said to have ‘enemies’—often fellow citizens who are viewed as betraying a sense of national authenticity (Laclau 2005, 84-5). ‘Enemies’ or ‘anti-people’ may be defined along status, class, ethnic, party, or sectoral lines, and are often viewed as undermining national well-being (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018). Thus, a key aspect of populist politics is its divisive rhetoric, which, when repeated often enough, turns into a discourse, i.e. a way of perceiving and thinking about the world.

Another structural continuity of populism is that it frames its central political actor—‘the people’—as a victimised group within broader national or global populations (Samet 2019). Their ‘enemies’ are somehow a source of ‘the people’s’ suffering or exploitation. This may seem surprising, as ‘the people’ and their assumed ‘enemy’, are single names for heterogeneous groups and social sectors, each representing highly disparate sets of social demands. Moreover ‘the people’ can even include powerful groups, such as dominant racial groups within a society. Yet, this sentiment of victimhood or of being a morally upright ‘underdog’ is particularly important, as it unites vague sectors and otherwise heterogeneous factions of a given society (Chatterjee 2011, 15). By relying on antagonistic victimisation, populism is a necessarily polarising political force. As such, it engenders an illiberal rejection of consensus-seeking politics or deliberative democracy—even if most populist regimes have been democratic. As some scholars have underscored, liberal regimes that present emotional politics as ‘irrational’ may further marginalise the

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social demands of the most vulnerable populations within society (Ahmed 2004). Populism, on the other hand, allows for the expression of political voices that might otherwise go unarticulated.

A final structural continuity between different forms of populism that draw on 'the people' as an underdog, even a downtrodden group, is that its discourse does not rely on traditional notions of class warfare. This can be explored through Trumpism in the United States. In this case, 'the people' stands for a highly racialised concept of American identity but is not defined, in membership, by being white. 'The people' consists of a broad coalition that feels that their different demands could be satisfied by the same leader and movement. 'The people' is also an identity that is inherently exclusive towards many Americans who are considered to be sympathetic to migrants, protesters associated with amorphous leftist forces, as well as various 'elites', be they academics and universities, part of a general intelligentsia (including non-aligned media), and even corporate managers who do not adhere to Trumpist politics. Trumpist discourse is thus not restricted to ideas of class warfare but has, instead, allied various sectors of American society against common and often vaguely defined enemies, such as 'the media', 'the Washington elite', or 'the Left'.

In sum, populism refers to a discursive logic or manner of constructing the political rather than a specific ideology, and it thinks of politics in polarising, often self-victimising terms. Populism is also usually characterised by charismatic leadership, overtly emotional rhetoric, and positions 'the people' as the central actor in politics. While this definition of populism is broad, its structural continuities differentiate its various ideological stripes from the liberal forms of democracy most celebrated in Europe and North America after the French Revolution. As this entry will explore further, the relationship between populism and democracy is not one of diametric opposition, but populist notions of political representation certainly disturb liberal norms of deliberative democracy. More specifically, populism is a political logic that encourages an overtly emotional brand of politics.

The anthropology of populism

While much social science literature has been dedicated to populism, the term does not yet occupy a large amount of literature within anthropology (see Mazzarella 2019). This is surprising, as the discipline is uniquely suited to study the appeal of populist movements. Its ethnographic research methods reveal the emotional, economic, social, and cultural factors that lead to populism's appeal. Additionally, because anthropologists conduct their research in diverse geographic contexts, their inquiries into populism clarify the historical and social contingencies that give rise to and shape populist movements in specific field sites, while also considering what these sites reveal about the appeal of populism more broadly.

Anthropological investigations of populism have focused on recent and current populist regimes, such as Erdoğan's Turkey (Tambar 2014), Maduro's Venezuela (Samet 2019), Modi's India (Hota 2020), Trump in

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the United States (Kalb 2023), and Orbán in Hungary (Laszlo 2020), adding distinctively ethnographic insight into what has been described as an illiberal rejection of liberal democratic norms prevalent in the post-WWII era. They have often sought to explain the appeal of the respective populist movements upon which they focus, frequently asking how populist communities are created and sustained. Anthropology links this question to its interest in the structure and reproduction of community as well as to its long-standing interest in the creation of social solidarity. It turns out that rhetoric, ritual, and state fetishism are central to populism's appeal. For example, in Lauren Derby's history of Trujillo's Dominican Republic, she understands fetishism to be key to the dictator's appeal, or 'seduction', in her words, diminishing the population's capacity to resist authoritarianism (2009). Similarly, Fernando Coronil, Michael Taussig, and Rafael Sánchez have all underscored how reifying and even deifying political figures is central to populist politics.

Similarly, work on scapegoating in times of uncertainty has shown that ambiguous social conditions lead to blaming individuals or groups for social ills, often resulting in violence (Evans-Pritchard [1937] 1976; Geschiere 2013; Siegel 2006). In recent ethnographic work on ethnonationalism in Turkey, for example, we have seen how wounded masculinity among disabled Turkish veterans of the Kurdish conflict contributes to their hatred for their Kurdish foes. Coming home from war disabled, these veterans feel betrayed by the Turkish state, which they criticise for taking too soft of an approach against the Kurds (Aciksoz 2019). Ethnographic work on racialised nationalism elucidates how the demonisation of racialised others becomes the basis for racist political movements. For example, ethnographic work on white nationalists in de-industrialised parts of the United States has reflected this logic of demonisation. Instead of drawing on theories of scapegoating explicitly, some anthropologists have traced this othering logic through a psychoanalytic framework, meditating on the dialectical relationship between self and other to understand how whiteness is constituted through xenophobic and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in deindustrialised North America (Song 2011).

Scholars working on ultranationalist politics have also drawn on the notion of sacrifice to better understand the rhetoric of ethnonationalist populist discourse. In Turkey, disabled military veterans (*gazi*) are lionised as modern-day martyrs (*şehitler*). Their sacrifice, particularly the sacrifice of their bodies in war, is deeply implicated in notions of citizenship. Disabled veterans are held to be owed debts of honour and gratitude by the state, which entitles them to various privileges, such as high-quality prostheses, jobs, interest-free housing credit and medical care (Aciksoz 2019, 56-7). They do not embody the horrors of war as much as they serve state purposes for further militarisation. The celebration of their sacrifice exists alongside a scapegoating of the Kurdish movement as a threat to Turkish sovereignty (Aciksoz 2019).

Further broadening ethnography's insights into populism, anthropologists of the post-Soviet Visegrád nations (i.e. Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary) have looked at how populism can emerge in opposition to liberal discourses of multiculturalism. Here, people attracted to populism consider national

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culture to be under attack by an urban intelligentsia. In Poland and Slovakia, populist politics underscore local valorisations of cultural authenticity (both fascist and progressive), which appeal to local identities associated with rural origins and agricultural labour (Buzalka 2021). Post-Soviet populism is also marked by a nostalgia for a sense of collectivism and community, which seem at risk in an increasingly globalised world. In Hungary, the interplay of economic transformation and an attachment to national culture and solidarity are equally at play (Kurti 2020). Here, populism is closely tied to racist ethnonationalism and xenophobic political sentiments that translate into anti-immigrant discourse, as is evident elsewhere in the region (Buzalka 2022; Kalb 2009a, 2009b; Malewska-Szalygin 2009). The ethnographic study of Visegrád politics thus helps understand the logics of populism in other regions, notably Brexit and Trump (Kurti 2020).

The following sections will foreground three main tensions in the anthropological study of populism, namely the emotional drivers of populism, its relationship to democracy, and the nature of populist leadership.

Emotion and political economy

Anthropologists have been interested in the emotional and affective drivers of social life since at least the 1990s. They neither condemn nor celebrate emotion as irrational or rational, but consider feelings, sensations, and emotional and affective dispositions as revelatory of political dynamics. This is true for work on the emotions and affect of political memory (Yashin-Navarro 2002, 2012), volunteer work (Muehlebach 2011), or citizenship (Cox 2016; Savell 2015), for example.

Anthropologies of populism share this overarching concern with affect and emotion and have often aimed at understanding the ritualisation and routinisation of emotion in illiberal politics (Sánchez 2016, de Abreu 2021). Take Peronist rallies in Argentina during the 1940s and 1950s. These rallies, in which thousands of Peronists gathered to express loyalty to the leaders of the movement, were highly emotionally charged ritualised theatre in which the masses played a mostly passive role. Many women active in Peronist politics have imitated the matriarch of Peronism, Eva 'Evita' Perón, in their speech patterns and hairstyles (Auyero 2001). In contrast to spontaneity, these practices 'modulate affect' through ritual, inculcating the followers of such movements with a series of habits that some critics qualify as authoritarian (Sanchez 2015) or at least at odds with the freeing affects of revolutionary politics (Beasley-Murray 2010, 25).

The emotional and affective underpinnings of populist mobilisation can be libidinal, even erotic. The election of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister in India in 2014, for example, catalysed a populist Hindu nationalism that was not just racialised and caste-oriented, but also highly gendered (Hota 2019). Here, Hindu ethnonationalists shored up popular anxieties linked to sex by presenting the 'national body' as ascetic, masculine, and pure, whilst conceiving of vilified others (e.g. protesting students, Christians,

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Muslims) as feminised and polluting. Doing so helped Modi supporters add a sexualised edge to the emotions involved in political othering.

Some scholars have drawn on Western crowd theories to trace a genealogy between the libidinal urges evident in crowds and populist emotions. People in crowds experience a contagious collective effervescence, frequently described as producing sentiments and actions that transcend the individual (Canetti [1960] 1984, Freud 1921, Le Bon [1895] 1995, Tarde [1898] 1989). They may thus act differently than they would on their own. Thus, crowds are sometimes perceived as stripping people of their agency or as intrinsically sinister, as they may elicit irrational and base feelings. Perceived as such, crowds can be thought of as threats to the social order, bypassing institutions and sanctioned normative behaviours. While this can be true—taking the January 6th, 2021 riots of Trump supporters in the US, who stormed the Capitol because they did not accept that Trump had lost the 2020 election, as an example—ethnographic work also shows that crowds can be a generative political force, capable of transforming social and political norms. The imprisonment of then-Secretary of Labor Juan Perón in 1945 by the Argentine government provoked mass protests that not only led to Perón's release but solidified Peronism as a formidable political force that would drastically expand workers' rights in Argentina.

Beyond focusing on affect and emotion, the popularity of nationalist populism, particularly in Europe, is often linked to a general disenchantment with neoliberalism (Gusterson 2017, 210). While populism predates neoliberalism, populism's increased popularity can be read as a reaction to an economic system in which state intervention favours the market, rather than regulating the market to favour its citizens (Foucault 1979). In Guatemala, this disenchantment takes the form of pessimism in which citizens, even if they may sympathise with drastic political reforms, view social transformation through politics quite cynically. Ethnography has shown how a significant number of citizens from the Indigenous population, which faced genocide at the hands of the military dictatorship led by Ríos Montt in the 1980s, has, since the 1990s, supported his Guatemalan Republican Front in local and national elections. In a context of neoliberalism where revolutionary change seems impossible, this population is drawn to this political party's local development projects and clientelistic practices, which bring capital to Indigenous communities. In this context, Indigenous Guatemalan subjects are resigned to understanding the limitations of politics and pragmatically engage with a political party that can contribute tangible material gains to their lives (Copeland 2019). Disaffection with neoliberalism and wariness of globalised cosmopolitanism was also evident in the UK's 2016 withdrawal from the EU through the Brexit referendum (Gusterson 2017).

Notable ethnographies of populism have foregrounded the role of cynicism in the face of neoliberalism. For example, in post-Soviet contexts such as Slovakia (Buzalka 2022) and Poland (Kalb 2009a; Malewska-Szalgin 2001a, 2001b), citizens feel left behind by neoliberal policies that render them further

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marginalised. In these cases, cynicism towards neoliberalism is also accompanied by a celebration of national tradition that takes on, often, ethnonationalist flavours. As shown by work on post-Soviet populisms in anthropology, the reification of traditional and even rural ways of life are part of a rejection of neoliberalism and liberalism.

The study of populist emotions and affect raises the question of who exactly the subject of populist movements is. Ethnographic work on populism has confirmed that 'the people' are not explicitly related to socioeconomic class categories. 'The people', even when they are primarily thought of as 'workers', such as in the case in early Peronist rhetoric in Argentina, is a vague enough moniker to unite various social sectors that are not constricted by class identity. Instead, who 'the people' are is often intentionally left vague so as to absorb as many different social forces as possible. This coalitional nature of populist politics cuts across class alliances. In Brazil, for example, right-wing authoritarian politics include supporters that are not limited to one particular socioeconomic class (de Abreu 2021). Similar inter-class alliances have also been observed in right-wing populism in Guatemala (Copeland 2019), and Chavista and anti-Chavista mobilisation in Venezuela (Samet 2019).

At the same time, populist movements celebrate an underdog identity that appeals to notions of being part of a social sector excluded from the elite. Some scholars have been particularly attentive to the 'double devaluations' of space and class felt by those attracted to right-wing populism. The double devaluation refers to feelings of disenfranchisement that arise from those who feel both their socioeconomic class and place of origin to be devalued by liberal norms. Neoliberal global flows of capital, people, and ideas have produced a rise in the popularity of right-wing populist movements that imbue their supporters with a sense of dignity (Kalb 2023). In this work, like those working in post-Soviet contexts and in Latin America, we see how disenchantment with neoliberalism produces cynicism, resignation, and, in the case of Poland, resistance in the form of illiberal, right-wing politics (Kalb 2023).

Both populism's critics and its supporters are attentive to its emotionally charged nature. Critics often find its overtly emotional dimensions to be proof of its irrationality, disqualifying it from being taken seriously or even condemning it as something that has no place in the political sphere (Ostiguy 2009, 2017). Supporters have argued that populism is radically democratic, and that its capacity to express the affective dimensions of political mobilisation is precisely part of its democratic potential (Samet 2019; Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018). From this point of view, liberal paradigms of democracy that focus on mediation through institutions are overly restrictive as they repress the emotional nature of political participation.

Ethnography has trodden a middle ground in this debate. While highlighting the importance of emotion and affect, anthropologists refuse to fetishise populism as inherently less rational than other kinds of politics (Hann 2019). Consider the discussion of Peronism mentioned above. While Peronism is marked by dominant emotional features, these do not thereby render it irrational. Instead, its emotional appeal exists

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in addition to a political field of highly limited practical options. Peronist supporters are motivated by a 'structure of feeling' that coexists alongside practicality (Auyero 2000). Rather than pointing at populism as a mostly rational reaction to neoliberalism or as simply a ritualised collective effervescence, ethnographic work shows that practical and emotional drivers co-exist and interact with one another.

Relationship to democracy

As stated above, discussions of populism tend to categorise it as radically democratic or counter to the spirit of democracy. Anthropologists have thus explored the relationship between populist movements and democratic politics. Both privilege the concept of popular sovereignty, which positions 'the people' as the foundation of political legitimacy. In populism, 'the people' is the political actor *par excellence*, viewed as having a rather unmediated relationship to power even beyond the sphere of electoral politics. In deliberative democracy, 'the people's' power is mediated, mostly by elections and state bureaucracies, which is meant to protect minorities and temper populist decision-making via a rule of experts.

The classic image of popular sovereignty is the crowd—a group of people that has come together through a common cause or grievance. The Jacobins, who emerged in the late 1700s as part of the French Revolution, represent the crowd's raw democratic potential and potentially sinister dimensions. Once in power, during the early 1790s, they carried out a wave of political violence known as The Reign of Terror (*la terreur*), which resulted in thousands of executions of political and ideological enemies. Yet, they also represented a plurality of social forces dedicated to anti-royalist republicanism. The Jacobinian phase of the French Revolution thus positions the crowd as both the embodiment of democratic spirit and the anarchic overturning of an existing order (Mazauric 2014). The mass of the revolution is violent, unpredictable, and destructive—yet it is this mass action that challenges the monarchic notion of the sovereign by demonstrating the bare power of popular sovereignty. And so, within the history of modern democracy and republicanism, we have a reification of 'the people' as the political actor *par excellence* and as the mercurial and temperamental mass that can tear down an existing order through organising around particular demands as well as through brute force. As follows, some political theorists have argued that the crowd embodies true democracy while others consider it true (i.e. deliberative) democracy's 'shadow' or 'mirror' (Canovan 1999; Panizza 2005).

Crowds are arguably both celebrated and feared by deliberative democracies, who view popular sovereignty as fundamental yet often insist on its mediation through institutional mechanisms. Within liberal democracy resides a tension between the Jacobinian, evolutionary spirit of popular sovereignty and the requirement for institutionalism, the latter often being viewed as cumbersome to the former (Canovan 2005; Sánchez 2016). In populism, this tension comes to a head as the crowd may potently shirk institutions associated with the status quo. Obvious examples from recent history would include the January 6th, 2021 riots that sought to overturn the results of the US 2020 presidential election, as well as

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the January 8th, 2023 protests in Brazil, which also challenged the outcome of their presidential elections.

As some scholars have argued, the crowd is both necessary for democratic support in the context of republicanism, but also poses a threat to the stability of a republic. Thus, the state must transform the unruly crowd or masses into the disciplined 'people' of republicanism. Popular sovereignty makes republican politics possible and constantly challenges its perpetuity. The same is true for populism, which creates 'the people' out of a broad coalition of social sectors and political interests. As a result, even in its democratic iterations, populism is ultimately authoritarian because it is so focused on controlling the masses by containing them as 'the people'. Some have argued that this tension exists in republican democracy as well (Sánchez 2016), but it is more obvious in populism due to its more brazen celebration of popular sovereignty as 'the people' (Canovan 1999, 2005; Panizza 2005).

Anthropologists have long been aware of this uneasy relationship between populism and democracy. While some have been critical of populism's allegedly inherently authoritarian tendencies (Sánchez 2016), several ethnographies argue that populism is the most radically democratic form of political organisation, which is precisely why it seems so threatening to any status quo. Its capacity to unite diverse factions of society makes it a particularly efficacious brand of political mobilisation (Samet 2019).

A major question that these debates raise is what the relationship between populism and fascism may be, as many right-wing populist movements clearly resemble or have components of the latter. Populist movements, in the Global North in particular, represent democratic as well as fascist reactions to liberal paradigms of governance, which favour models of deliberative democracy. In these contexts, popular support for populist movements and parties is, in large part, due to their platforms' espousal of anti-immigrant and racist sentiments. Scholars studying these cases have shown how neoliberal economic policies, combined with liberal political discourse, have alienated rural and post-industrial contexts (Holmes 2010, 2019; Kalb 2023). These movements, such as the British National Party, Marine Le Pen's National Rally party, Brexit, Trumpism, Germany's Alternative für Deutschland, as with many Visegrád region nations, articulate national sovereignty and citizenship in ethnonationalist terms (Kalb 2009a; Malewska-Szalgyin 2021a, 2021b). This fascistically ethnonationalist and racist populist illiberalism unites those who feel devalued by liberal multiculturalism and the patterns of capital accumulation that have historically accompanied it in the post-WWII era.

The fascist discourse of many populist movements has led some scholars to argue that they are intrinsically interrelated—in other words, that populism is always related to fascism (Finchelstein 2019). While the abovementioned ethnographic work looks at populisms that are blatantly ethnonationalist, xenophobic, and racist, anthropologists have also argued that because populism is a political logic with drastically varying ideological content, it is important to evaluate different populist traditions based on the ideas they promote, rather than stigmatising all political forms that are labelled as 'populist' (Samet and Schiller

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2017).

Charismatic leadership

One of the most important and controversial themes of inquiries into populism is the relationship between 'the people' and the leader. Because of its emphasis on popular sovereignty, some anthropologists have underscored the importance of people's mobilisation in populism. They consciously move away from attributing the appeal of populist politics to personal charisma, arguing that depictions of charismatic leaders presiding over a passive mass reinforce stereotypes of socioeconomically precarious sectors as lacking in agency or as being intellectually incapacitated (Aciksoz 2019; Cody 2015; Lazar 2017; Samet 2019; Tambar 2014). These thinkers have sought to underscore the bottom-up dimensions of populism, demanding that we not simply credit the charismatic leader for creating the basis of populist organisation and showing that local and grassroots organisation are central to its appeal and success.

Recent studies of modern-day Peronist labour unions in Argentina have shown them to be far less oriented towards personalist political representation than one might assume. Instead, these unions are primarily spaces of negotiation. For Sian Lazar, labour unions allow for decision-making and debate that do not follow a strictly top-down structure by which a leader gives a command that is then carried out without deliberation or debate (2017). Such work stands in tension to a widespread concern that leaders and their charisma may be a chief organising force of populist movements. Anthropologists of populism elsewhere have also emphasised the importance of populism's supporters by focusing on crowds and grassroots political organising, showing that populist mobilisation is not purely explained by the pull of a charismatic leader (Cody 2015, Tambar 2014).

The work on Eastern European populism emphasises sentiments on the ground as the source of populist cohesion more than shared loyalty to a single figure (Buzalka 2021; Kurti 2020; Malewska-Szyalgin 2021b). These studies underscore how populist discourse speaks to practical concerns of citizens who feel excluded, unmoored, and disenfranchised by economic and social transformation.

Many scholars of populism have focused on the nature of its conceptions of leadership. They contend that populist notions of political representation often fetishise larger-than-life figures (Finchelstein 2017; Wedeen 1995). Such figures can play a generative role in populist movements, as they help absorb the differences between the diverse social sectors that constitute 'the people' (Laclau 2005; Müller 2014). This was famously argued by Sigmund Freud in his examination of crowd psychology. For Freud ([1921] 2001), the leader is a love object. While the crowd is turned against others outside of itself—others whom it has come together against—its attention is also lovingly turned toward the leader, who is held to be a surrogate father figure (Derby 2009). Because populism depends on a coalition between diverse social sectors, the charismatic leader functions as an 'arbiter of contradiction'.

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Of course, the personality and even body of the leader are relevant to other political paradigms beyond populism: Monarchical leaders represent a classical notion of sovereignty in which they are above and beyond the laws that constrict their subjects. German historian Ernst Kantrowicz famously examined how divine right monarchs both embody and represent the divine and the human. He studied the genealogy of political leadership in Europe, examining the king's two bodies as both divine and human, reflecting the doubling of Christ as, at once, both flesh and blood and godly (Kantrowicz [1937] 2016). Fetishism of a political leader—the reification of a human into a deified figure—has been part of political traditions far before the first populist party even emerged. It should thus not be surprising that followers of populist political leaders may consider them both eminently human and inherently not human, even divine (Coronil 1997; Derby 2009).

Scholars of regimes that are cults of personality, but not necessarily populist, also often have leaders that are both intended to be relatable and incomparable—their fetish quality is essential to their capacity to bring together diverse populations (Wedeen 1999). In the anthropological literature, the role of fetishised political leaders is conceived of in symbolic and psychoanalytical terms. Studies of totalitarianism and dictatorships have drawn on structuralist theories of the 'master-signifier'—a signifier that does not refer to specific content (or 'signified') but is the anchor for a whole symbolic system—to understand how certain figures occupy singular symbolic functions. Thus, work on the Soviet Union has shown how certain historical figures like Lenin come to be reified as beyond reproach and critique, serving as master-signifiers that serve as an anchor through which subjects make sense of themselves and the world around them through a shared official discourse (Yurchak 2006). Scholarship on social uncertainty in times of political upheaval has shown how the deposal of brutal dictators, whose larger-than-life presence had previously served as a constant point of reference for their citizens, leads to a state of social ambiguity in which people feel the loss of a referential anchor (Siegel 2006).

Conclusion: A political question of our time

Ethnographic inquiry makes anthropology uniquely suited to give insights into why populist politics are so popular in today's world. Anthropological work on populism has centred on its highly diverse manifestations. It generally avoids labelling populism as inherently left or right, but, instead, views it as a discursive style that can be adapted to many different ideological programs. The discipline makes sense of populism by focusing on themes including sacrifice, scapegoating, ritual, and the nature of group belonging. A major topic of investigation is the nature and importance of emotions at play in populist movements. Another main topic concerns the complicated and dynamic relationship between liberal paradigms of deliberative democracy and populism, which demonstrates that democracy encourages mobilisation in the name of popular sovereignty and yet seeks to contain it. While anthropology considers the importance of charismatic leadership, it errs on the side of highlighting the agency of the subjects who

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engage in populist politics. What unites much of the anthropology of populism is the nature of political representation. Who should or should not be represented, how emotional or direct this representation should be, and who really defines the nature of representation are pressing questions that we need to keep asking against the rapid rise of populist parties globally.

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