Recovering Populism:
Saving Democracy from Authoritarian Temptations

by

Mitchell Daniel Pawluk

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Political Science
University of Alberta

© Mitchell Daniel Pawluk, 2024

Abstract

Over the past two decades, we have witnessed the emergence of what I call the populist paradox, where citizens seek to restore grassroots democratic power by embracing authoritarian movements or governments. Instead of abandoning populism to anti-democratic forces, in this thesis, I argue we can and should revive an alternative populism that revitalizes democracy and affirms meaning in an increasingly nihilistic world. Against those who reduce populism to either an authoritarian ideology or value-neutral strategy, my analysis shows populism is practised in divergent ways that impact political projects and values — for better and for worse. Through analyzing political theory and populist movements spanning from radical prairie movements to Donald Trump, I show two contrasting forms of populism. Whereas authoritarian or antagonistic populism relies upon enflaming ressentiment towards a shared enemy, democratic or agonistic populism is a world-building exercise that reveals the people through action in concert. The difference, then, is between a populism espousing limitless destruction and another that expands democratic spaces where we can create political visions through perpetual contestation with and against others.

Dedication

To my parents, Gwen and Jerry Pawluk, for their unconditional love and support.

To Lochlann Kerr, for never doubting me and for refusing to let me doubt myself.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not be possible without a community of friends, mentors, and colleagues who supported me at every step. The biggest thank you to my supervisor Dr. Cressida J. Heyes, whose advice, guidance, and feedback illuminated new paths in my thinking that I could not see myself. In her most recent book, Cressida talks about "limit-experiences," those events at the edge of subjectivity that break the self's understanding and, in doing so, expand the boundaries of our self-imagining (Heyes 2020, 23, 136). Although an imperfect example, thesis-writing pushed me and my thinking beyond what I previously thought was possible. Thank you, Cressida, for guiding me and many others through our own limit-experiences — it means more than I can say.

I am grateful to those at the University of Alberta who taught me and made me a better thinker. Thank you to Dr. Marie-Eve Morin and Dr. Catherine Kellogg for being on my defence committee. Your intellectual charity and insights are always appreciated. I also want to thank Dr. David Kahane and Dr. Jared Wesley for their mentorship; I am a better scholar because of your guidance.

Thank you to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Government of Alberta, the University of Alberta, and the Department of Political Science for financially supporting my research and studies.

I benefited from being part of a talented group of graduate students who challenge and encourage each other. Thank you to Aidan Trembath, Victoria Young, Joshua Ayer, Telisa Courtney, Noelle Jaipaul, and Savannah Ribeiro for offering academic community and support when it mattered most.

My interest in studying populism first came from writing alongside students at *The Gateway*, who practice care for the world through their journalism. Collaborating with Jin He, Emma Jones, Areeha Mahal, and Emily Williams made me a better writer and I can never thank them enough. An extra thank you to Emily, who gave feedback on drafts of this thesis and whose willingness to discuss ideas over coffee saved my sanity more than once.

To my friends, Karel Brandenbarg, Harnoor Kochar, Téa Lewis, Rylee Los and Emma Sereda, thank you for your support and encouragement throughout this project.

My family, and our weekly Sunday dinners, do more to sustain me than words can express. I am forever grateful for my Grandma Linda, Auntie Jeanne, and sister Jaime who always cheer me on. I can never do enough to thank my parents, Gwen and Jerry, whose unconditional love means the world and who indulge my tendency to rant about politics, even after long days at work. Everything I do, I hope to make you proud.

Finally, I would not be the person I am without Lochlann Kerr. You read more drafts of this thesis than anyone could reasonably expect and would still do it again if asked. No word adequately captures how much you support me. Partner, boyfriend, copyeditor, classmate, co-worker, best friend — you are all these things and more. Thank you and I love you.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1
The Populist Paradox 2
Reviving Populism's Democratic Impulse 6
Recovering Populism 9
Defining Contested Concepts 10
Outline 16
Chapter One: Making Ressentiment Great Again 18
Political Identity and Chains of Equivalence 20
Populism: Equivalence or Ressentiment? 26
Populist Authoritarianism and Disfiguring Democracy 35
Is there hope for populism? 39
Conclusion 43
Chapter Two: Little Agon on the Prairie 48
The Alternative Ethos of Democratic Prairie Populism 50
Prairie Populism as World-Building 61
Non-Sovereign Creativity versus Sovereign Destruction: Differentiating Populist Approaches to The Political 72
Conclusion 81
Chapter Three: Populism in Disorienting Times 84
Democratic Disorientation and Nihilism 87
The Elite Capture of Populism 97
Mapping Out a (Post)-Nihilistic World? 108
Zombie Neoliberalism 110
Antagonistic Populism 114
Agonistic Populism 118
Conclusion: Stepping into Uncertainty 121
Conclusion: Where to? What Next? 124
Bibliography 130

Introduction

> Perhaps the horror of populism carries the horror of the people, especially a politics of the people, the power of the people, real democracy.
>
> — Wendy Brown, Foreword to *Seven Essays on Populism* (2021)

Although I had heard the term before, the significance of populism was impressed upon me during my final social studies class in high school. Where we would normally be discussing course content, we were instead tuned into *CNN* watching the presidential inauguration of Donald Trump. At the time, I was familiar with his campaign but, like many others, thought he was doomed to failure. Yet, against the odds, I sat in the second row of class on January 20, 2017, and watched him take the oath of office before we were dismissed by the bell. What was supposedly my last lesson turned out to be merely an introduction to a significant feature of our times: the rise of populist agents and the subsequent transformation of the political terrain within which we live.

Trump's success was, of course, preceded by various populist phenomena — his alt-Right politics did not suddenly appear from nowhere. Others would also come after him, emerging from a multitude of contexts and cultures. These were, by no means, limited to far-Right movements. Across the world, you cannot go anywhere without running into a populist claiming to act in the name of the "common people." It is impossible to count the number of individuals and collectives who have been labelled as populists. Depending on who you listen to, Trump, Jeremy Corbyn, Hugo Chávez, Viktor Orbán, Margaret Thatcher, Tommy Douglas, and even

Barack Obama all shared this label at some point in their political careers. Skimming over this brief list will likely raise questions: what do these figures have in common? In what way is each one populist? What does it mean to be a populist? And, most importantly, how should we greet the rise of contemporary populism occurring across the political spectrum?

The Populist Paradox

Responding to populism remains uniquely challenging due to the contradiction embodied by many contemporary movements between democratic calls to restore power to the people and the authoritarian means used to fulfill this desire. The paradoxical relationship between these two aspects of populism confounds a normative approach to the concept.

We can safely assert that populism, despite any potential flaws, relies upon a democratic impulse for governance by the people and for the people. Advocates of populism would be nothing without a hunger for self-governance and a profound belief that people have an inherent right to participate in political decision-making. This belief is, of course, inherent in the conception of democracy itself — etymologically, we trace the term back to the Greek *demos* and *kratos*, meaning "power of the people." As opposed to alternative regimes such as aristocracies or oligarchies that privilege status or wealth, democracy entails a collective will from which we derive political power. The democratic ideal is the ever-unrealized notion that we can all participate in the collective act of governance, without unjust barriers and exclusions. We can recognize flickers of this ideal amid the embers of populist movements, where participants demand that power be given back to the people. This feature is quintessential to populism, regardless of a movement's political vision or philosophy.

Much of populism's appeal appears to come from rising dissatisfaction with existing

democratic institutions. Although many argued that we entered the "end of history" after the Cold War, with liberal democracy becoming the ultimate form of governance (see Fukuyama 1992), the consensus on democratic norms is increasingly under threat. Critiques from both the Left and the Right point to shortcomings in democratic states. Almost universally, public opinion shows rising distrust towards democratic institutions and the leaders that run them.[1] Of course, this distrust is not always misplaced. Exclusionary practices and outcomes prevent many from meaningfully participating in democratic life. Electoral processes like gerrymandering predetermine whose vote matters and economic inequality ensures that our capacity for self-governance is not equal, to name only a few examples. Existing liberal democracies reduce political participation to voting in elections, narrowing the breadth and application of democratic principles throughout society. Under current conditions, democracy struggles to overcome the atomistic individualism that shatters our relations with each other and the world.

These shortcomings fuel the appeal of populism and the temptation of many to reach for it. This is why even its most adamant critics recognize populism relies upon and embodies genuine grievances. Benjamín Arditi (2005) compares populism to a drunken guest at a dinner party, one that abandons the table manners governing liberal politics and disrupts the conversation in favour of challenging existing norms (90-91). As anyone seated next to them can attest, drunken guests are rarely welcome company. However, they remain memorable because their drunken expressions contain blunt truths other attendees would prefer to remain unspoken. Too often, this is precisely the role populist movements play in contemporary politics. Although the specific

[1] Among the best public surveys illustrating this point is the Ipsos *Populism in 2024* survey. The company polled 20,630 respondents from 28 countries on various measures related to populism. The findings include that 63% of respondents want a strong leader "to take the country back from the rich and powerful;" 58% feel their country is in decline; 57% feel their country is broken; 62% view elites as a close-knit group; and 74% worry their government will do little to help them in the future (Young 2024, 3).

content of each movement varies, I can empathize with the desire to restore power and communal connection in a contemporary world where the political forces shaping our lives are increasingly opaque, multi-faceted, and unaccountable to any demos.

Despite this notable desire, populists too often turn the democratic impulse against itself, attempting to restore power to the people by demonizing others and carrying out centralized, authoritarian actions, especially once elected. Over the past two decades, many examples of authoritarian populist movements have emerged. The most notable is likely Trump, whose ultra-nationalist rhetoric propelled him to the American presidency. Similar far-Right figures captured considerable public support in Britain, France, Germany, and Italy.[2] In Latin America, Left authoritarians have also emerged as strong leaders (see Weyland 2013).[3] Although each relies on different discourses, each figure promises to fight against the unaccountable establishment and restore democratic power to the people — provided we rely upon their unchecked and absolute leadership to do so.

We do not need to look far to recognize these dangerous forms of populism; often, we only need to look in our own backyards.

Take, for example, my home province of Alberta, Canada. We have a long history of populist leaders whose reactionary measures eroded our democratic principles and scapegoated those deemed "un-Albertan" or "anti-Albertan," blaming them for our troubles. My grandparents had William Aberhart and Ernest Manning; my parents had Ralph Klein; I had Jason Kenney; and now, we all have Danielle Smith. While none are as notorious as Trump, their populist premierships drastically reduced democratic governance in the province and championed so-

[2] Notable far-Right populists in these countries include Boris Johnson, Reform UK, Marine Le Pen, National Rally (France), the Alternative for Germany (AfD), Giorgia Meloni, and the Brothers of Italy.

[3] Among the politicians Kurt Weyland (2013) examines as authoritarian are Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Rafael Correa, and Daniel Ortega.

called “severely normal” Albertans, to the exclusion of others (Filax 2007; Heyes 2024). These prairie populists negatively impacted our province’s democracy and failed to restore communal relations, accountability, or self-governance to Albertans’ lives. After decades of reactionary populist rule, our lives are less in our own hands today than they were earlier — due, considerably, to the policies of prep-school populists who claim to represent the demos and the popular will but then undermine them, often in favour of contemporary elites once in office. Sadly, as the above examples demonstrate, this is only a local example of a global trend.

As more governments led by populists fall into authoritarianism, it is not difficult to understand why many reject populism as anti-democratic or anti-political. The demonization of others carries fatal consequences for marginalized groups and occurs alongside attacks on liberal democratic institutions. We do not lose liberal democratic virtues such as freedom or equality but these principles become distorted to the point where they undermine democracy itself. Think of how freedom became appropriated on the reactionary Right in Canada by trucker convoy movements and anti-vaxxers. We should not ignore how their opposition against supposedly totalitarian and “unconstitutional” public health measures led key organizers to support overthrowing the federal government (Taylor 2022; Cecco 2022). Simply, their impulse to resist elite authority and reclaim power for the people contradicts their authoritarian demands, hostility towards dissenting perspectives, and drive for moral unity.

The relationship between these two conflicting claims of populist discourse is what I call *the populist paradox*. The drive to reclaim and restore power to the demos is actualized through the contradictory action of authoritarian governance. Rather than addressing legitimate grievances against existing institutions, the populist paradox undermines democratic principles and entrenches the exclusionary logic it purports to oppose. By relying upon a singular source of

moral authority, authoritarian populists either aid existing elites sympathetic to their vision or replace them with those who are. The elites may change but exclusionary structures remain intact. The inability of the populist paradox to fulfill desires for self-governance subsequently fuels further dissatisfaction and more reactionary movements, creating a cyclical drive towards increasingly authoritarian ends. Frighteningly, this disorienting spiral places us under an unparalleled threat, where those yearning for a better democracy become its assailants.

Reviving Populism's Democratic Impulse

Unsurprisingly, this paradox has led many to denounce populism as a threat to democracy. By twisting democratic desires into authoritarian drives, some argue populism is empty rhetoric that voices real dissatisfaction while channelling these frustrations into anti-democratic practices and systems. To resist this, many call for a robust defence of liberal democratic institutions and the pluralistic principles these structures claim to uphold (see Müller 2016; Urbinati 2019).

Although well-intended, I worry that a wholesale rejection of populism discredits the desire for shared governance at the heart of many populist projects and fails to adequately consider whether we can rescue this desire from the authoritarian leaders who currently claim it for their political visions. Without critically engaging with the democratic sentiment fuelling populist movements or recognizing the institutional shortcomings these feelings gesture towards, we abandon fertile ground for growing a better democracy to demagogues who wish to raze our shared world to advance their own interests. If we wish to combat the authoritarian dimensions of populism, we must recognize how populism's most dangerous aspects rely upon a deep-seated democratic virtue of sharing political power among equals — something existing institutions are not fulfilling. In the face of this, we must ask whether populism is doomed to undergo an

authoritarian shift. Alternatively, can we overcome the populist paradox by recovering the populist impulse for collective and self-governance to deepen democracy, rather than destroy it? And, if so, how can we cultivate a more democratic populism?

The progressive roots of prairie populism intensified my interest in the democratic potential of populism. While I was already familiar with the reactionary populists that governed Alberta, studying political science and history revealed that populism historically emerged prominently on the Left in the Canadian prairies. In fact, populism appeared across the political spectrum, from the radical democratic populism espoused by the United Farmers Movement to the social democratic populism that led to the establishment of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in Calgary (Laycock 1990). Although different from our contemporary problems, these movements were similarly rooted in discontent towards institutions and political parties that locked out western farmers and labourers (see Young 1978, Chapter 1). In contrast to the last few decades, however, this discontent did not always manifest in anti-democratic forces. Instead, agrarian populism in rural Alberta allowed for the flourishing of participatory democracy in places like schoolhouses and community halls to the extent that Canadian political scientist Roger Epp (2003) has argued democratic political action on the prairies in the 1920s and 1930s was “reminiscent of ancient Athens” (49). Within these rural communities, Albertans applied democratic values to places beyond the ballot box including the economy and education systems. Whereas many think of prairie populists as reactionary figures, our history shows prairie populism belongs just as much to Tommy Douglas or Henry Wise Wood as it does to Ralph Klein or Preston Manning.

Further, Canadian prairie populism is far from the only historical example of progressive, democratic populism. Michael Kazin’s ([1995] 1998) history of American populism shows how

the People's Party, the Progressives, and organized labour in the 1920s and 1930s espoused populism, protesting the conditions of the average citizen and advocating for transformative change. This insurgent energy even helped lead to the development and implementation of the New Deal. Although we tend to associate populism with the reactionary Right in America in contemporary politics, this history reminds us that the Left has a rich history of embracing populism to emancipatory ends.

Rather than falling into authoritarianism, these examples demonstrate the malleability of populist movements and their complicated relationship with democracy; one that appears neither inherently anti-democratic nor radically democratic. What populism points to, instead, is a way to remake the political, to redraw boundaries of collective will and identity for various ends, both just and unjust, inclusive and exclusive. As contemporary politics makes clear, how populists redraw these lines can differ greatly and significantly impact the types of values these movements assume. We cannot merely reduce populism to a monolithic "value-neutral" practice that can come to life with any philosophical content; how one practices populism matters and impacts the outcomes of these movements.

Drawing from these experiences, we should ask whether we can escape the contemporary populist paradox and rescue the democratic impulse inherent within populist movements. Can populism revive democratic principles or does it necessitate an authoritarian exclusion? If so, what type of populism is congruent with radicalizing democracy and how does it differ from populists who veer into authoritarianism? Is populism a way to protect the political or does it facilitate its demise? What specific practices of populism can uphold democratic desires for collective governance and which betray them? These questions motivate my project and answering them remains paramount if we wish to preserve plurality and democracy for future

generations.

Recovering Populism

In this thesis, I argue reviving a democratic populism is more than necessary — it is urgently needed to recover meaning in contemporary politics. Against critics who reduce populism to an inherently anti-democratic ideology or allies that drain populist logic of value judgements altogether, I assert populism is a powerful response to disorienting times that can profoundly transfigure democratic principles. The outcome depends on the logic and practices used by populists to redraw the frontiers of political struggle. Whereas authoritarian or antagonistic populism emerges through demonizing its enemies, democratic or agonistic populism preserves the shared spaces and distances between us necessary for contestation. Without care for these spaces, and our adversaries within them, struggle ceases to exist. Our common world collapses, our plural existence becomes flattened, and our virtues lose meaning beyond ourselves. By affirming the political, populism can assert distinct values in an increasingly nihilistic state. Only through participating in democratic struggle with and against others can our political projects acquire depth. A radically democratic populism must reignite the flames of contestation and continuously preserve this fire, even if our visions become dominant over others; otherwise, we risk burning down our shared world.

To save the democratic impulse of populism from capture by authoritarian forces, I analyze differing populist logics, how they emerge, and the problems motivating their rise. My examination is both practical and theoretical, oscillating between real-life populist practices and their conceptual foundations. Through this, my project reveals a divergence between different populisms over how to craft political visions. The practices used to create collective identities

and the frontier separating “the people” and “the elites” impact the political virtues assumed by populist movements. Understanding what practices lead to destruction and which lead to renewal is vital for radically recovering democracy today.

Defining Contested Concepts

Examining the relationship between populism and democracy immediately raises how I define these contested terms. Scholars have tried to characterize these concepts for decades. What is populism? Is it an ideology, style, rhetoric, discourse, or empty pejorative? What is democracy? Is it a system, a set of institutions, a practice, or an experience? A brief analysis of existing literature is necessary to answer these questions and situate my project.

Democracy

Although often spoken about, we rarely reflect on what we mean by “democracy.” Broadly, most agree democracy is “power by the people,” a form of shared government characterized by freedom and equality among citizens, but definitions diverge beyond this. If democracy is something populism seeks to reclaim, what exactly are we missing?

In popular usage, democracy typically refers to a governmental regime constituted through a set of institutions, such as a legislature, free press, and judiciary. The extent to which these institutions exist and function, then, becomes the determinative factor for whether a state is democratic. Democracy becomes something quantifiable, that we can measure and implement by creating the right institutions. Among the most popular surveys measuring democracy is Freedom House’s (2024a) annual report which assigns countries a “freedom score” out of 100. Each score is devised by answering questions such as whether the government operates with

openness and transparency or if the judiciary maintains "due process."

While the "freedom score" and other indicators created by social scientists can be informative, defining democracy as a regime misses constitutive practices of democracy and subsequently does not shed enough light on what populism seeks to reclaim. If democracy is merely a type of government, why do many citizens within states with these institutions feel powerless? More importantly, why do states with these institutions feel increasingly undemocratic, as if the people have no say? Voting every four years and accessing the free press alone is not enough to guarantee shared governance. Take a look at Canada, for example, a country assigned a near-perfect freedom score of 97 (Freedom House 2024b). Despite this, democratic dissatisfaction looms over us, as Canadians increasingly feel excluded from power and as though their lives are outside their control.[4] Populist slogans such as "Canada is Broken" resonate because people believe democratic institutions are not working for them.[5] Canada is far from the only solid democracy to experience this shift. Given this, democracy must be more than a structure.

Drawing on Sheldon Wolin (1994), I define democracy as an experience, a mode of being shared with ordinary citizens where we discover common concerns and act together in attempting to address them. The definition stems largely from Wolin's rejection of the managerialism cultivated by modern institutions which perpetuates domination and rule by a limited group over others. The demos cannot act under these restrictive conditions, relegating

---

[4] Returning to the Ipsos survey of populism (Young 2024), 53% of Canadian respondents agreed that our society was broken (16); 68% agreed the economy is rigged for the powerful (23); 61% agreed that traditional political parties "don't care about people like me" (24); 56% agreed that experts "don't understand the lives of people like me" (26); and 64% agreed that "the political and economic elite don't care about hard-working people" (29). A different survey from Leger (2024) has similar findings, with 70% of Canadian respondents agreeing that "it feels like everything is broken in this country right now" (16).

[5] This slogan references Pierre Poilievre, incumbent leader of the Conservative Party and a populist, who has claimed "it feels everything is broken in this country right now" and that his government will fix it (Aiello 2022).

democracy to a fugitive experience. He notes that: “Paradoxically, while hardly anyone questions that the self-styled ‘advanced industrial democracies’ really are democracies, fewer still care to argue that ‘the people’ actually rules in any one of them, or that it would be a good idea if it did” (22).

Wolin’s words resonate with today’s populist claim that we have lost democracy and the people who are supposedly at its core. Against this, we must return to democracy as a momentary experience that arises through a commonality with others, renewed only in exchanging words and deeds. The institutionalization of democracy, and its boundaries that try to contain the political, stand in tension with democracy as an unstable experience of spontaneous action by ordinary people; a shared experience that contests existing institutional limits, uncovers new commonalities among us and realizes shared concerns through action (23). Legislatures alone cannot protect democracy under Wolin’s definition; democracy is instead an experience that ordinary citizens renew through discovering common concerns alongside others (11). Although there are aspects of Wolin with which I disagree, his conception of democracy as “a moment rather than a form” (19) is ingenious in identifying the shared experience of power missing from modern societies.

Populism

As the number of populists increases, so does the number of potential definitions for the term. As Francisco Panizza (2005) said, it has become cliché to talk about the lack of clarity over the concept — and that was nearly 20 years ago before mainstream interest in the topic exploded. Definitions typically share only one basic premise: populism relies on an adversarial relationship between “the people,” for whom the populists advocate, and an “Other,” whom populists oppose.

Approaches differ vastly beyond that.

Examining scholarship on populism, two dominant categories emerge: ideational theories and discursive theories.[6] Ideational theories primarily define populism as an ideology, rhetoric, or style characterized by a concrete set of principles, beliefs, or actions. This is similar to how scholars define other "-isms" like liberalism or conservatism. Unlike these ideologies, however, populism necessitates broad or vague boundaries since it appears across the political spectrum. Often, scholars devise these defining characteristics through an analysis of case studies built upon "empirical" methods such as ethnographic observation and historical comparison. The most popular ideational theory is likely Cas Mudde's (2004) definition of populism as a "thin-centred ideology" that divides society into two homogenous, antagonistic, and pure groups: the people and the elites. Since it is thin-centred, agents can combine it with other ideologies. Mudde's definition, however, is far from the only ideational one. Other examples include Peter Wiles's (1969) list of 24 premises held by populists and Margaret Canovan's (1981) typology of populism.

Ideational definitions fail, however, to capture all phenomena labelled as populism. Whenever a single definition is made, a case emerges that escapes its narrow limits. Examining the disparities between populists shows we cannot reduce the concept to a checklist of premises or broad categorization. Despite this, many scholars continue to try, expanding definitions and quibbling over whether certain cases belong to populism at all. At one of the earliest conferences on defining populism, Isaiah Berlin acutely diagnosed this approach as the "Cinderella complex." Summarizing it, he said:

[6] The conceptual divisions provided by Pannizza (2005), Ernesto Laclau ([2005] 2018), and Nadia Urbinati (2019) were influential in identifying this divide. Although each uses different terms all posit a similar divide in the literature.

> [T]here exists a shoe — by the word "populism" — for which somewhere there exists a foot. There are all kinds of feet which it nearly fits, but we must not be trapped by these nearly fitting feet. The prince is always wandering about with the shoe; and somewhere, we feel sure, there awaits a limb called pure populism. There is the nucleus of populism, its essence (quoted in Allcock 1971, 385).[7]

Berlin's comments indicate a hard truth about studying populism: the concept does not have a singular, exemplary definition and our drive to uncover a Platonic essence is doomed to failure. The perfect populist many seek out does not exist. Although researchers acknowledge this, many remain trapped by the Cinderella complex today.

Discursive theories remedy this failure by defining populism as a performative and discursive practice rather than a referential concept. Ernesto Laclau ([2005] 2018), the primary founder of the discursive approach, specifically defines populism as a "political logic" (117) through which we construct collective identities and redraw the boundaries of political struggle, a dimension of all shared spaces ready to be invoked by any participant. Subsequently, discursive theories do not worry over devising a definition of populism extended from the programmes or promises of populist movements; their analysis centres on populism as a discursive intervention — how populists (re)constitute the frontier between "us" and "them." Vagueness and ambiguity are not definitional barriers but conditions of the undetermined world that populism intervenes within, discursively creating "the people" through dispersed and varied social elements (224-28). Under this definition, populism becomes synonymous with the political itself, disrupting normative orders and reigniting debate between adversaries. From this, Laclau concludes "there is no political intervention which is not populistic to some extent," only differing degrees to which something is populist (154-55). This approach to populism remains influential among those

[7] Berlin's quote came directly from his comments at the conference rather than a paper he presented. Allcock cites a verbatim report produced for conference participants but that was not published. Copies of the report can be found online but remain unverified.

seeking to recover populism for a democratic project (see Mouffe [2018] 2019).

Although I favour the discursive theory, its elementary definitions still fall short. Specifically, Laclau and other discursive theorists neglect how the specific *act* of constructing collective identities impacts the principles and actions assumed by populists. Too often, they take the populistic logic of constructing collective wills or identities as *value-neutral*, only raising critical evaluations of the demands made by specific populist movements. To me, however, there is an important difference between how a populist like Bernie Sanders constructs the people and how someone like Donald Trump constructs them. Nadia Urbinati (2019) touches upon this in her critique of Laclau, calling his definition of populism "malleable and groundless," a "relativist" idea that makes victory the standard of its truth and that reduces politics to the "zero-sum game" of hegemonic politics (34).

To overcome this challenge, I employ a discursive definition of populism that seeks to expand populism beyond a singular process. Specifically, I define populism as the discursive art of crafting a collective will which struggles against an oppositional Other for power. The act of populist construction is not value-neutral, apolitical, or even reducible to a single logic. There is instead a multitude of discursive logics that can construct a collective will, each with its own implications on the political desires and principles of populist agents. The metaphorical comparison of populism and country dancing made by journalist Gorden Laird (1998) may be useful here: line dancing and two-stepping may both be dances, but only the latter requires spontaneity and reciprocity between partners, while the former imposes conformity (75). Similarly, populism can emerge through democratic reciprocity or authoritarian crusades.

Outline

I defend my argument through a series of steps. In my first chapter, I explain how authoritarianism develops from the democratic instincts of populism. Opening with an explanation of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's defence of populism, I subsequently criticize their "chain of equivalence," a concept they use to describe the set of interlinked demands that comprise populist identity. Drawing upon Friedrich Nietzsche, I show how the chain of equivalence becomes ridden with ressentiment and slave morality by building populist projects upon unfulfilled demands. Using the chain to create populist movements becomes damaging, as ressentiment traps projects in a reductive moralism and reduces political opponents to scapegoats. I also discuss how ressentiment acts as an anesthetic to political action, abhorring power as something held by immoral others, which disregards how populist movements can wield power through action. To avoid these pitfalls, I reject having unsatisfied demands and ressentiment as the foundation of populism.

Against authoritarian desires, I reconceptualize a democratic populism in my second chapter by analyzing Canadian prairie populism. Examining the expansion and preservation of participatory spaces by radical and social democratic movements, I argue democratic populism is revivable as a world-building exercise, where the people emerge through what Hannah Arendt called "acting in concert." Instead of relying on a shared enemy, democratic populism arises through caring for a common world where we can derive meaning alongside and against others. Juxtaposing these approaches by comparing Arendt and Carl Schmitt, I propose two differing conceptions of populism: antagonistic populism, which destroys the shared world in unconstrained combat against an enemy, and agonistic populism, which expands the spaces where we come together for political action. With this understanding, we can begin cultivating

an agonistic populism today that revitalizes democratic practices and the shared spaces where they occur.

Finally, in my last chapter, I argue today's populist surge is a response to our increasingly nihilistic condition. Developed through an engagement with Friedrich Nietzsche, Hans Sluga, and Wendy Brown, I posit that contemporary politics is haunted by democratic disorientation, where our modern institutions trivialize and instrumentalize the democratic principles they purport to uphold. Among the most perverse symptoms of this disorientation is the elite capture of public resources previously used to orient ourselves amid uncertainty — including, significantly, populism itself. Within this context, I develop a post-Nietzschean map of contemporary politics, arguing that we are witnessing three dominant responses to intensified nihilism: 1) Zombie neoliberalism; 2) Antagonistic populism; and 3) Agonistic populism. Whereas the first two responses continue devaluing democratic principles and destroying shared spaces, agonistic populism offers a path forward that expands political spaces where we can (re)create meaning alongside and against others through perpetual contestation. Only through struggle can we make ethical and political distinctions amid a boundless world and reclaim democratic principles from authoritarian demagogues — reclaiming a democracy worth fighting to preserve, for the people, by the people.

<u>Chapter One: Making Ressentiment Great Again</u>

> Nothing burns one up faster than the affects of ressentiment. Anger, pathological vulnerability, impotent lust for revenge, thirst for revenge, poison-mixing in any sense — no reaction could be more disadvantageous for the exhausted …
>
> — Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* (1989b, 230)

> For God's sake, have some populist rage.
>
> — Caption on a *New Yorker* cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan (2009)

Almost a month after his inauguration, Donald Trump held his first "Make America Great Again" rally as president in Melbourne, Florida. Amid denouncements of the "special interests," "global elites," and "fake news," Trump defended his then-recent attempt to suspend immigration from Muslim-majority countries, commonly known as the "Muslim ban." In his speech, he paraded the racist policy as part of his larger vision to revitalize government for and by the people. "People want to take back control of their countries, and they want to take back control of their lives and the lives of their family," Trump (2017) said. "Erasing national borders does not make people safer or more prosperous; it undermines democracy and trades away prosperity."

Besides proving his ignorance, Trump's comments reflect one of the most disturbing features of contemporary authoritarianism: the use of democratic principles to justify blatant violence and discrimination. Although the misuse of democracy is far from new, as Hannah Arendt notes in her study of totalitarianism, the increasing popularity of this tactic among authoritarian populists

gives reason for worry. Globally, populists capture mass support by blaming problems facing the "the people" on marginalized outsiders and often targeting them if elected. When faced with institutional barriers, they undermine the institutions themselves. Attacks on institutions like the free press and the judiciary grow — all under the guise of protecting the people.

To rescue democratic values from the populist paradox, we must begin by answering how populist movements claiming to restore power to the people become anti-pluralist, moralizing, and authoritarian.

In this chapter, I argue that populism often shifts away from democratic praxis and into authoritarianism because many populist constructions of a collective will are ridden with ressentiment. Rather than expressing an open-ended, contingent articulation of a collective will, when populist constructions emerge from unsatisfied demands they fall into a moralizing desire for vengeance that poisons our politics. Conceptions of power become conspiratorial, obsessive, narrow, and dependent on the hatred of others. Political contests between adversaries become reduced to absolute moral struggles in which the "good" seeks to eradicate the "evil" by any means necessary. Fixed hierarchy, order, and moral values become transcendent, something to force onto others. Authority is derived through morality, not through democratic contestation. Under these circumstances, the aim of populism turns against itself by seeking to destroy the pluralism necessary for political struggle itself. No longer is there an "us" versus "them" — only a singular totality.

To locate where this authoritarian desire arises within populism, I discuss Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's conception and defence of populism. Cultivating a theory that incorporates the insights offered by earlier scholars, I draw upon Friedrich Nietzsche to show how what Laclau calls the "chain of equivalence" becomes a breeding ground for moralizing vengeance. By

establishing an equivalence between social identities through a shared sense of dissatisfaction and unfulfilled demands, populist identities emerge from ressentiment towards a supposedly powerful Other. All other values of these movements rely upon the bond cultivated through their shared hatred; there is never any possibility of overcoming a desire for revenge.

Although my argument incorporates the insights of scholars critical of populism, these critiques should not lead us to discount populism altogether. Too often, arguments against populism ignore how existing democracies perpetuate an exclusionary consensus and disregard instances of populism that advanced emancipation. Together, we can recognize that critics and advocates of populism both miss something vital. Only by properly understanding how populism can become authoritarian can we start to develop democratic alternatives.

Political Identity and Chains of Equivalence

The most prominent theoretical defence of populism comes from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Inspired by the successes of the New Right, the pair argue for a Left populism that creates new antagonisms, ideally shifting political struggle onto terrain favourable for establishing a radical and plural democracy.[8] Contrary to essentialist conceptions of political struggle, radical democracy rejects a privileged political subject or a priori logic. Instead, Laclau and Mouffe ([1985] 2014) assert the social is an indeterminate and plural space where subjects are discursively constructed through hegemonic struggle (136). Put another way, subjectivity is not ontologically pre-given but politically constructed. By embracing this, radical democracy affirms the proliferation of democratic struggles through which the Left can create new subject

[8] Laclau and Mouffe discuss how the Left can learn from the populism of the New Right — particularly Margaret Thatcher — in many places, including *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* ([1985] 2014, Preface, 152-54); *On Populist Reason* ([2005] 2018, 78-79); and *For a Left Populism* ([2018] 2019, Chapter 2).

positions and imaginations to carry us beyond the current horizon. Rejecting Third Way social democracy and orthodox Marxism as too rigid, Laclau and Mouffe aspire to break free from our current conjuncture by pursuing projects that bring people together across differing subject positions (such as the working class, women, queer and trans people, and environmentalists) without reducing the differences between them.

Populism, by drawing a frontier between "us" and "them," becomes the key way to assert a radical democratic project through the creation of a new adversarial relationship that shatters the limiting consensus underlying politics (Laclau [2005] 2018; Mouffe [2018] 2019, 5). To avoid reimposing an essentialist identity, we cannot rely upon pre-political conceptions of "the people" to practice populism — we must develop a theory that views "the people" as a product of performative articulation, something that does not reduce parts of collective will to homogenous unity and keeps internal differentiation between these parts alive (Mouffe [2018] 2019, 62-63). To do this, Laclau and Mouffe argue that collective will (and, subsequently, populist identity) emerges from a "chain of equivalence" that links heterogeneous demands together — and it is within this chain that I locate the potential for authoritarian desires.[9]

To avoid reinforcing essentialist notions of identity as pre-given, the chain must start with the most elementary unit in articulation, which Laclau claims is the social demand. An ambiguous term, a demand refers to a request or claim imposed on someone else (Laclau 2005, 35-36; Laclau [2005] 2018, 73). A demand cannot be self-managed; it must refer to a higher Other with decision-making power ([2005] 2018, 85-86). An example may be when residents of an impoverished neighbourhood ask the government to address economic inequalities by creating

[9] Although first discussed in their joint work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* ([1985] 2014), Laclau best articulates the relationship between chains of equivalence and populism in *On Populist Reason* ([2005] 2018). Given Mouffe's analysis of populism draws primarily upon this text, my analysis primarily draws upon this work.

more programs to redistribute wealth into their community. Each demand is particular but can also be shared by multiple individuals or groups, helping to compose a concrete identity or will.

Whether a demand is fulfilled or unfulfilled determines how it fits within existing social relations — particularly, whether institutions can subsume the demand, leaving them differentially isolated from others, or whether unmet demands enter an equivalential relationship (73).[10] If a demand is satisfied, Laclau and Mouffe argue it retains its particularity, remaining differential and disconnected from other demands. There is no need to enter into an alliance or coalition with other demands since the state has addressed their concern in an isolated, particular way. The demand becomes acknowledged and accommodated under dominant frameworks, inscribing it within them (77).

Rejecting or leaving a demand unfulfilled opens a different possibility, where antipathy connects otherwise unrelated concerns. If only one demand is not met, this may cause dissatisfaction but is not necessarily troubling. Things change when multiple demands go unmet, creating a build-up of anger toward the status quo. For example, a demand for wealth redistribution may go unmet without becoming transformative. When compiled with unmet demands for better infrastructure, community safety, and labour protections, however, the situation is no longer one of isolated frustration. The shared antipathy exposes a break or gap in a social order, where institutions fail to represent dissatisfied people (85-86). In other words, there is a "fullness" absent in hegemony that is otherwise present in the ordinary experiences of dissatisfied communities. This is why populist visions exclude those in power from their conception of collective will — their demands and desires are irreconcilable under the dominant power structure.

[10] According to Laclau, the social realm is the locus of tension between the irreconcilable yet necessary logic of difference and logic of equivalence ([2005] 2018, 79-80).

Due to this break or gap, these demands become reshaped under a logic of equivalence. For Laclau and Mouffe, this is a type of solidarity where actors view their demands as equivalent to each other because their rejection by the state gives them a commonality, an enemy to oppose. Equivalence does not mean these demands lose their partiality or lack internal differences (79) — each one is unique and a positive commonality across all is unlikely, if not impossible. Their commonality is rooted in a shared negativity, an antipathy towards the dominant order (96).

What populism, and the chain of equivalence that constructs "the people," requires is privileging the equivalence bonding plural demands over the differences that separate them. Demands are no longer isolated, becoming connected in the common struggle for an alternative vision. Through equivalence, we can take advantage of rupturable moments where a break within existing orders becomes apparent and subsequently reconstruct a new idea of the people, stemming from the underdogs — those without power against those in power (81). The antipathy manifests into a positive, collective will; a new version of "the people." Social division becomes apparent and the frontier of political struggle becomes redrawn, leading to new possibilities

To shift from vague solidarity into a populist identity, equivalent demands must crystallize around a common denominator: a positive, symbolic expression representing the entire chain (95-96, 120). According to Laclau, two aspects are necessary for this to emerge. First, a particular demand or expression must become overdetermined, an object others can read differing, equivalent demands into. Think, for example, of how Occupy Wall Street's cry of "the 99%" represented multiple demands including income redistribution, increased democratic participation, and corporate regulation. It is, as Laclau states, the "tip of the iceberg" (Laclau 2005, 37) whose top masks a large underside. Second, the expression becomes what Laclau calls an "empty signifier," embodying an unachieved fullness denied or unrepresentable under the

existing social order ([2005] 2018, 71). The emptiness is a space from which an alternative order can emerge under the banner of a particular, overdetermined sign; often, a collective identity or will. The centrality of this demand cannot be determined beforehand and the sign itself cannot control how others may interpret it. This movement is always contextual and can go in various directions. Through no action of its own, the demand comes to embody something that exceeds it (120).

By naming the popular identity this overdetermined and empty signifier represents, populist unity becomes possible among differing demands. The name is not something accessible or constructible before the chain of equivalence emerges. It is only because demands shift into a popular one that an actor can name this phenomenon retroactively (102-04). The unity of equivalential demands arises from this name — often, grouped under “the people” (108).

It is the entirety of this process, derived from a chain of equivalence, that shows how a populistic construction of the people arises within Laclau’s theory. The chain of equivalence, rather than imposing an essentializing framework, helps show how collective identity emerges from a set of heterogeneous demands. Any actor can use this logic to construct a people, hence why populism appears on both the Left and the Right (87). Through radical investment in this identity, Laclau argues “the people” can become the beginning of a counter-hegemonic project, signalling a transformative alternative to existing orders.

To avoid entrenching these new political frontiers as fixed or essential, Laclau expands on two ways that forces outside a chain of equivalence can complicate identity formation. First, Laclau argues demands do not have to remain in one chain of equivalence; they can shift and move to other rival projects trying to win them over. Since this places a demand between two adversarial projects, it becomes a “floating signifier,” its meaning inherently indeterminate

between these two possible projects (131-32). For example, we can think of how working-class demands originally associated with the New Deal later joined the New Right (135).

Second, some demands will exceed the "us versus them" binary posited by populism. We see this, Laclau notes, when unmet demands conflict with each other, causing one to leave the chain but remain opposed to the dominant system (124, 139). What happens to demands that are neither "us" nor "them?" Laclau argues these belong to an "exteriority," an always-present outside that no single logic can completely recover or acknowledge (140, 147-49). The binary logic of identity/difference is, therefore, an attempt to master an outside that will exceed it regardless, an always imperfect endeavour.

Together, this demonstrates the articulation of a collective identity is necessarily an incomplete action, what Laclau later calls a failed transcendence (244). Political frontiers are always unstable and in the process of being unmade and remade (153). There is an undecidability between homogeneity or equivalence, the logics which bond us together, and heterogeneity or difference, that which overflows us. It is within this undecidability that the political itself emerges, as a hegemonic struggle over redrawing the political frontier that simultaneously binds and separates us.

It is for this reason Laclau declares the act of constructing a people is the ultimate political practice. Populism is how we transform ourselves and what is representable — reconfiguring existing demands, adding in new ones, and excluding some previously present. Populism, in this view, becomes "synonymous" with the political. Every political intervention is populistic, to varying extents; less in agents that seek to downplay division and more in those that rupture social relations into two camps (153-55). It applies as much to the hegemony legitimizing the status quo as to the movements opposing it, just in differing scopes. Since populism is part of all

politics, it is open to many projects, not just democratic ones (see Laclau [2005] 2018, Chapter 7). Yet, this indeterminacy also opens it to radical democratic ends, provided we construct and name the people with such principles in mind (Mouffe [2018] 2019).

Populism: Equivalence or Ressentiment?

> But the people the populists worshipped were the meek and the miserable, and the populists worshipped them because they were miserable and because they were persecuted by the conspirators.
>
> — Ghița Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (1969, 4)

> Chris, THE DEEP STATE IS KNOCKING AT MY DOOR! They dragged me into court. They RAIDED MY HOME! They are doing everything they can to STOP me. But because of your support, I WILL NEVER SURRENDER! I don't know what they're going to hit me with next. But at this very moment, I need to know if you're in my corner.
>
> —Donald Trump (2024b) in a fundraising email

Although Laclau and Mouffe's theory tries to reopen the potential of democratic populism, I argue the authoritarian temptation within populism arises from how they conceptualize the chain of equivalence. By insisting that the chain starts from a series of unsatisfied demands, the chain becomes infested with a desire for vengeance against a more powerful Other. Populism becomes an expression of ressentiment through which new moral hierarchies replace dominant ones, as a way to inflict harm onto the Other.

Drawing from Nietzsche (1989b), I define ressentiment as an affect of hatred that creates new moral values through condemning an evil Other. Unlike other moral philosophers who primarily investigate what values qualify as good or bad, Nietzsche's *Genealogy* sought to evaluate the origins of morality itself, questioning the value of categories like "good" or

“bad”(20). Genealogy as a methodology, which future scholars like Michel Foucault would build upon, allowed Nietzsche to present a history of the present, one that interrogated normalized practices that we take for granted and exposes how they fulfill some entrenched, psychological need within us (see Foucault 1977). By focusing on moral ideals, he aimed to examine what needs morality fulfilled and who benefited from the highly moralized discourses circulated in the eighteenth century.

Ultimately, Nietzsche argued that “good” and “evil” as moral categories stem from what he called the slave revolt in morality (34). In contrast to the nobles who came before them, slave morality developed from those without power. Nietzsche associates it with the rise of Judeo-Christian values, such as humility. Using the priestly caste as an example, Nietzsche talks of their impotence and weakness, their inability to overthrow those who ruled over them (32-33). Against the nobles, who revelled in their power over others and skill in contestation, the priestly caste wallowed in their inability to actualize their values against the nobles who dominated them. Their weakness and inability to act led to a building of hatred that poisoned the priestly caste, causing them to turn away from action and to imagined acts to fulfill their needs.

It is in this context that ressentiment emerges as an imagined, spiritual revenge against the powerful. Those outside of power transform their conditions of weakness into moral ideals — subjection becomes obedience, lowliness becomes humanity, and impotence becomes the goodness of heart (47). None of these ideals arise from an ontological affirmation of the world or life. Instead, ressentiment becomes creative through the action of rejecting what is different or outside of itself, saying “no” to the world that we find ourselves in (36-37). The world in question must be hostile, filled with immoral evil-doers who use their power to harm us. Ressentiment is dependent upon this outside evil, one that justifies a re-evaluation of morality in

favour of the weak (34). An idea of “evil” is always necessary before the conception of the “good” can emerge, creating a hyper-fixation on the demonized (39). We displace responsibility for our suffering onto this evil Other, who is blamed for our weakness. Under ressentiment, action becomes a reaction, a response focused on overcoming evil through new ideals and the creation of slave morality. Although Nietzsche focuses on Christianity in these passages, the faith slave morality prescribes is not necessarily religious — others can and have secularized these moral values while still depending upon some form of transcendence from material reality.

The consequences of ressentiment are severe. First, ressentiment reproduces passivity and powerlessness among those poisoned by the affect, cultivating hatred towards acts of freedom altogether. It becomes an anesthetic to action, making us hesitant to affirm the practices necessary to actualize values in the world (38). Diving deeper, what ressentiment relies upon is an ontological separation between subjectivity and action. Whereas the nobles conceptualize the good through expressions of power (ex. “I do strong acts, therefore I am strong”), slave morality locates strength in an a priori, transcendent realm that does not require action to sustain itself (ex. “I am strong because it is who I am before any action”). Strength and other values become things inherent to certain subjects, something we are free to express or not to express. Our instinct for freedom — what Nietzsche will call “the will to power” — becomes sublimated under a suffocating morality. Weakness is, therefore, something we voluntarily choose through free will, a reality we can change through mere choice rather than being a product of cultural and material conditions (46). Those infected by ressentiment must then, by necessity, lie to themselves. The world is no longer a common, shared space — ressentiment trains people to love “hiding places, secret paths, and back doors” (38), those covert spots that reduce the world to possession, something singularly owned rather than established through plurality.

What this diminishes is that the subject — the doer — is a fiction added on to action — the deed — in a similar way that we associate lightning with the flash that follows it (45). Action is precisely what allows us to constitute ourselves; it is the becoming that precedes being. Identity alone means nothing if we lack the freedom necessary to express ourselves within the world, to make ourselves through action. To deny this freedom is to deny the creative, affirmative capacity of humanity. What ressentiment develops, therefore, is a nihilistic contempt towards humanity and our capacity to create values through affirmative action — in Nietzsche's words, "we are weary of men" (44). Hatred will only beget more rage toward ourselves and towards the evil Others that we blame for our condition.

With this conception of ressentiment, it is easy to see how chains of equivalence become ridden with hatred that poisons populist identities. The issue arises immediately with Laclau and Mouffe's basic unit — the demand. Although the definition can vary, all demands require a more powerful Other upon which to impose this request or claim. Generally, this is the state but this is not the only possible recipient of a demand. We can imagine demands aimed at community leagues, corporations, and post-secondary institutions, for example. What matters is the Other has the power — or at least *appears* to have the power — necessary to fulfill the demand. Otherwise, we would not place a request upon them. The demand inherently constitutes and makes us dependent upon this powerful Other. Not only does reducing social relations to demands foreclose other possible forms of action that do not turn outwards toward the Other (a politics of refusal or prefigurative politics, for example) but it consistently places those making demands in a state of reliance. If we view demands as the basic unit for collective will and identity, we must always rely upon a prior conception of the Other that is embedded within these demands.

Where populist identity becomes dangerous is that, for Laclau, demands become equivalent when the powerful leave them unmet. The shared trait among demands is, by necessity, always negative, something stemming from dissatisfaction with those in power. Even as Laclau recognizes some unmet demands will conflict and fall outside the chain of equivalence, he asserts that "there is a specific negativity which is inherent to the equivalential link" ([2005] 2018, 96). He also never explains why or how some demands remain connected, while others leave. Although he claims "the people will be something more than the pure opposite of power" (152), Laclau fails to explain what bonds them beyond negation.

By making dissatisfaction towards a shared enemy the bond that creates equivalence, Lalcau's theory falls into ressentiment. The determination of evil — the state that denies me what I am owed, the common enemy we all hate — always comes before the determination of good. Equivalence, in Laclau's conception, is no different from ressentiment. Our collective identity arises from an experienced lack within the existing order, something we are denied by the Other. Hatred becomes reactive and creates new ideals to justify our suffering. It is precisely here that moralism emerges in populism. We are not merely constructing a new people — we are constructing a new, transcendent morality that justifies exercising vengeance against the powerful Others blamed for our problems. What this relies upon is a consistent demonization of the supposedly powerful Other.

Ressentiment does more than inflecting populist identities with moralism — it reproduces the mindsets of passivity and powerlessness within populists. As mentioned earlier, ressentiment separates subjectivity from action. Examining contemporary populism, what this means is that supporters no longer assess populist governance based on their actions. Their authority is, instead, derived from the ideals that ressentiment bears. This does not mean that populists do not

act or that their deeds lack consequences. No one who witnessed the authoritarian policies peddled by populist governments would make this argument. Instead, what I am emphasizing is that their ressentiment-laden followers do not care if populist actions contradict their moral ideals or even worsen the initial problems that fuelled their hatred. Since the authority of populist leaders stems from transcendent moral values, they cannot lose their role as champions of the common people even if their actions are incoherent or hypocritical. Judgement and assessment of their actions are not necessary. Turning to Donald Trump, it does not matter to reactionary evangelicals that the behaviour of the former president who is credibly accused (and now, convicted in civil court) of sexual assault contradicts traditional Christian virtues. Nor does it matter to white working-class voters that Trump did not restore the manufacturing sector or bring back their jobs. It does not even matter that Trump hypocritically pursued policies which disproportionately benefit the super-rich, such as his corporate tax cuts. Provided his followers buy into the ideology of "Make America Great Again" and the moralism devised from ressentiment against the status quo, their faith in Trump as a saviour remains unshaken.

Moreover, ressentiment abhors power and responsibility, even if those perpetuating it hold elected office. By definition, ressentiment is always oppositional and anti-establishment. It requires a hostile world, filled with those who seek to persecute "the people" and those leading them (see Nietzsche [1967] 1989b, 36-37). Populism inflected with ressentiment similarly becomes fundamentally anti-establishment, scapegoating others they blame for societal problems and vigilantly weeding scapegoats out of the state. Vital to this belief, however, is the premise that scapegoats remain powerful, embedded throughout state institutions and, therefore, responsible for any challenges faced by authoritarian populists. This is why Ghița Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (1969) claimed populists worshipped the meek — those they oppose must always

be the powerful and the common people must always remain powerless, no matter the material circumstances.

Although analyzing "diagonalism" rather than populism, we can borrow insights from William Callison and Quinn Slobodian's (2021) analysis of anti-vax protests to understand how this approach to power manifests within populist movements:

> At the extreme end, diagonal movements share a conviction that *all power is conspiracy*. Public power cannot be legitimate, many believe, because the process of choosing governments is itself controlled by the powerful and is de facto illegitimate. This often comes with a dedication to disruptive decentralization, a desire for distributed knowledge and thus distributed power, and a susceptibility to rightwing radicalization. Diagonal movements trade in both familiar and novel fantasies about elite control. They attack allegedly "totalitarian" authorities, including the state, Big Tech, Big Pharma, big banks, climate science, mainstream media, and political correctness.

Discrediting public power as a conspiracy is fundamental to populist ressentiment. The institutions that are supposed to act as points of stability and orientation, such as the legislature or the courts, become delegitimized. These are no longer sites of democratic practice but are spaces controlled by elites — even if there is no evidence to support these theories. Of course, it is important to note some conspiracies can be true; elites can attempt to rig the institutions through blatant criminal acts, such as those seen in the Watergate scandal, or through implementing rules that favour their partisan interests, such as gerrymandering. Yet, most conspiracies have nothing to do with facts. Instead, they exist to keep the world hostile, to shift responsibility away from populists and onto scapegoats who conveniently remain hidden throughout the state.

It is here that moral antagonisms give way to authoritarian governance. Suddenly, populists can use the full extent of their power to dehumanize those they scapegoat and blame for societal woes. Despite their God-like moral authority, populists rarely claim responsibility for power; there is, instead, always some larger, more powerful force operating behind the scenes,

sabotaging their projects and attempting to undermine their actions.

The best example here is, undoubtedly, Donald Trump. While the 45th president of the United States likes to act as a strongman, his populism is only successful because he simultaneously portrays himself as a victim, someone who needs the people to protect him against the elusive elites rigging the system against him. Never mind most of us cannot imagine the advantages afforded by his status and wealth — Trump claims to lack power in the face of his imagined enemies and needs his supporters to save him. In the words of Bonnie Honig (2021), his campaign rhetoric espouses a mixture of masculine domination and feminine victimization, as he targets others while also crying out for protection from persecution (44). Trump's populism ultimately relies upon him being both a strongman and a damsel in distress.

Trump's speech on January 6, 2021, in which he encouraged his supporters to march on the Capitol and "stop the steal" after losing the 2020 election, is perhaps the most emblematic of this (Naylor 2021). Throughout his speech, Trump repeatedly makes the false assertion he won the 2020 presidential election and that the election was "rigged." Who is responsible for this? Trump identifies many enemies throughout the speech who supported this supposed theft: Big Tech, the media, the "Washington swamp," the Supreme Court that "loves to rule against me," corrupt Democrat-run cities, and "weak Republicans," whose ranks include Brian Kemp and potentially Mike Pence, depending on whether he supports Trump's attempt to overturn the presidential election results. Together, these institutions and actors denied Trump the presidency, discrediting the democratic process that elected Joe Biden. It is precisely Trump's words — his call to action for his supporters to combat these figures and "fight like hell" to save their country — that emboldened over 2,000 people to storm the Capitol in an attempt to overthrow Congress, in favour of keeping Trump in power. Against democratic notions of shared power and collective

governance, populist ressentiment justified the insurrection attempt and the deep scars it left on American democracy.

Even after his presidential term, Trump continues to benefit from acting as the victim of state persecution, especially as state officials investigate and indict him on various charges, including for his attempts to overturn the 2020 election. Trump rejects responsibility for trying to subvert state institutions and returns to his old trick of calling on his supporters to come to his aid. One *New York Times* article noted that, as more courts doled out criminal charges for Trump, he had "perfected a playbook of victimhood, raising campaign funds off each indictment and encouraging Republican officials to defend him" (Haberman 2023). Scrolling through databases of his emails to campaign supporters demonstrates this, as Trump often blames the "deep state" for laying sham charges against him and calls on the recipients of these messages to stand beside him (Trump 2024b). Recently, he has even taken to calling his messages a "private letter" (Trump 2024a) in the subject line of his emails, cultivating an intimacy that aligns well with Trump's attempts to portray himself as a damsel in distress facing an unjust "witch hunt."[11] Altogether, this sets the stage for violent reactions from Trump's supporters should he lose the next election or face jail time. Worse, it justifies Trump denigrading and gutting the democratic institutions that comprise the "deep state" should he win a second presidential term, something his advisors already seem to be preparing for (Moynihan 2023).

[11] As I was completing final edits on this thesis, a Manhattan jury convicted Trump on 34 charges related to falsifying records to conceal a potential sex scandal (Protess et al. 2024). In the lead-up and the aftermath of the conviction, Trump's campaign increasingly tried to cultivate intimacy between him and his supporters in fundraising appeals.

This includes emails with the subject lines: "I'll never forget what you did for me" (Trump 2024h); "I need you to be my voice" (Trump 2024d); "Chris, are you awake?" (sent as a late-night email) (Trump 2024g); "I love you" (Trump 2024f); and "What are you wearing?" (offering a discount on a MAGA t-shirt) (Trump 2024e). Perhaps the clearest example is an email that reads "Crooked Joe Biden could never understand the love you and I have for each other. We've been to hell and back in our fight to Make America Great Again, and NOTHING - not even their endless Witch Hunts - could tear us apart" (Trump 2024c).

Altogether, Trump's behaviour embodies populist ressentiment's disavowal of power and responsibility. It also shows how, in scapegoating certain segments of society, populist ressentiment creates new moral values that transcend democratic politics and justifies the atrocious treatment of enemies — all in the name of the morally pure people. He may be an extreme example but make no mistake, populist ressentiment flows through contemporary movements beyond Trumpism. His mobilization against the enemies of the people echoes Ron DeSantis's "war on woke" in Florida (Smith 2024), Jair Bolsonaro's attempts to liberate Brazil from socialism and "political correctness" (Phillips 2019), and other autocratic insurgencies undertaken in the name of "the people." Through connecting dissatisfaction to ressentiment, we can explain how populism, even when derived from a chain of equivalence, devolves into authoritarianism.

Populist Authoritarianism and Disfiguring Democracy

By identifying ressentiment in the chain of equivalence, we see how authoritarian desires and practices can become commonplace across various populist movements. Since ressentiment relies upon the continued denouncement of a scapegoat, populism derived from the chain of equivalence relies upon moral condemnation, unifying "the people" through targeted rhetoric and violence. Once elected, these movements become authoritarian, often maintaining existing institutions but disfiguring them, distorting democratic principles and rendering them unrecognizable. Populism subsequently becomes a movement claiming to restore power to the people that, instead, erodes democratic values.

What is most dangerous about ressentiment-ridden populism is how it predicates moral unity upon the demise of a common enemy, developing "a politics of partiality" intolerant to differing

perspectives (Urbinati 2019, 4). The specific values posited by populists vary from movement to movement but the underlying unitarian logic remains the same. Populism becomes anti-pluralist because no tolerance exists for groups outside the people. It becomes, in the words of Jan-Werner Müller (2016), "a moralistic imagination of politics" that defends a fictional, pure, unified whole against a morally inferior group (21). The reflexivity necessary for democratic politics disappears and is replaced by reductionist identity politics (Müller 2016; Cohen 2019, 398-99). This mutates the anti-establishmentism championed by populists into a type of anti-politics, fuelling destructive desires to constitute their own identity by destroying the difference that stands in its way — in the process, destroying pluralism itself (Urbinati 2019, Chapter 1).

Critics such as Müller (2016), Nadia Urbinati (2019), and Jean Cohen (2019) argue this destructive drive is best exemplified by populism once elected, noting a distinction between populism in opposition and populism in government. Since the moral unity presupposed by populists justifies their authority, their governments reject imposed limits and increasingly turn to oppressive measures to silence dissent.

Müller (2016) proposes three authoritarian techniques of populist governance. First, populists seek to "colonize" the state apparatus, appointing partisan cronies to key positions in institutions such as the bureaucracy and judiciary (44-45). The purpose is not to destroy these institutions but to reshape the state to align with a populist's moralistic image of the people. Different tactics can advance this occupation but the most powerful is the populist constitution, where governments establish a new constitutional order conforming to their moral hierarchy (62-63). Second, populist governments use state resources to reward friends and punish opponents, relying on a mixture of mass clientelism and discriminatory legalism (46-47). The maximum of discriminatory legalism best reflects this mindset: "For my friends, everything; for my enemies,

the law" (Müller 2016, 46; Weyland 2013, 23). Finally, populist governments aim to suppress civil society, seeing non-governmental actors as a threat to their authority over the people (Müller 2016, 48-49). This motivates populist governments to delegitimize and silence civic actors. Potential actions include restrictions on the free expression of critics, defunding organizations that challenge government narratives, and monopolizing power in government-owned or government-friendly groups.

Other types of government may exercise these authoritarian tactics but what is unique about authoritarian populism is how leaders openly abuse their power in the name of democracy itself. Sparse efforts are made to conceal corruption, hypocrisy, or the oppression of enemies, if any. No cover-up is needed because the authority of populists is not legitimized through democratic procedures but through their representative claim of a unified, morally pure people.

The claim to popular representation is why populism, unlike demagoguery or autocracy, relies upon representative democracy (at least as its starting point) — they must claim that their movement, and only their movement, represent the people and this arises best through a representative system (Müller 2016, 20-23; Urbinati 2019, 9). Importantly, they claim direct representation, where the leader alone perfectly represents the people, disregarding the need for mediating forces of other institutions (Urbinati 2019, Chapter 1). Populists cultivate this by bypassing traditional institutions to speak directly to the masses through rallies, state-controlled media, or social media platforms. The distance between leaders and followers which allows for critical judgement is destroyed. Subsequently, no barriers restrict the popular will expressed by leaders. The only exception is that, whatever action populists take, it must be for "the people," making the boundaries of this identity the only limit on their government.

Despite acting as an incarnation of the people, this limit requires populist governments to

gain legitimization from the masses — even if this vindication is as fictional as the identity of "the people" they claim to protect. Generally, this requires manipulable or controllable institutions to maintain a veneer of democracy. Specifically, Jean Cohen (2019) asserts the unitarian and anti-pluralist drives of populism typically manifest into competitive authoritarianism, where formal institutions remain intact but the state suppresses substantive dissent through authoritarian tactics (398; Levitsky and Way 2002). The result is an unbalanced terrain for political struggle, manufacturing conditions under which "the people" consistently triumph over their chosen scapegoats. Not only does this satisfy a drive to punish the Other, but competitive authoritarianism provides populists with electoral legitimacy, something they can tout as proof that "the people" are always on their side. Debates arise over whether or not this constitutes a totalitarian or fascist project. Take, for example, how what Cohen describes as competitive authoritarianism overlaps considerably with what William Connolly (2017) calls "aspirational fascism" (xvi). Although a full consideration of whether anti-democratic populism qualifies as totalitarian is beyond the scope of my project, Judith Butler's (2024) observation is useful; that contemporary authoritarians may keep electoral institutions but often "rely on fascist techniques and stoking fascist passions to stay in power" (263). This may give us the bridge between authoritarian populism, its reliance on democratic institutions, and the fascist desires it evokes in supporters.

What populism derived from ressentiment ultimately does through destroying enemies in the name of the people, is "disfigure" democratic principles by stretching them to their limit, mutating democratic impulses into authoritarian unity. As argued by Nadia Urbinati, disfigurement leaves the democratic body intact but transforms aspects of it beyond recognition (Urbinati 2014, 1-2, 6; Urbinati 2019). The majority becomes the whole; civic disagreement

becomes moral antagonism; contestation becomes demonization; opposition becomes destruction; and the people become one. Each value justifying populism is a mutation of a democratic origin. The rise of populism thus represents a crisis of democracy where many are dissatisfied to the extent that they twist democratic principles into their inverse. The ability to shatter the coherence or meaning of any principle is the unique threat of populism relative to other movements; it robs us of democratic virtues and uses them to justify unjust ends. In seeking to return the demos — the people — back to democracy, populists tap into a real desire for collective governance but express it through targeted violence toward others. Eventually, populist disfigurement can give way to the temptation to kill the democratic body altogether — the gravest threat we face today.

Is there hope for populism?

Given the extent to which ressentiment poisons populism and gives rise to authoritarian violence, why not reject populism altogether? Some democratic theorists have argued populism is inherently anti-democratic due to its exclusionary insistence that only part of the people is the whole (what some call a *pars pro toto* logic), leaving the concept beyond repair or recovery (Müller 2016; Urbinati 2019; Cohen 2019).

In dismissing populism, critics attempt to overcome the challenges motivating it by making more inclusionary claims within existing institutions. Take, for example, Müller's argument that true democracies leave "the people" as an open question to be continually debated by citizens and encourage claims of inclusion. Whereas populists claim "we, *and only we*, are the people," authentic democrats claim "we are *also* the people" (68-74). Another solution, posed by Urbinati (2019), advocates for democratic institutions to act as intermediaries between citizens and

governments ensuring pluralistic dissent and the permanent presence of opposition (72-73). What these responses gesture towards is that populism reflects dissatisfaction with existing democracy but recreates the problem of exclusion, replacing one homogenous elite with another, rather than expanding institutions to be more inclusive.

Although this is a tempting position, we should resist a wholesale rejection of populism for two reasons. First, critiques of populism as exclusionary miss how existing institutions also perpetuate exclusion and engender remainders. Although Urbinati's faith in the institutional practice of "counting votes" (73-74) to remind us of our opponent's legitimacy is heart-warming, it neglects a history of states counting some votes and voices more than others. Liberal democracies do not leave the people as an abstract, empty ideal; there is concreteness attributed to them through decisions such as who qualifies as a citizen, whom states restrict from running for office, and whose work we consider meaningful. This conception of the people is also not something we can merely contest within the parameters of institutions. Participation within these spaces is not always guaranteed and, if it is, the terms of participating are rarely fair. Disenfranchising marginalized groups, restricting their standing in court, and gerrymandering their communities are some examples of how systems deny this. These harsh realities make the core premise of Laclau and Mouffe's argument compelling, even if their solution is poor — under hegemony, some lives and practices remain unrepresentable, excluding them from meaningful participation within democratic societies. This is especially the case when institutions limit participation in decision-making beyond voting.

Similarly, reducing democracy to continually expanding "the people" neglects how many are not only asking for inclusion — they are asking to reconsider how we conceptualize collective will and identity altogether, sometimes in ways that require us to transform entrenched aspects of

ourselves. Take, for example, calls for decolonization by Indigenous resurgence activists and scholars. Under this perspective, many do not wish the state would merely add them to existing conceptions of the people. Instead, their work shows how Indigenous forms of identity, nationhood, and relationality differ greatly from the settler colonialism forced upon their communities, in ways that cannot simply co-exist alongside each other without profound transformation. The alternatives practiced through Indigenous resurgence compel settlers like myself to reconceptualize our sense of self and the practices that sustain it to allow for a better, more just existence to emerge. Similar critiques also exist within critical race theory, queer theory, and feminist politics. These groups do not claim that "We are also the people"— they assert that "we are the people in a different, meaningful way that is not recognizable under the status quo."

Ultimately, what this reveals is that "the people" cultivated by liberal democratic institutions engender remainders themselves, that they are not neutral or inclusive. Critics may quibble with advocates of populism but they overlooked an insight wrought by their work — namely, the entrenched aspects of our individual and collective identities rely upon exclusions to constitute themselves, an underside to our sense of self that we prefer to look away from.

The second failure is that a wholesale rejection of populism disregards the democratic accomplishments of specific populist movements historically and fails to consider how we could recreate these movements today. Take, for example, how Müller (2016) examines the American People's Party and Bernie Sanders as potentially democratic populists but ultimately argues that they are not populist under his use of the term because their conception of the people remains open rather than closed (85-93). Given Müller creates his definition of populism through analysis of empirical cases, the decision to exclude these movements from his conception relies on an a

priori logic which is never clarified or defended. This is especially puzzling given the People's Party is one of the first to use the term "populist." Excluding these cases arbitrarily limits us to the worst potential outcomes of populism, discounting the potential of a radically democratic populism.

Even Urbinati, the critic who best acknowledges democratic populism, raises more questions than answers in her work. Throughout her scholarship, Urbinati acknowledges that populist movements can act as a rebalancing force in the context of democratization, redistributing power between established and emerging social groups (Urbinati 1998, 112; Urbinati 2019, 18-19). The democratic effects of these movements stem from their context, where institutions remained oligarchic and hostile to large swaths of society. Within established democracies, however, Urbinati asserts populism is more likely to lead to authoritarian tendencies because it delegitimizes opposition and democratic procedure. The differentiation between democratic and authoritarian populism, however, remains unclear in this argument. It relies heavily on a distinction between established democracies and emerging ones. But is the line between democracies and non-democracies this black-and-white? If democracy is never fully accomplished and remains a work in progress, as Urbinati (2019) suggests elsewhere in her argument (72), then why can populism not work to advance further democratization? We find no shortage of broken promises in contemporary democracies — how do the problems plaguing our institutions today differ substantially from the structural issues of the past? This, again, points to a shortcoming of rejecting populism as inherently anti-democratic.

My two critiques show that, although populism has a risk of authoritarianism when derived from ressentiment, we should not relinquish the possibility of a democratic populism. If democracy is power by the people, we must ask difficult questions about who is included and

excluded by the boundaries of "the people," and how we constitute these boundaries. Laclau and Mouffe are right to question whether the frontiers of existing institutions need to be redrawn, even if their chain of equivalence falls into ressentiment. Embracing the necessity of remaking a collective identity or vision can cause us to understand that transforming institutions and tearing down barriers is not inherently bad. It can be a vital aspect of democratic life. There is a clear difference, for example, between amending constitutions to ban immigrants and amending them to decentralize power. Similarly, populist calls to change or transform NATO or the European Union vary widely, between calls on the Right for increased national sovereignty and calls on the Left for less militarized and austerity-driven structures. There are important differences between these proposals for institutional change and ignoring them will not resolve the anxieties causing many to turn to populism. In fact, failure to acknowledge these sentiments results in the build-up of resentment and disappointment motivating the exclusionary projects democratic theorists wish to oppose. Above all else, this requires a populism that allows us to exercise judgement and differentiate between democratic calls for transformation and anti-democratic calls for destruction. While ressentiment precludes us from exercising political judgement, this does not require us to reject populism or its transformative potentials altogether. Instead, it requires us to find a populism beyond ressentiment, one that starts from positive desires rather than unfulfilled demands.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I illustrated how populism can turn against itself. Examining the abuses of power by authoritarian populists, we see the extent to which their rule disfigures democracy. Rather than binding themselves to democratic virtues, authoritarian populists use

their authority — both in and out of elected office — to unleash a moralistic vengeance upon those they scapegoat. The drive for revenge is not merely located in an abstract anti-establishment attitude or inherently moralistic vision but is derived from a particular way of constructing the people. While Laclau and Mouffe's chain of equivalence offers a non-essentialist way of creating collective identity, by making demands the base unit of equivalence, the chain is poisoned by ressentiment. Dissatisfaction becomes the people's unifying feature, leading to new moral ideals that justify their demands — regardless of their content or engagement with others.

Under this ressentiment-fuelled morality, authority becomes absolute, the powerful evade responsibility for their actions, and violence against enemies becomes commonplace. Instead of restoring democratic governance, this populism distorts democratic virtues to the point of inversion. The people crying out for democratic renewal deteriorate into the masses cheering on its demise.

Despite this, we should not abandon the possibility of a democratic populism. Contrastingly, we need to fight harder for an alternative type of populism now more than ever. The temptation to entirely reject "the people" and defend existing institutions is understandable but mistaken. The democratic concerns fuelling populism will not disappear merely because we turn away. To abandon collective will, identity, and action in favour of procedural institutionalism is to abandon democracy altogether. We cannot have power by the people, without the people — even if this requires us to reconsider how we construct collective identities.

Partially inspired by Urbinati, I propose we work towards a populism of democratic transfiguration. Whereas disfiguration defaces and distorts ideals, transfiguration goes beyond the surface to change the appearance of democratic virtues in a way that recovers their meaning.

Transfiguring the values of democracy to become bolder, more beautiful, and more restorative is a vital aspect of showing how we can come together through collective action. We will not fix democracy by giving in to the temptation to abuse our virtues, pushing them to their absolute limits; we instead should seek to go to their core, to reconceptualize and revitalize democracy as a practice that protects the world, rather than seeking to dominate it.

There are differing entry points for this project but, to begin, I return briefly to Nietzsche's insights into what he takes as the opposite of ressentiment: the valuation practiced by the aristocratic nobles. In contrast with slave morality, Nietzsche ([1967) 1989b) discussed how the nobles created values for themselves without relying on a prior definition of evil (28, 37, 39-40). Unlike the priestly caste, the nobles enacted their values through action — their values were not supported by an "imaginary revenge." Instead, aristocratic nobles developed these values in everyday practices, asserting their distinct ideals into a common world against competing claims (38).

This capacity to become value-affirming and creative while contesting others emerges from what Nietzsche called a *pathos of distance*. In making ourselves distinct from the Other, we create a gap between the higher, virtuous principles and those common or low (Nietzsche [1966] 1989a, §257; Nietzsche [1967] 1989b, 26). The experience of this distance — of being distinct, of differences existing between us — enables us to develop our capacity to create values through action (Nietzsche [1967] 1989b, 26). Although useful, the pathos of distance has anti-democratic tendencies that we must address. Many argue the concept fundamentally presupposes a hierarchal order where one group brutally dominates the Other (see Alfano 2018). It is not difficult to understand how one can arise at this explanation given Nietzsche discusses the pathos of distance as when "the ruling caste looks afar and looks down upon subjects and instruments

and just as constantly practices obedience and command, keeping down and keeping at a distance" (Nietzsche (1966] 1989a, §201).

While we cannot ignore the anti-democratic sentiments in Nietzsche's work, I would join the group of Nietzschean scholars and democratic theorists who assert that we can recover aspects of his thought to improve democracy. I am inspired most by William Connolly's ([1991] 2002) suggestion that scholars develop a post-Nietzscheanism that takes Nietzsche's arguments seriously but reconstructs them to deepen democratic theory and practice (185-86, 197). To recover the pathos of distance, he argues we should pull Nietzsche's moral pluralism out of the hierarchical order of rank it presupposes, transforming "the vertical 'pathos of distance' into a horizontal pathos of pluralism" (Connolly 2000, 317). By constructing a level ground upon which conflicting moral systems can look across from each other while attempting to distinguish themselves, we can conceptualize a radically democratic pathos of distance. Drawing from Connolly ([1991] 2002), we can imagine a pathos of distance emerging between competing nobles "whereby each maintains a certain respect for the adversary, partly because the relationship exposes contingency in the being of both" (179).

While developing a post-Nietzschean pathos of pluralism requires breaking from Nietzsche, we could begin this work by recognizing something valuable about how Nietzsche's nobles engage in contestation. As seen in "Homer's Contest" (2008) and parts of the *Genealogy*, Nietzschean nobles presupposed a unique reverence for their competitors that did not deny their impulse to struggle against them but also respected the capacity of their adversaries to create values which existentially conflict with their own. According to Nietzsche, this agonistic disposition is the only path to genuine love for one's enemies: "for [a noble man] desires his enemy for himself, as his mark of *distinction* [emphasis added]; he can endure no other enemy

than one in whom there is nothing to despise and *very much* to honour!" ([1967] 1989b, 39). Perhaps this ethic of contestation is most useful for building a populism that escapes the trappings of ressentiment; one that starts from a positive action rather than a negative reaction. Without this, we remain bound to fall into authoritarian drives and the scapegoating of our enemies.

Chapter Two: Little Agon on the Prairie

> Perhaps no undertaking of the people has ever been harder than adjusting themselves to democratic organization. But nothing has ever promised the people so much, when they have made that adjustment.
>
> — Henry Wise Wood, Presidential Address at the United Farmers of Alberta Conference 1920 (quoted in Laycock 1990, 86)

> Courage liberates men from their worry about life for the freedom of the world. Courage is indispensable because in politics not life but the world is at stake.
>
> — Hannah Arendt, "What is Freedom?" ([1961] 2006, 155)

When I began this project, I struggled to envision and describe a sustainable democratic populism. Relative to the authoritarianism emerging from the populist paradox, recovering the democratic sentiment that sparks populist movements seemed abstract — something good in theory but rarely practiced on the ground, especially by governments. Surprisingly, I found an alternative populism in my own backyard: the Canadian prairies.

As a lifelong Albertan, the prospect of a more democratic ethos emerging from our history initially seemed laughable. Until I turned 16, our province had been under one-party rule for 44 years; our most famous politicians espoused exclusionary rhetoric and often eroded democratic institutions. At a glance, our experience appears more like a cautionary tale than an example to follow.

Underneath these developments, however, is a neglected history of democratic action on the prairies — collective memories most Albertans seem to forget. Schoolhouses and community

halls came alive with a plurality of voices that converged together to speak as “the people.” Rather than demonizing marginalized citizens, their adversaries were the massive corporations and far-off politicians who benefited from the exploitation of agrarian workers. Their action and speech did not enact ontological or physical violence onto their adversaries either; instead, the people created new values through contestation and practice, with and against each other. The question of what an alternative populism looks like was no longer abstract. In historical accounts of prairie populism, we could recognize political action and contestation that preserved the flame of democracy rather than extinguishing it.

In this chapter, I use the example of early prairie populism to defend an alternative and radically democratic form of populism. Specifically, through an analysis of prairie populist movements, I argue these forms of populism act as a world-building exercise, offering moments where people come together in common spaces to debate shared political desires and then attempt to actualize them through acting in concert. Rather than destroying a common world, these prairie populisms expanded these aspects of political life, extending the values of democracy beyond the ballot box and to everyday experiences. I argue that the virtues practiced by these movements reflect a different underlying logic from authoritarian populism.

By connecting these values to differing approaches to the political, I propose two differing conceptions of populism: antagonistic populism, which seeks to destroy the Other, and agonistic populism, which seeks to expand political spaces in which we contest the Other. Whereas the former attempts to overcome the uncertainty of politics through destroying the plurality necessary for a common world, agonistic populism requires an ethical commitment to maintaining and expanding the agon within which populist conflict takes place. Rather than kill the Other, agonistic populists recognize that it is only through contestation among equal

adversaries, and the conditions that make this contest possible, that our political virtues acquire substantive meaning. Without engaging the Other, we lose the plurality needed for democratic persuasion and the common struggle within which we come to truly recognize ourselves and the commitments we hold from perspectives beyond our own.

The Alternative Ethos of Democratic Prairie Populism

Driving along rural Alberta highways, you will likely spot a variety of abandoned monuments dotting the prairie horizon. Rundown barns, schoolhouses, and grain elevators are commonplace, rarely serving a contemporary purpose aside from occasionally becoming sites for roadside photo ops if commuters have the time to pull over. Yet, as Roger Epp (2001) argued, these crumbling buildings recover meaning when we view them as political artifacts, windows to alternative democratic practices developed and previously done on the prairies (302). To develop alternative populist ethics, we must analyze how radically democratic forms of action and experimentation emerged on the Canadian prairies through participation in political spaces like cooperatives. Instead of merely seeing these spaces as decaying infrastructure, we should recognize their historical significance for the practice of democratic populism.

Prairie populisms vary greatly, spanning decades, states, and political philosophies. In fact, it may be more accurate to talk about them as a set of populisms, rather than a universal or singular phenomenon. While many commentators focus on the authoritarian populists governing many prairie provinces and states today, earlier scholarship on prairie politics offers useful frameworks for conceptualizing different formations of prairie populism.

The earliest formation was the American Populist movement in the 19th century, which was most prominent in the Southern and Western United States. Embodied through organizations like

the National Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party, American Populism was a mass democratic movement that sought to empower people to enact change through participatory politics, devoted to cultivating a collective sense of self-respect (Goodwyn 1978, 34-35). Against an increasingly oligarchic political system, the Populist aim was primarily to bring the corporate state under democratic control, removing the barriers that prevented self-governance by everyday people (322).

Although American Populism influenced politics north of the border, my analysis focuses on movements in the Canadian prairies due to their electoral success and governing experience. Despite their popularity in the South and West, the People's Party never held considerable power in Congress or independently gained control of a state legislature, instead relying on electoral coalitions with the Democratic Party to win elections (Clanton 1991, 118). The Populist vision also concentrated heavily on national issues like the monetary system and public land policy, leaving Populist state officials unable to enact their agenda beyond modest reforms (118, 137). Subsequently, American Populism declined after 1896, with their ideas largely channelled into the Progressive movement. In contrast, Canadian prairie populism continued for decades, with agrarian movements eventually delivering electoral victories (McMath 1995, 531, 540-44). Under different parties, Canadian prairie populists held majorities in provincial legislatures under the parliamentary system, giving them substantive authority to govern. To overcome concerns that populism inherently becomes authoritarian once in government, we must analyze prairie populisms that, beyond being a democratic movement, also formed a democratic government.

During the first half of the 20th century, numerous populist movements emerged in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, transforming politics in the Canadian prairies in ways that still resonate today. Many scholars offer insights into these movements (see MacPherson [1953]

1962; Lipset [1950] 1968; Young 1978). The most systematic analysis of differing forms of prairie populism, however, came from David Laycock (1990), who declared at the outset of *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies* that "prairie populists contributed more to Canadian thought about the nature and practice of democracy than did any other regional or class discourse" (3). Relying upon a Laclauian definition of populism, Laycock identifies four variants of Canadian prairie populisms: 1) crypto-Liberalism; 2) radical democratic populism; 3) social democratic populism; and 4) plebscitarian populism (19).[12] Laycock is cautious to note that these four did not develop in isolation and that most populist organizations contained multiple variants within them. Although there are moments where Laycock's analysis pushes the limits of his theoretical boundaries, his framework helps distinguish specific formations of prairie populism and their relation to democracy.

Whereas the populist movements I examined in my first chapter fostered authoritarian desires, radical and social democratic populisms were unique in their attempts to expand democratic thought and practice. Best embodied by the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) and the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) respectively (19-20), these populisms captured discontent with existing democratic structures, arguing that the parliamentary system was captive to financial interests in central Canada and could not act in the interests of the people without significant reconfigurations. Social democratic populists specifically wanted to expand democracy beyond civic institutions to include the economic and social relations that preserved an unequal distribution of power in everyday life (136). Through an interventionist state, social

[12] Crypto-Liberalism, while important for igniting populist sentiments across the prairie region, scarcely provided solutions beyond the status quo. While rank-and-file supporters of crypto-Liberalism desired direct political action, movement leaders saw participation as necessary for electoral success but little else (Laycock 1990, 51). I discuss the primary example of plebscitarian populism (William Aberhart and his Social Party) further in my third chapter.

democrats could remove socioeconomic barriers that prevented the flourishing of true democracy.[13] Radical democrats went even further in this mission, proposing that the demos emerged from outside parliamentary institutions and envisioning continuous political participation from the people outside of periodic elections (69).

Radical and social democratic populism aspired to create and preserve political spaces where citizens derived "the people" through participating in democratic decision-making. Whereas authoritarians sought to destroy spaces, these populists aimed to expand them beyond the status quo.

Economically, this meant breaking down corporate monopolies and advocating the establishment of cooperatives. Under the democratic control of local farmers and workers, cooperatives would stop exploitation and allow local residents to retain decision-making power. Most importantly, residents would familiarize themselves with democratic practices in cooperatives, learning to assume responsibility for participating in collective dialogue, debate, and decision-making. These were not activities confined to elite politicians in legislative halls but interactions vital to the flourishing of individuals and communities in their workspaces. Supporting the cooperative movement became an important feature of prairie populism. Take, for example, the UFA helping to establish the Alberta Wheat Pool in 1923 (Tolton 2009, 83-84) or the Saskatchewan CCF's creation of a "Department of Cooperatives" (Lipset [1950] 1968, 275-76).

Public ownership of industry also remained paramount for social democratic populists, who argued the policy would advance economic democracy (Laycock 1990, 161). The CCF premiership of Tommy Douglas established many crown corporations, including enterprises

[13] Few documents express this perspective as clearly as the CCF's Regina Manifesto. Adopted at the party's founding convention, the manifesto upholds explicitly democratic socialist and anti-capitalist principles.

dedicated to public automobile insurance, bus lines, and electric power among others (Lipset [1950] 1968, 298). Their most renowned achievement was creating a universal medicare program, which the CCF committed to earlier in their tenure and fought for decades against organized medical professionals who favoured privatization to establish (287-295; Frank [2020] 2021, 264-267). The CCF program was the precursor to Canada's national healthcare system, a service that many continue to cherish today.

Furthermore, both populisms integrated participatory practices within their respective political parties. Skeptical of conventional parties and politicians as agents of powerful interests acting contrary to those of the people, populist party structures had to protect and channel the participatory impulses of the people.

The multifaceted structure of the CCF showed this commitment, as the organization dedicated itself to being a federation of smaller parties and movements. The party was democratized as much as possible to prevent a single clique from taking control (Young 1978, 60, 69). In the CCF, this manifested in the creation of provincial councils which contained representatives from various political, social, and economic groups, as well as annual conventions where party policy was debated (Laycock 1990, 156). The direct democracy facilitated by these organizations, while imperfect and imbalanced, held substantial importance for ensuring CCF government officials and rank-and-file members exchanged opinions and thoughts on political issues (Lipset [1950] 1968, 256-58).

The extent of democratic practices within social democratic populism, however, was limited by a technocratic commitment to centralized planning and absolutist views of social science that could weaken commitments to participatory politics (Laycock 1990, 188). Simply put, the means of social democratic populism could undermine their end goal of true democracy, although this

was not true in every case. The CCF still evaded authoritarian temptations and expanded democratic spaces in ways that hold contemporary lessons. Regardless, the truest expression of prairie populism's democratic commitments lies elsewhere with the radical democrats and the UFA.

Out of all the prairie populisms, radical democrats went further in their democratic aspirations and practices. Although the UFA also had annual conventions, their practices went beyond the confines of executive councils or party events. Desiring to be free of autocratic rule by politicians and advance self-governance, radical democrats relied upon local community institutions where residents could enact democratic governance alongside their neighbours. As historian Gord Tolton (2009) noted, no unit was more important than the UFA local in each community, the grassroots satellite of the movement (35-38). Made of community residents, locals brought people together to discuss and take initiative on political issues. While these spaces could become sites of family rivalries and serious contestation (Epp 2001, 302-03), their primary focus was cultivating concerted action among citizens. At the height of their popularity in 1920, the UFA had 1,200 locals (64). Although their concerns could be brought to the central organization, locals were encouraged to take action themselves to address political issues. The pamphlet *How to Organize and Carry On a Local of the UFA* (1919) embodied this mentality clearest. Members were encouraged to come together to debate matters of public importance, study legislation, provide economic training, and promote the creation of communal services (12-15). Often, these locals intersected with existing local institutions and even expanded them. Economic cooperatives remained paramount but, beyond this, the UFA pamphlet also emphasized the importance of communally-operated schoolhouses, public libraries, and newspapers to democratic practice (ibid). The actions of locals reflected their commitment to

community-building. Examples include fundraising to build community halls, schools, and hospitals, or helping neighbours with their farm if someone fell sick (Tolton 2009, 36). Residents were also encouraged to form United Farm Women of Alberta (UFWA) locals and junior branches to allow for increased participation among varying groups with unique interests.[14] Locals also planned events such as picnics or concerts that developed wide followings in some communities. Above all else, locals encouraged continued participation from community members, asking residents to actively engage in discussions, regularly attend meetings, expand membership, and assume responsibility for addressing political issues.

The commitment to community spaces stemmed from what Laycock (1990) identified as a "radical democratic notion of citizenship" which held that political participation should demand as much investment as other areas of life (82-83). Residents could not act democratically without partaking in institutions where they learnt how to practice decision-making and develop their judgement alongside others. Only this could foster a consciousness of how political, social, and economic forces shaped the contours of our individual and collective experiences. In this sense, the democratization of social and economic institutions was vital to any political action; electoral activity was only one facet of the radical democratic movement and should not take away from participation in non-parliamentary institutions that provided the foundation for political action itself (91). Without local institutions, there would be no collective subjectivity upon which to think or act; since voting was typically an individual activity, elections could not be the basis for democratic action alone (84). Unless citizens had spaces that brought them into relation with

[14] UFWA locals were significant in advancing the women's movement in Alberta. While their perspectives did not break completely with gendered notions of labour, the organization defended the full participation of women in public life. Irene Parlby, one of the Famous Five, was the UFWA's most prominent member and, when the UFA formed government in 1921, she became the second women cabinet minister in the British Commonwealth. Due to racial prejudices, discussed later in this chapter, the UFWA unjustly benefited some women more than others. See Tolton (2009) and Bradford James Rennie (2000) for more on the UFWA.

each other and allowed the people to emerge and organize themselves around shared interests, neither democratic thought nor action was possible and democracy itself remained an illusion. Prairie populists acknowledged that such practices would likely entail making mistakes, experiencing growing pains, and occasionally falling short of promises, but they argued that democratic citizenship and responsibility to the demos could not exist otherwise. Democracy had to permeate the whole of society.

Preserving the possibility of democratic action was paramount for the UFA, a commitment demonstrated in their ideas and practices. Recognizing that the state is historically an instrument for domination and used to prevent the people from achieving self-governance, radical democrats advocated for a systemically pluralist state (99-100). Their boldest proposal was rejecting the system of parliamentary governance and attempting to advance forms of delegate democracy, where delegates were mandated to carry the opinion of their group unit following public dialogue, debate, and voting. The clearest articulation of this idea was the group governance theory which sought to replace parliamentary democracy with delegates from different occupational and vocational backgrounds who would arrive at decisions through democratic debate (97; 102). Although this proposal ultimately failed and opened the door to technocratic governance mechanisms by assuming that groups "naturally" converged around economic interests (133), the theory showed a commitment to democratic experimentation when existing structures fell short and the argument in support of the model reveals the virtues that guided radical democratic practice. The model sought to preserve intergroup and intragroup pluralism, choosing to recognize how varying social and economic conditions can lead to differing and opposing interests rather than concealing them. The proposal even gave voice to potential political opponents, such as producers, who traditionally opposed working-class interests (280).

Dialogue and debate would allow cooperation to emerge between groups and bind them together in a shared sense of interdependence—each citizen would recognize that our social, economic, and political way of life would not exist without each other. Contestation and disagreement were also important, however, as public scrutiny was a necessary component of achieving cooperation. While this could lead to frustration between groups, social interdependence would prevent citizens from aiming to suppress or destroy those they disagree with. There is an uncomfortable or imperfect relation to each other that preserves pluralism but allows action to emerge.

What these experiences ultimately demonstrate is that these prairie populisms, unlike other iterations, remained politically and ethically committed to democratic expansions into various areas of society. The public-private divide which typically structured political life at this time was routinely challenged by an insistence to democratize social and economic spaces. The rationales behind this expansion differ between social and radical democrats but both of their interventions offer valuable lessons. Social democrats recognized how social and economic relations, often viewed as apolitical, cemented an unequal distribution of power that precluded ordinary citizens from participating in democratic life. Radical democrats argued that democracy could not occur unless citizens learnt how to think and act together through practicing democracy in their daily lives. Both allowed for interdependence and solidarity to emerge. Rather than destroying political spaces and pluralism, these populists sought to expand them and made their political projects contingent upon their success. This is fundamentally different from the authoritarian populism I previously examined — citizens were not passive followers of demagogues but active participants who were encouraged to assume responsibility for decision-making. Populism only worked when the people gathered and found their voice first.

Despite their participatory practices, radical and social democratic prairie populism still had significant shortcomings that limited their emancipatory visions. Addressing these failures is vital for reconceptualizing a contemporary democratic populism.

In my reading, the prairie populism exhibited two problems. The first is that the UFA and CCF governments became more centralized and technocratic over their tenure in office, often in ways that undercut their democratic commitments. Unable to fully enact democratic reform, their administrations became increasingly constrained by the confines of cabinet governance, responsible government, and a growing bureaucracy (MacPherson [1953] 1962, Chapter 3; Lipset [1950] 1968, Chapter 12). The technocratic theories guiding executive decision-making, which often stemmed from materialist theories of history and supposedly natural economic laws, were in tension with the broader participatory impulses of the movement (Laycock 1990, 267, 273-74). If this is the case, how much did these populists differ from their authoritarian counterparts?

Although technocratic tendencies tainted their time in government, it would be a mistake to disregard the differences between democratic prairie populism and authoritarian, ressentiment-laden populism. While the UFA and Saskatchewan CCF could have gone further, these governments did not use state power to intimidate or silence enemies, nor did they become cults of personality. As Epp (2001) notes, the CCF remained partially bound by annual conventions, did not reduce communal spaces, and relied upon the cooperative movement for support, which sustained democratic practices — all things which could also be applied to the UFA (315). Ultimately, these governments attempted to expand democratic institutions, even if their technocratic impulses limited the potential of their experiments. Instead of discounting prairie populism, we must untangle their democratic practices from the mistakes that led to their

downfall. The significance of this is underscored by how their growing centralization helped reactionary forces to co-opt prairie populism, as I discuss more in my third chapter. Recognizing how they fell short, we can still recover an alternative set of political and ethical commitments from these prairie movements that led to a democratic populism. Similar to how post-Marxists expunged class essentialism from Marxist theory to recover it for democratic projects (see Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2014), so must we expunge the technocratic tendencies from prairie populism.

The final, and most significant, failure of prairie populism is the broader nativist and settler-colonial context within which these prairie institutions and spaces emerged. Left unchallenged by prairie populists, settler colonialism largely ensured the exclusion of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people from communal spaces while also relying upon the continual dispossession of their traditional lands. Although the inclusion of Métis people in populist spaces occasionally occurred, other Indigenous people never participated in the UFA and anti-Indigenous prejudice pervaded the UFA membership (Rennie 2000, 89-91). Many notable prairie populists advocated for eugenic policies that disproportionately targeted Indigenous peoples (Rennie 2000, 119-20; Heyes 2024, 212). Although primarily welcoming towards eastern European immigrants during a time when discrimination against them was commonplace, prairie populists still espoused anti-Black and anti-Asian racism (McMath 1995, 545. Rennie 2000, 91-98). A handful of interracial alliances and Black UFA locals did emerge, but white supremacy remained predominant. While literature exists on both topics, the connection between these overtly racist policies and the democratic practices of prairie populists remains understudied. Reflecting on these discriminatory exclusions raises important questions about the extent of the democracy practised in prairie populist spaces. How could prairie populism spaces be truly democratic when

established on stolen land? How transformative are these movements when racial unity was rarely questioned? These questions emphasize the negative impacts on groups that fall outside the people/elite dichotomy upheld by prairie populism. Diverging from prairie populism here is important and, in rejecting the racist and colonial features of prairie life, we gain valuable insights into how political spaces can rely upon violence or dispossession, which limits our political projects. Failure to atone for discrimination prevents us from creating authentically democratic spaces. Accordingly, I return to this later due to its theoretical insights for world-building and its meaningful contributions to conceptualizing contemporary democratic populism.

Prairie Populism as World-Building

Examining their participatory practices and virtues, prairie populism becomes recoverable as a world-building exercise, where the people become constituted through what Hannah Arendt called acting in concert. The concept neither presupposes homogenous unity nor atomistic individualism as necessary for political action; instead, it requires us to act with and against each other in concern for a shared world (Honig 1995). Only through concerted action can we preserve the distances between us that provide us with a common reality in which we can agonistically create meaningful distinctions.

The core feature of Arendt's theory of action and speech, which differentiates them from other activities such as labour or work, is their ability to disclose and construct new realities. Instead of merely *being* distinct as a physical object among other objects, Arendt ([1958] 2018) argues that action is where we *become* distinct through our own words and deeds (176). Through this, we reveal "who" we are (our identity or subjectivity) which always exceeds and is juxtaposed by "what" we are (our functions, roles, work produced, gender, race, physical

appearance) (179).

The identity we bring into appearance through action and speech, however, is never fully within our control. It remains elusive, only unveiling itself to us only in the performance of acting and speaking alongside others; it is not something we can do alone. This is because the self we disclose is not something we know beforehand or can make like a product; the meaning of action and speech must exhaust itself in the performance, existing only in "sheer actuality" and remaining independent of its motives or consequences (205-07).[15] This leads Arendt to conclude that "it is more likely that the 'who,' which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself" (179). The reality revealed by words and deeds often surprises even those who performed them.

In revealing ourselves, action constitutes more than an identity; when we act or speak about a common, objective interest, we constitute the world itself (182; 198-99). In acting, we create the distance between us where we can appear before each other and objects, which before I only saw in isolation, can present themselves to us from various perspectives; hence, becoming objective. Arendt calls this space the public realm and it exists provided it remains common to all — the space between us that relates and separates us (50-53). The world is, therefore, a web of relationships that establishes an objective reality within which we can derive facts through the testimony of others, debating over shared objects or interests until "sameness in utter diversity" reliably appears before us (57).

Endangering this public realm, however, is the intangibility, irreversibility, and unpredictability of action and speech. Unlike material products of work, the space of appearance

---

[15] To do otherwise would reduce action to the instrumental logic of means and ends. This would kill meaning, as instrumentality can always revert ends into a means for something else (Arendt [1958] 2018, 154). Action must always be an end in itself.

disappears once words and deeds stop being exchanged (199). Keeping us together is made more difficult by action's boundlessness; the significance of our actions carries beyond ourselves and remains beyond our control, affecting all entangled within the web of relationships we created (190-91).

The only thing keeping the Arendtian public realm alive is power, which, unlike violence or strength, arises from people gathering together and acting for a concerted purpose — to "act in concert" (244). Acting in concert maintains the public realm by disclosing and establishing new realities, with power only becoming actualized when word and deed do not part ways (199). Power, therefore, creates new relations which escape or change existing boundaries and limitations (190). Although we cannot avoid uncertainty, acting in concert can alleviate it through the facilities of forgiveness and promising — mutual release and mutual agreement. Notable, for Arendt, is how the promise of treaties and contracts can erect "islands of security" amid an ocean of uncertainty, providing us with some reliable thing to orient ourselves against (237). The mutual promise, gathering people not under a universal will but for an agreed purpose of living with others, binds us together (244-45).

By maintaining the public realm, acting in concert becomes a "world-building" exercise, increasing the permanence of human creations to the extent that, ideally, it transcends our individual lives.[16] To achieve this world-building requires remembrance through the presence of others and reification that tries to turn the intangible ideals of performative acts into tangible material like art, theatre, or written history (95-96). Since action and speech can only become partially reified through repetition and imitation (187), the worlds we build and materialize must remain spaces for action and speech (173-74). The example of this space Arendt most admires is

[16] To read more about world-building projects, see *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Zerilli 2005), especially Chapter 3.

the Greek polis which, as a space for sharing words and deeds, enabled citizens to practice freedom and distinguish themselves through acts of excellence; attempting to make the extraordinary into an everyday occurrence (197). Although plural people acted in concert to create and preserve the space, the polis remained infused with an "agonal spirit," a passion to distinguish ourselves against others, show ourselves to be the best, and exchange who we are (41, 194). Stemming from the Greek word Agon, which means "contest" or "struggle," Arendt's comments on the agonal spirit show how action in concert is not universal agreement but a practice where we "act and struggle both with and against each other" in striving towards excellence (Honig 1995, 156). Contestation, however, remains committed to the world between us rather than seeking to destroy the Other — without this respect, the distance that gives life meaning would vanish.

The condition for action and speech that acting in concert and world-building ultimately preserves is plurality. Arendt characterizes plurality as paradoxically about equality (all of us are equally unique) and distinction (all of us are irreducibly different) (Arendt [1958] 2018, 175). Political spaces, therefore, uphold an "equality of unequals" where each participant remains distinct but becomes "equalized" to protect the shared space between us (215).[17] Hence, the only limitation on power is the existence of other people without which plurality would cease and the political would collapse (201).

Through establishing and expanding political spaces, radical and social democratic populism embodied acting in concert. The participatory spaces of the schoolhouse and co-op are where prairie populism emerged and maintained itself. What residents built through exchanging words and deeds was a common world, seeable through a plurality of perspectives. Unlike authoritarian

[17] We could potentially think of Arendt's "equality of unequals" as a way to cultivate the horizontal pathos of distance discussed in my first chapter.

populists, prairie residents did not base their concept of the good upon the demonization of an enemy but allowed political visions to develop among citizens in shared spaces.

The clearest demonstration of this stemmed from the radical democratic premise that the people could not emerge before action by citizens. Only through participating in local institutions, alongside and against others, could we reveal "who" the people are as opposed to "what" they are. Nor did their populist identity remain fixed; similar to how action is reified in its repetition or imitation, so too are the people only possible through its continuous emergence in political spaces. Since action is distinct and unpredictable, the people become rebirthed in each performative act, exposing populist identities, visions, and values to transfigurations we cannot know ahead of time. Expanding democratic institutions to everyday life subsequently becomes paramount, as these are the only places the people (re)appear through action. Participants gathered in these spaces did not have to assume an identical will or submit to the rule of others; instead, they learned how to practice democracy through acting and speaking alongside others.

Since democratic prairie populism necessitated continuous action to distinguish the people, their spaces became infused with the same agonal spirit of the polis. In assuming responsibility for shared governance, radical democratic citizens embraced the words and deeds that distinguished their values and visions against others. Contestation, within and outside groups, became common as this is how distinction reveals itself to us and the world. Since the revelatory character of action becomes impossible without others, equality becomes necessary within these agonistic spaces. Rather than turning to unconstrained and destructive violence in contestation, prairie populism remained bound to the mutual agreement that limits action as a way to preserve it. Preserving others — especially our adversaries — becomes the limitation on prairie populist

power because without them our common world, and any meaning derived from distinctions performed within it, collapses. What prairie populism embraces, then, is *care for the agon*, the spaces of contestation that emerge from vigorous exchanges between contrasting visions, expose us to the distinct meaning of ourselves and the world, and disappear the moment we lose plurality and the adversarial Other. Persuasion, rather than violence or strength, must then remain the aim of democratic populism.

Connecting Arendt to prairie populism likely raises immediate questions. Chief among these is whether populism conflicts with Arendt's characterization of the political realm as a site for individuation. Within political spaces, Arendt focuses on how acting distinguishes the uniqueness of oneself as an individual rather than a collective. The populist dynamic of "us versus them" can risk the loss of togetherness, reducing us to only being "for or against people" (Arendt [1958] 2018, 180). Speech becomes empty talk and deeds become violent, preventing the emergence of power and the possibility of plurality. How can populism avoid spiralling society into the hyperpolarization Arendt feared would do away with the distance between us either through uncritical closeness and intimacy to our allies, or the destruction of our foes?

Another concern is that radical and social democratic populism took social problems as political concerns, something Arendt would adamantly oppose. Social demands, for Arendt, lie not in the public realm but in the private, where the acts of labour and work occur. Different from action, these activities concern the singular life of an individual and arise out of necessity. Concerns over economic or material redistribution (i.e. whether I have enough food to eat or money to afford a home) are individual concerns for Arendt. Contrastingly, action must always come from initiative and remain concerned with the world rather than my own life. When one dares to liberate oneself from the individual necessities imposed by life and care for a common

world, one enters the political. Given the divide, I do not doubt Arendt would be concerned with how the prairie populisms I discuss emerged largely from socioeconomic concerns and supposedly private activities like work.

While well-founded, these concerns can be overcome by unravelling the threads in Arendt's writings to, as Bonnie Honig ([1993] 2023) expresses it, think with and against her. Despite Arendt's tendency to locate distinction at the individual level, her theory of action does not privilege individualism. Although skeptical of mobs and the masses, acting in concert reflects a high reverence for direct action when done properly, opening Arendt to populist readings (see Canovan 2002). Action, after all, is never done by individuals but emerges from the distance between us. We do not author action or control its outcomes; its meaning only becomes apparent in our web of relations. Anything revealed by action, whether a political project, identity, or virtue, remains fundamentally relational. What Arendt wants to avoid is complete allegiance or unapologetic solidarity with a group and unrelenting hatred of an enemy. It would be a mistake to claim distinct identities or virtues cannot be shared beyond oneself; acting in concert proves these things are always relational, something whose meaning only becomes when we courageously share them with and against others.

The second objection over the social is more complex but the relationship between necessity and initiative makes Arendt's public-private divide less fixed than she explicitly claims. While Arendt's initiative requires partial emancipation from the necessities of "bodily existence," other comments show that experiencing necessity is still vital. For Arendt ([1958] 2018), we derive the "reality of life" through life imposing its intensity and vitality upon us via necessity (120). More damningly, she asserts our experiences of freedom, to start new beginnings, emerge from our "never wholly successful attempts to liberate [ourselves] from necessity" (121). Without

exposure to necessity, we become apathetic and indifferent; initiative disappears and action cannot occur (70-71). These comments reveal a co-dependency between necessity and freedom that begins to blur the boundaries between Arendtian spaces. If we do not have material and bodily concerns, what will the content of political action and speech be? What will we be attempting to liberate ourselves from? Others have used this contradiction in Arendtian thought to recover embodiment and materiality within her theory of action, recognizing both abject wealth and poverty as depoliticizing forces (see Hyvönen 2021).

To overcome this contradiction, Honig ([1993] 2023) reconceptualizes Arendt's private-public distinction as a contestable and augmentable line, enabling us to (re)politicize supposedly private issues through action (118-24). Against the bureaucratization of everyday life, Honig asserts this intervention would allow us to discover initiative and practice freedom in overcoming the normalizing regimes that impose necessity upon us. Nothing is "ontologically protected from politicization," accepting the line between political and nonpolitical realms as always contingent (121-22). Some of Arendt's responses to critical questions suggest she was open to this reconception, admitting she questioned herself about the public-private divide and how what constitutes the public is contextually dependent, composed of issues that remain uncertain and, hence, require public debate (Arendt 1979, 315-17). Acting in concert, subsequently, can cross Arendt's fixed boundaries. Necessity is no longer merely material and banished to the private; rather, necessity becomes tied to normalizing processes that try to limit us to a rigorously defined and policed subjectivity. Experiencing the limits of this imposed necessity, we take the initiative to liberate ourselves and practice freedom, exceeding and transforming existing categories in the process.

What most affirms prairie populism as acting in concert, for me, are the exemplifying

movements provided by Arendt. While she laments contemporary trade unions, Arendt ([1958] 2018) praises the earlier labour movement for advancing a political vision (212-13). The movement generated power in their "fight against society as a whole," distinguishing themselves from ruling elites, and becoming "the only group on the political scene that not only defended its economic interests but fought a full-fledged political battle" (218-19). Importantly, the attraction of the labour movement expanded beyond the working class and "could represent the people as a whole," as distinct from the population or society (219). Is there any way to read this other than a democratic populism? What distinguished them from society was not a false universalism or the radicalness of their economic demands but their embrace of unprecedented and experimental democratic governance — their willingness to propose a new form of government and transform the status quo (216). The most endearing example of this new governance for Arendt is the people's councils that merged from people's revolutions, where plurality and spontaneity allowed for continuous action.

From this, democratic prairie populism is undoubtedly acting in concert. What matters most is its cultivation and articulation of a political vision that exceeds categories and emerges within a shared world. Building new institutions, creating participatory spaces, and distinguishing the people through shared words and deeds remained paramount. Whether in the cooperative, the schoolhouse, or their proposal for "group governance," prairie populism cared for agonistic political spaces and embraced the democratic experimentalism Arendt most valued in movements. In expanding democratic spaces across everyday life, prairie populism sought to make the extraordinary an ordinary experience, much as Arendt herself did.

Settler Colonialism, Action, and (Non-)Reconciliation

Before moving forward, I want to respond to an issue I repeatedly wrestled with while writing this chapter: whether prairie populism specifically, and, Arendtian action in concert broadly, perpetuate settler colonialism and nativism. The question is not an easy one to address, nor do I provide a comprehensive answer. Beginning to address this concern, however, is significant since prairie populists and Arendt not only disregarded the experiences of BIPOC communities but their creation of new political spaces relied upon continual dispossession of Indigenous land. Writing about the emergence of these conditions allows us to overcome a practical and theoretical limitation of the works I discussed.

Among the core conditions that allowed prairie populism to emerge was the frontier myth, the false notion that colonialists had only recently settled Western Canada, which completely erased centuries of Indigenous presence. In the supposed absence of any institutions, settlers were open to developing a new political culture that was experimental (Laycock 1990, 27, 295-96). Similarly, Arendt's theory of new beginnings fails to consider how natality can justify colonial doctrines of discovery. Contemporary scholars have also criticized Arendt's overall work for excusing settler colonial violence (see Temin 2022), best seen in her unapologetic reverence for the American state and her separation of settler colonialism from imperialism.[18] How can we recover populism from the colonial limitations of relating the political to the new?

Although a full answer is beyond my scope, a potential starting point is reconceptualizing Arendt's underdeveloped idea of reconciliation. Writing in her notebook, she asserts "[N]o

[18] The following quotes from Arendt sufficiently show these attributes. In a 1973 interview, she said "America is not a nation-state…There are no natives here. The natives were the Indians. Everyone else are [sic] citizens" (Arendt 1973). In *Origins* ([1951] 1994), she wrote about the British Commonwealth: "Dispersion and colonization did not expand but transplanted, the political structure…the British nation provided to be adept not at the Roman art of Empire Building but at the Greek art of colonization" (127-28).

action is possible without mutual forgiveness (what is called *reconciliation* in politics) [emphasis added]" (Berkowitz 2011). As mentioned earlier, Arendt asserted the constant mutual release of forgiveness is necessary for action but, in differentiating reconciliation from forgiveness, she leaves an opening to reconsider what this process looks like. Building upon this and other references Arendt made to reconciliation, Roger Berkowitz argues that reconciliation becomes necessary "when the offending action is elevated from a mere transgression to a sin or a crime," where action becomes impossible without an apology from the offending party and a response from the wronged (ibid). Under these circumstances, we must exercise judgement and foster solidarity either through reconciliation, where we make peace with the world which produced the wrongdoing, or non-reconciliation, where we conclude the offence ought never to happen and establish a new common world through a rejection of the old. Arendt herself did this in her infamous reporting on the Eichmann trial where she eventually supported his execution due to the severity of his crimes. The difference between this, and the revenge of ressentiment, is the prerequisite of exercising judgement alongside others, consistently attempting to keep a common world alive. Vitally, this can also help us recognize the difference between Nietzschean ressentiment and what Glen Coulthard (2016) calls "righteous resentment," where the negation of unjust systems "have engrained within them a resounding 'yes'" rooted in the protection of Indigenous forms of life (168).

With this, the requirement of reconciliation or non-reconciliation offers paths forward for democratic populism that rejects settler colonialism and nativism. Without seeking genuine reconciliation over colonial violence or standing in solidarity with Indigenous nations in acts of non-reconciliation (or, as we may more accurately call it, refusal), settlers like myself cannot experience the mutual release needed for world-building. While Arendt and early prairie

populists never sought release from the irreversible consequences of colonialism, contemporary political projects should not make the same mistake of refusing to pursue reconciliation and substantive change. Any transformative project will, instead, necessitate creating shared spaces to contend with the ongoing and historical impacts of colonialism; otherwise, genuine action and new beginnings remain impossible.

Non-Sovereign Creativity versus Sovereign Destruction: Differentiating Populist Approaches to The Political

Prairie populist commitments to creating, preserving, and expanding political spaces demonstrate a different way to practice populism. Instead of becoming subsumed in ressentiment, radical democratic and social democratic populisms show an alternative way forward that reserves pluralism, contestation, and democratic principles. The root of this difference rests in prairie populism's commitment to creating democratic, pluralistic spaces that bring citizens together versus authoritarian populism's commitment to destroying their enemies, public spaces, and, ultimately, the potential for democratic action itself. Both populisms rely on contestation, but the former seeks to end the conflict through absolute victory over the enemy while the latter sees democratic contestation as an ongoing process, good in its own right. These populists understand that struggle, alongside and against others, provides our political projects and values with meaning.

Ultimately, these actions reflect differing approaches to reviving "the political." As a term, "the political" is different from politics, which refers to institutions, administration, and practices of government. Expressed in the work of many political theorists, the political refers to a distinct

dimension of life that arises from our inherent diversity.[19] Amid irreducible differences, our shared experiences constitute an uncontrollable, unsettled, open, interdependent space where conflicting notions of the good emerge. Simply put, the political is where our concern is not individual life but our shared, collective experience; where our concern is the common. Distinct, but not independent from other dimensions like ethics or epistemology, the political is significant because it is where our values, projects, visions, and identities acquire meaning in determination with and against others. This is because I am not alone in the political — I exist alongside others and my values can hold meaning beyond myself. Together, we decide the meaning of collective life and how we best construct it.

The difference between democratic and authoritarian populism depends upon their commitment to preserving the agonistic spaces required for the political to emerge. Without this commitment, contestation easily becomes unconstrained and destructive. To explain this, I compare the agonistic populism derived from Arendt's acting in concert with the antagonistic populism derived from Carl Schmitt. In contrasting their accounts of political practice, the divergence between varying populisms becomes clear.

As scholars both born and educated in twentieth-century Germany, analyzing these two becomes increasingly interesting when considering their vastly different experiences of the Holocaust and their own political engagements. Schmitt was a legal theorist who joined the Nazi Party in 1933 and infamously defended Hitler's regime at the height of his power. After the war, Schmitt was unrepentant over supporting Nazism and, despite not being allowed to hold an academic job, remained influential among conservative intellectuals (Vinx [2010] 2019). Contrastingly, Arendt was a Jewish refugee who fled Germany, narrowly escaped the Gurs

[19] Key theorists who write about the political include Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt, Sheldon Wolin, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, and Wendy Brown.

internment camp in France, and immigrated to America where she critically studied the rise of totalitarianism (Young-Bruehl 1982). Throughout her life, she attributed her political participation to witnessing the moral atrocities of the Nazis. When considering biographical context, divergences between Schmitt and Arendt become more significant because they potentially explain how each came to hold such contrasting political commitments.

Despite their differences, Schmitt and Arendt's theories arise from shared concerns over the depoliticizing effects of modernity. Schmitt ([1932] 2007) specifically criticizes liberal constitutionalism for elevating society above the state (22-23), reducing the latter to an indecisive site of compromise between private interests rather than an arena where we fight for a common vision. In *The Human Condition* ([1958] 2018), Arendt similarly laments "the rise of the social," where private objects like wealth have become the only public concerns (68) and the common world loses its stability. The political withers way and pure administration grows in its place, reducing government to the singular fiction of behavioural sciences and the exercise of normative power upon individuals (40-41; 44-45).

Both these accounts of depoliticization are remarkably resonant when read in the contemporary context. The problems motivating the rise of populist movements — the decline of self-governance and political participation, the disappearance of common spaces — overlap considerably with the issues motivating Schmitt and Arendt's respective projects. Although our world has developed post-modern tactics of power more advanced than those previously imagined, we remain plagued by normalizing forces that appear diffuse and beyond our control. If we wish to begin exercising power, it is important to reclaim the political. In this sense, populists are justified in re-igniting contestation and advancing a collective vision that breaks with established orders.

To protect the political, however, Schmitt and Arendt turn to opposing concepts: national sovereignty and non-sovereign action.

Schmitt's Sovereign Theory of the Political

Attempting to rediscover a distinctive state against an increasingly apolitical and indecisive society, Schmitt ([1932] 2007) resurrects the political as the distinction between friend and enemy (26-27). The realm becomes the place of intense "union and separation," (ibid) as people gather around and against conflicting visions. In their sheer difference, the enemy appears as an existential threat which must be negated to preserve ourselves. It does not matter whether these identities stem from religious, moral, economic, or national divisions; provided there is a clear friend-enemy grouping, the political one exists (38). To preserve our life's meaning, we must existentially negate the enemy through warfare (33). Schmitt's antagonistic conception of the political then necessities is "the ever present possibility of combat," where the "real possibility of physical killing" remains alive (32-33).

To risk their lives, however, a decisive entity must emerge that distinguishes friends from enemies; this state is the sovereign, the unified political community which transcends other associations and holds "the right to demand from its own members the readiness to die and unhesitatingly to kill enemies" (46). This is why, for Schmitt, pluralism is incompatible with the political; it reduces us to unattached individuals, equalizing societal associations, and refusing to denote a singular, sovereign power (40-41, 53). Schmitt does not rule out that the political entity can change, with one association overcoming another (for example, a labour union becoming more authoritative than a state), but, regardless, a sovereign must exist (43-44).

The Schmittean conception of the political, as the friend-enemy distinction, is influential in

many contemporary theories of populism. Prominent scholars, such as Chantal Mouffe ([2018] 2019; [1993] 2020) argue that populism revives the conflict necessary to escape post-politics and create ethical-political distinctions. Through populist action, these theories attempt to recreate the sovereign. Surely, we can also recognize how populism's "us versus them" dynamic can overlap with Schmitt's friend-enemy grouping.

Where Schmitt's conception of the political undermines itself, however, is the boundlessness of combat. The sovereign, exclusively derived by distinguishing the enemy, unravels once the Other ceases to exist. Subsequently, the sovereign entity becomes antipolitical, only establishing its vision by annihilating its enemies and, subsequently, the possibility of the political itself. Schmitt's support for Nazism shows the horrific projects his theory can legitimize. Alone, the unified political community becomes meaningless since it is exclusively justified by "the existential threat to one's way of life" posed by the enemy (Schmitt 2007 [1932], 49). Schmitt does not expand on what he means by "way of life" but the term is doubtlessly caught in discourses left unquestioned, identities given to us and whose boundaries we immediately protect rather than assume responsibility for crafting.

Since the friend-enemy distinction — and hence, Schmitt's theory of the political altogether — is solely derived through reference to the existential enemy, we cannot consider how to *change* our existence beyond how we are already living or whether such a change is warranted. The only judgement derives from warfare, with "protection and obedience" to a sovereign becoming how we maintain ourselves lest we disappear (52-53). We remain trapped within the policed borders of our way of life. Where does this pure antagonism leave us besides an isolating and false universalism?

Recognizing this danger, Mouffe and other theorists attempt to reconceptualize his theory,

revising his concepts to improve democratic deficiencies. Against the limitless violence upheld by Schmitt, Mouffe endeavours to recover his conception of the political by transforming antagonism into agonism (see Mouffe [1993] 2020, 4-5; 1999, 4-5; [2018] 2019, 90-93). Differentiating between the two, Mouffe asserts antagonism is the irresolvable conflict between friend and enemy, whereas agonism is the struggle between adversaries. While the enemy is something to expel, the adversary is someone "whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated" ([1993] 2020, 4). Within an agonistic democracy, Mouffe argues we can establish a populism which struggles against adversaries. The concept of the enemy is displaced onto those who reject the "conflictual consensus" ([2018] 2019, 91) and subsequently exclude themselves.

Although I am fond of Mouffe's conceptual distinction, she fails to explain how antagonism becomes agonism. How can we transform our antagonistic enemies, whose difference makes them an existential threat, into an adversary? Schmitt ([1932] 2007) would undoubtedly denounce the shift, arguing that perpetual competition and discussion reduce the state to society, erasing distinctions between conflicting associations (71-72). The only way this arises, for Schmitt, is through sovereign power and repression. Similarly, how does the conflictual consensus discussed by Mouffe emerge? Does this not become an apolitical foundation, an unquestioned and universal order that Schmitt and Mouffe would reject? Vitally, who assumes the sovereign role that decides whether one is an enemy of agonistic democracy and worthy of exclusion? The question becomes important as authoritarian populists frame their opponents as anti-democratic elites who rob the people of freedom and equality. In a Left-populist project, are authoritarians and their supporters enemies we must exile? If this is the case, does society not develop some underlying unity?

Above all, I fail to see how Mouffe's reconception of Schmitt escapes relying upon the

existential threat of the Other; antagonism remains at its heart. I do not question that political projects require a constitutive outside but I take issue with this becoming pure negation. Once an enemy is exiled or killed, the political as defined by Schmitt and Mouffe can no longer sustain itself. Democratic contestation demands more than this — political visions must have some affirmative aspect, a solidarity built on more than repelling an existential threat. Attempting to recover the political through repressive conceptions of sovereignty only further erodes its necessary conditions. All that remains is an *antagonistic populism*, an antipolitical logic derived exclusively from hatred and fear of the enemy whose existential difference must be expelled.

Arendt's Non-Sovereign Action

Against Schmitt's reliance on the existential threat of the enemy, Arendt's acting in concert makes intersubjective difference and plurality a condition for perceiving meaning in the world. Arendt rejects sovereignty as an anti-political illusion maintained through violence (2006 [1961], 163), an attempt to overcome the uncertainties of a plural world by reducing action to something tameable by one master. Whatever identities we assume, sovereignty passionately clings onto these, attempting to shut down the disorienting effects of plurality. Subsequently, sovereignty is not an embrace of contestation — it is an attempt to preserve the self by shutting down political spaces and the threat that difference poses to us, withdrawing from conflict-ridden real worlds into imaginary ones (234). The danger of this is most apparent in the final chapter of *Origins* ([1951] 1994), where Arendt describes how totalitarian ideologies make loneliness an everyday condition by destroying the spaces between us and leaving individuals without a discernable place in the world (475, 478). In these conditions, retreat into an imaginary world further removes us from a common reality, causing us to lose the capacity to distinguish between fact

and fiction (474).

To protect our shared spaces, we must embrace non-sovereignty as a price of freedom and something that preserves the transformative potential of action — for the world and ourselves. By non-sovereignty, Arendt refers to the condition of plurality inherent in our existence that makes absolute rule over myself or others impossible ([1958] 2018, 234). Only under non-sovereignty does freedom as an exercise and mode of being dedicated to creating new realities and meanings become possible (Arendt [1961] 2006, 163-69). Jointly defining them, she said: "To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another and not to be in command oneself. It meant neither to rule nor be ruled" (Arendt [1958] 2018, 32). Freedom, in the Arendtian sense, is not to choose or decide alone but to act in new and unprecedented ways, emancipated from necessity, obedience, or even self-control. Escaping the processes and necessities of existence, freedom requires seizing initiative and acting in unprecedented ways that surprise all, including us as agents. To act and to speak among different and uncontrollable equals, therefore, is to be free. It is this that makes acting in concert and the power derived from it transformative.

The fear of non-sovereignty and confronting existential differences is understandable given the unpredictable consequences of action. Arendt notes how acting within a web of relationships makes us both a doer and sufferer, capable of enacting new realities but also guilty of unintended consequences and reactions we cannot foresee ([1958] 2018, 190). Given how action "invariably [drags] the agent" into a tangled web of relationships, it is tempting to withdraw from public life altogether and protect the limits of the self from the unknowable potentials of action. Since action reveals aspects of ourselves that we cannot identify alone, action exposes the contingency of life itself; that my identities, virtues, and projects are not fixed and are always changeable.

Perhaps most hauntingly, contingency shows my form of life forecloses other possible ways of being and can unknowingly impose these limits upon others. Rather than confront these uncomfortable realities, sovereignty attempts to avoid them and police other boundaries of our current life.

Yet, illusions of sovereignty deny us the world and the possibility of making distinctions in the first place. Without freedom, we lose the common world and the meaning we create through words and deeds. It is through engaging with others amid plurality that I see myself and my life from perspectives beyond my own — my way of existence becomes one possibility among many others. Since we can always begin anew through action, however, "who" I am overflows the categories I have assumed or been given. Rediscovering and remaking "who" I am becomes possible only through exercising freedom with and against others in a common world. Transformation, subsequently, is not possible without non-sovereignty; as Arendt concludes: "If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce" ([1961] 2006, 163).

What the political becomes through an Arendtian perspective is the realm where we (re)discover meaning and distinction in ways beyond anyone's control. Paradoxically, it is where I reveal myself to others and others reveal the limits of myself to me. The distinct meaning of political projects, virtues, and identities only becomes created through engagement with and against others. My words and deeds will distinguish my values as excellent from others and others will respond to my disclosures. What we find here may surprise and change us or it may not — this is precisely what political action is all about. In shared struggle, I assert meaning in the world alongside others but also recognize the boundaries of myself as contestable; as something that could always be otherwise. Only through agonistic engagement can our political projects acquire a worldly meaning.

What this means, however, is that the political requires caring for a common world endowed with plurality rather than preserving the narrow boundaries of the self. When I act and speak with others, I must risk losing myself in exchange for gaining the world and its intersubjective meaning. This is why Arendt claims courage is the ultimate political virtue — because we liberate ourselves from the necessities of life for the freedom of the world (155). It is why Arendt's political engagements were acts of courage while Schmitt's acts were nothing more than cowardice — she remained willing to risk her life for the world whereas he would only risk life for life's own sake. Courage assumes responsibility; cowardice displaces it onto others.

Contestation no longer aims to overcome the existential threat of difference but to preserve a common world; what subsequently emerges through acting in concert is an *agonistic populism*, concerned with cultivating and expanding the political spaces between us. While antagonistic populisms develop from the threat of difference, agonistic populisms keep contestation perpetually alive by preserving pluralistic spaces. To deepen democracy and recover the political, we must embrace contemporary forms of agonistic populism that, like the prairie movements that preceded them, emerge from the concerted actions of many and continually preserve the plurality from which the people emerge.

Conclusion

Through contrasting agonistic and antagonistic approaches, we can begin reclaiming populism as a way to radicalize democracy. Although we should not and cannot recreate the exact practices of democratic prairie populism, their experiences offer unique insights into how we build a radical political vision among ordinary people. In opposition to an oligarchic system, radical and social democratic prairie populists cultivated local institutions within which "the

people" could emerge by acting in concert, allowing distinct ethical and political projects to arise through vigorous debate and democratic persuasion.

Participation in these spaces was more than a hobby; it was fundamental to democracy itself, part of the radical democratic conception of citizenship that encouraged people to assume responsibility for political engagement and action. Democracy was not something imposed upon others or restricted to a legislature; it was a practice, a mode of being learnt through partaking in the shared act of governance. The political spaces these populists established across the social, economic, and civic realms kept residents together for political action; the shared world built through democratic exchanges remained beyond any one person's control — it was something we built and found meaning in together. The only limit to their visions was caring for the agon and the people within it, without which meaning would be lost.

Speaking as a "city boy" raised in Alberta during the 2000s and 2010s, it is easy to disregard the Canadian prairies as inherently conservative or reactionary — but to do so would erase a neglected history of democratic practices and thought, moments that can help us develop radical political alternatives today. More than the co-op or the local library are lost among the sheaves of wheat. Lost are the political spaces built by an agonistic, democratic populism where prairie residents (re)birthed the people and a common world into existence by acting with and against each other. Like any birth, the democratic struggle which delivered new meaning could be painful — but it was ultimately joyous, a performance shared by an irreducibly plural people kept together by the continual exchange of words and deeds. Democratic prairie populism became an agonal exercise of world-building, and it is this practice that we should revive in contemporary politics. While our political spaces will look different than the rural schoolhouse and need to atone for the injustices of settler colonialism and nativism (something previous

examples never did), agonistic populism offers a powerful path forward towards a more democratic future. Our aim should, once again, be to make democracy an everyday experience through cultivating participatory spaces, rich with passion, contestation, and meaning.

Thus far, the story I have told omits something; how democratic prairie populism ended and authoritarian populism began. If you read anything about Alberta or Saskatchewan over the past 50 years, you probably know radical democracy did not flourish forever in the prairies. Nowadays, if you think of prairie populism, you are more likely to think of authoritarian rulers who erode or destroy political spaces to protect the people. Antagonistic populism and fear of the Other became the dominant strand of prairie populism. Among those leaders is William Aberhart, who came to power in Alberta after the United Farmers and dismantled many local institutions discussed in this chapter. Saskatchewan, the home province of Tommy Douglas and national Medicare, also underwent a profound shift and now produces reactionary figures like Premier Scott Moe (see Eisler 2022). The capture of populism by authoritarians is not isolated to the Canadian prairies, however, and spans many contexts. How did antagonistic populism supplant agonistic populism? And why are so many populists emerging now? What is the contemporary condition motivating the recent insurgence of populism? These are the questions explored in the next chapter of my thesis.

Chapter Three: Populism in Disorienting Times

> Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and themselves.
>
> — Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* ([1958] 2018, 4)

It is tempting to conclude that we live in "populist times" or a "populist age." Certainly, there are almost too many populists, across too many states, such that their rise appears unparalleled and as the distinct marker of contemporary politics. Chantal Mouffe ([2018] 2019, Chapter 1) asserts as much, arguing that we find ourselves amid the "populist moment," arising due to dissatisfaction with the depoliticizing effects of neoliberalism. This moment, for her, is a unique window of demise and opportunity that signals a return to the political decades after its decline (6-7). Mouffe's argument resonates with other analyses on the Left which frame populism as the dominant response to late-stage capitalism and neoliberal hegemony.

What Mouffe ironically overlooks is that she is not the first to use the term "populist moment" — that came decades earlier, before most scholars had even heard of neoliberalism. Lawrence Goodwyn (1978) initially used the term to describe the era of agrarian populism that swept across North America in the early twentieth century. His historical account met with acclaim and became popularized among progressives, denoting a mass grassroots movement and the democratic potentials we missed following its decline. Goodwyn's "populist moment," however, is far from the only instance; you can find populism across heterogeneous and varied historical periods. The earliest studies on populism reveal this, with the chapters published in

Ghița Ionescu and Ernest Gellner's *Populism* (1969) analyzing movements spanning the Russian narodniks and the peasant revolts of Eastern Europe, to Argentine Peronism and post-colonial African movements. Michael Kazin ([1995] 1998) re-examined American history to argue that populism was a defining feature of twentieth-century politics that encapsulated monumental projects including Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and the Reagan Revolution. Some scholars even claim that we can recognize early forms of populism in Ancient Greece and Rome (Strauss 2016). Mouffe's claim that our conjecture is uniquely populist, or that this is *the* defining characteristic of our times, appears misplaced. As Jason Frank (2018) argues, claims like these often obscure the systemic problems we face today and erase the rich history of populism that predates the present.

The most compelling counter to the claim that we live in a distinctively populist age stems from Ernesto Laclau's conception of populism — something Mouffe herself relies upon. Under his definition of populism as a discursive way of (re)constructing the people and redrawing the frontiers of struggle, Laclau ([2005] 2018) concludes that "there is no political intervention which is not populistic to some extent" (154). Subsequently, populism does not belong to a single moment in history. Instead, it remains a consistent presence, always appearing alongside politics; a conclusion supported by the ever-growing list of populist case studies.

Given this, how should we understand today's populist movements and the present moment? What conditions motivate contemporary populisms? Are they concerned solely with neoliberalism or is the current a mere manifestation of a deeper, historically prolonged situation? What characterizes our present condition and how does it relate to populism?

Although a full explanation is beyond the scope of my thesis, I aim to provide some initial answers. Contra notions that we live in a populist age, I argue our contemporary epoch is

characterized by *democratic disorientation*, an effect that arises from an intensified condition of nihilism. Disorientation, by itself, is nothing new; it is always wrought by nihilism and something easily identifiable in periods of profound transition. What is new, however, is the sheer intensity of our disorientation, the increasingly bleak conditions motivating it, and the unparalleled destruction that contemporary technology can produce in the most extreme attempts to overcome our vertigo. Importantly, our contemporary disorientation stems from so-called advanced liberal democracies which fail to embody the democratic virtues of freedom and equality. Now, more than ever, we find our values demeaned by crude processes of trivialization and instrumentalization, leaving them vulnerable to capture by contradictory foes — including the capture of populism itself by existing elites. It is not only democracy that is uniquely under threat but our planetary existence, especially as the climate crisis and technological advancements in warfare escalate.

It is this condition that motivates contemporary populisms. Faced with widespread democratic dissatisfaction and a lack of meaning, populist movements emerge as responses carrying the potential for both destruction and renewal. To show this relation, I conceptually map out three potential responses to democratic disorientation: Zombie neoliberalism, antagonistic populism, and agonistic populism. Whereas antagonistic populism attempts to overcome disorientation by gripping to baseless, moral values secured only through hatred of the Other, agonistic populism creates new values and re-establishes their meaning through political struggle. Such a populism remains the only way to regain meaning and protect a common world — one where we come together to make sense of others and ourselves.

To support my argument, I begin by conceptualizing democratic disorientation and nihilism through the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Hans Sluga, and Wendy Brown. I then explain how

nihilism, by exposing our values as baseless, makes our values and practices vulnerable to capture by opponents who use them in contradictory ways, further contributing to our sense of uncertainty — something reactionary conservatives are increasingly doing to term “populism” itself. Finally, I map out the three solutions, drawing largely from my earlier chapters.

Democratic Disorientation and Nihilism

> What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devaluate themselves*. The aim is lacking; “why?” finds no answer.
>
> — Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* ([1967] 1968, §2)

> The paradox of humanly created powers that diminish the human by revealing our incapacity to direct our own fates or even preserve ourselves and our habitat, reaching new heights as these powers are revealed as all that makes the world — this breeds a nihilism beyond Nietzsche’s wildest imagination.
>
> — Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* (2019, 181)

Whereas many look at populism as a way to establish alternative political visions amid times of hegemonic breakdown (see Mouffe [2018] 2019; Hall [1988] 2021), such a view is truncated, narrowing our analysis to a limited conception of the present while ignoring more nuanced histories that condition us. Against this, I argue the defining feature of our times is a democratic disorientation which stems from an intensified condition of nihilism that lurks under the surface of modern liberal democracies.

As defined by Hans Sluga (2017), disorientation is an affect of “opposing impulses and ideas both within and between us,” something increasingly unleashed by the complexity of the contemporary world. Experiencing contradictory instincts — for productivity and rest, renewal and return, love and hate, creation and destruction — unravels our individual and collective will.

Without pre-existing points of stability, we are left directionless with no immediate cure for our ailment.

Disorientation itself is not new. As Sluga himself acknowledges, the political has always entailed thinking, speaking, and acting amid incomplete understandings of the world and others; wading through an "ocean of uncertainty," to borrow a phrase from Arendt. Although such conditions produce disorientation, the multifaceted, intricate, and obscure forces that constitute our present condition escalated this experience to new heights. Ever-increasing human consumption, unprecedented technological growth, environmental destruction, catastrophic climate disasters, expansive surveillance tactics, latent processes of settler colonialism, and the unpredictability of action are only a few of the conditions that come together to constitute what Sluga calls an "empire of disorientation." With our existence tangled in a dense web of relations and systems, it becomes increasingly difficult to predict the consequences of our actions and words. Unpredictability is inherent in political action itself but our current conditions give us a unique sense of dread. More than ever, the forces shaping our lives appear beyond control and provide reason for pause. Hegemonic decline, best understood as the breakdown of prevailing common sense, contributes to disorientation but alone is not enough to understand it. How can we respond to the present if its conditions seem insurmountable or unknowable? On what basis can we act or speak? What ideals or virtues can guide us? And how can we discover them?

The resonance of these questions reveals that we remain trapped in an ever-evolving period of nihilism. Conventional definitions of nihilism often reduce it to a relativist, surface-level philosophy which asserts that life is inherently meaningless. We hold no essential values or beliefs, guaranteeing us nothing but despair. This definition, however, differs from what I am referencing. My interest is in nihilism as a condition: a situation that emerged alongside the

project of modernity and has expanded considerably since then. Drawn from his analysis of nineteenth-century European culture, Friedrich Nietzsche attributed the advent of nihilism to modernity where secular reason and progress surpassed religion and moral virtues as guiding principles ([1967] 1968, §1). The outcome of this, for Nietzsche, was not the emancipation championed by Enlightenment thinkers but the destruction of all transcendental foundations upon which we established values — secular or religious. We could no longer look to external, higher sources to justify our virtues; the standards imposed by modernized ideas of truth and skepticism precluded us from escaping into a world beyond our own, exposing the falseness of self-evident beliefs. The issue, however, is the values of modernity itself could not withstand the radical skepticism it ignited: reason and process cannot ground themselves on a higher plane any more than the deities they overthrew. No principle has an origin which is beyond dispute. The impossibility of transcendence wrought by the "death of God" is the precise cause of nihilism, plunging us into an existential feeling of meaninglessness. Simply put, the death of God appears as the death of meaning itself.

Elaborated across nearly all his writings, the consequences of our nihilistic age are multifaceted and longstanding, with Nietzsche asserting the condition would persist for the next two centuries. In his Nietzschean analysis, Sluga (2017) identifies two primary impacts of nihilism: the trivialization and the instrumentalization of all values. Trivialization stems from, in Nietzsche's words, "the highest values [devaluing] themselves,"([1967] 1968, §2) as things like truth, honesty, and goodness become unable to justify themselves. As they lose meaning and depth, all values become equal regardless of their content — something to discard and replace at a moment's notice. The distinction necessary for greatness is no longer possible. Triviality emerges where it once stood, making a mockery of the virtues we organized ourselves around.

Lacking substance, our values become victims of instrumentalization, reducible to a mere means rather than remaining an end themselves. Sluga argues this is possible because nihilism unleashes a "desublimation of the will to power," the will through which Nietzsche asserts we overcome ourselves and create new values. Whereas world-building projects sublimate the will to power through refined ideas of culture, morality, and political order, our nihilistic condition reverts the will to an elementary and unconstrained form, indifferent and uncaring to others. Values become tools used in an inexhaustible pursuit of power, further denigrating them. Instrumentalization also induces increased hypocrisy as many agents no longer hold genuine belief in their supposed values and see no problem using them in contradictory ways. Together, trivialization and instrumentalization impose meaninglessness onto our lives, begetting more nihilism in a seemingly endless spiral.

Ironically, Nietzsche attributed the advent of nihilistic attitudes to modernized democracy. Rather than fostering pluralism and ethical distinction, Nietzsche argued that the type of democracy cultivated through the Enlightenment imposed a reductive equality upon citizens. By equality, what Nietzsche denounces is the conditions in which all values or practices are taken as the same regardless of their meaning; "everyone is equal to everyone else," including those at the bottom ([1967] 1968, §752). This anti-democratic sentiment can, of course, easily become destructive, but this does not mean we should fully reject the insights of Nietzschean philosophy. What Nietzsche is denouncing is the loss of distinction needed to give values meaning; the recognition that my values are different for a purpose and to be the same as those that contradict them is to deny this purpose. My claim that vaccination improves public health, for example, should not be taken as equal to the claims of anti-vaxxers that deny them. Such equality arises from a "democratic idiosyncrasy" ([1967] 1989b, 78) that wholeheartedly rejects making ethical

and political distinctions between different ideals; modern democracy, for Nietzsche, is marked by a hatred of authority that denies the will to power altogether. What is cultivated in its place is mediocrity, a weakness of will that claims the great values are the same as those at the bottom.

Paradoxically, this so-called democratic equality undermines pluralism by denying the existence of meaningful differences between us — it reduces diversity to sameness. This cultivates what Nietzsche calls "herd instinct," where our moral judgements exclusively derive from the utility of the community and its preservation ([1966] 1989a, §201). Such social conformity imposes itself as a normalizing force that demonizes deviant perspectives threatening the community. Socioeconomic institutions, such as parliament or the mainstream press, enforce this normalization whereby "the herd becomes the master" ([1967] 1968, §753). Democracy is, in this way, an heir to the Judaeo-Christian slave morality which it replaced; they seek to reproduce moral uniformity by denouncing difference ([1966] 1989a, §202).

Nietzsche's critique of democracy, while lapsing into anti-democratic and potentially harmful perspectives, locates the source of nihilism and disorientation in modern democracy. When we lose distinction under a totalizing notion of equality, we do not lose power but merely obscure the normative tactics through which it is imposed upon us. Without any justification, these forces are experienced as arbitrary and meaningless, as purely instrumental tools to enforce existing social orders. Since this supposed equality precludes us from creating moral and political distinctions, our values also become trivial. Such aspects betray the pluralistic promise of democracy to govern ourselves alongside others and intensify nihilism.

The nihilistic sentiments described by Nietzsche certainly resonate with our experience today insofar as our democratic institutions appear meaningless and shallow, reducible to nothing more than tools of powerful interests. After all, how can we claim to have upheld the democratic

values of shared governance, liberty, and equality when thousands globally and domestically live in abject poverty which prevents most from directly participating in their communities? How can a Supreme Court claim to uphold justice while stripping women of their autonomy and simultaneously manufacturing new rights for corporations? How can constitutional democracies claim inclusion when relying on the continual dispossession of Indigenous land? Such contradictions and hypocrisies expose the nihilistic conditions wrought by modern democracy as a site of arbitrary administration and bureaucracy whose practices trivialize their founding principles. Disorientation stems from this configuration of democracy; one that denies us the power to make moral and ethical distinctions for ourselves while simultaneously enforcing moralizing authority upon us without justification, legitimacy, or accountability. I refer to this specifically as democratic disorientation, where faux-democratic institutions engender profound uncertainty and displacement that leave us without a sense of direction.

To further explain this sentiment, however, we must divert from Nietzsche and his anti-democratic reverence for the great individual. Rather than returning to his earlier perspective on democracy as a potentially pluralistic site (see Siemens 2009), Nietzsche seeks refuge in the overmen — the exceptional individuals and geniuses who struggle against the herd by creating their own values. Typically, this requires inflicting unjust acts of cruelty or domination onto others to establish greatness, subjecting others to heighten oneself. To this end, Nietzsche supports establishing an aristocracy that believes in an “elite humanity and a higher caste” ([1967] 1968, §752). Paraphrasing Hannah Arendt ([1958] 2018), this does little more than mistake individual strength for collective power, displacing the distinction that arises from the world between us to the private mind of the individual (200-04). Not only does relying on strength fail to overcome the structural forces engendering nihilism, but it also intensifies

conditions of nihilism themselves because individuals alone cannot revive meaning. It must be done through a pluralistic struggle alongside and against others.

Attempting to become the exceptional overman is, in fact, what motivates much of contemporary nihilism and democratic disorientation. Contrary to what Nietzsche claimed, displacing the sovereign power previously attributed to the divine or the monarch is vital to cultivating the modern notion of equality he despised. Overlooking this risks disregarding the way that modern democracy depends on the paradoxical combination of individual liberty and collective equality — something Nietzsche himself recognizes ([1967] 1968, §783) but does not fully grasp.

Modern democratic notions of equality require individuals to assume the place of the sovereign, making themselves into deities that despise external authority and do not require shared spaces for political action, rendering these spaces unnecessary. Jacques Rancière's ([2005] 2014) conceptualization of "democratic individualism" helps elucidate this. Attempting to understand contemporary antipathy towards democracy, Rancière traces the problems of democracy not only to the social homogeneity encouraged by supposed equality but also to the atomistic individualism it relies upon. Democratic individualism, according to Rancière, derives from a core premise of Enlightenment thought: elevating individual judgement to the level of collective belief or action (14). Certainly, Nietzsche's overman continues this tradition rather than breaking from it. While this elevation was seen as necessary to shatter the transcendental authority of monarchal rule, the move dissolved the social links between individuals, leaving modern democracy to devolve into a reign of limitless individual desire. Since each individual is a sovereign, each sees themselves as the final authority and rejects external authority even if it is about subjects they know little about such as medicine or education (18). Instead of motivating

reflection or changes, exposure to experts like doctors evokes hostility and impatience since their authority calls this individual's sovereignty into question. It is here where democratic equality brews nihilism; returning to an earlier example, individual sovereignty is what makes democratic equivalence possible between a doctor's claim in a peer-reviewed article that vaccines save lives and a soccer mom's claim on Facebook that they cause autism. It only works so long as the individual rules, unaffiliated and indifferent to others, cut off from transcendence (28).

To account for individual sovereignty and collective equality, Rancière asserts that modern democracy reduces shared spaces to the rationality of the marketplace (19-20). Individuals no longer relate to each other as citizens with common interests but as consumers purchasing a service from a provider. If at any point I do not like the service, I can opt for another provider. Such a relationship accounts for individual sovereignty (the customer is always right) and equality (equal exchange in the market). Freedom is no longer the freedom to act but the freedom to choose. The rationality behind this structures many social interactions and practices, including elections in so-called advanced democracies. As an individual voter, I go to the ballot box to choose between two (or maybe three if I'm lucky) options to govern me. If I dislike my choice afterward, I can always choose to "fire" them next election and support a different candidate. Never mind collective action outside of this; choosing between a handful of political parties is real civic freedom! Under this framework, elections are little more than the consumeristic practice of selecting a service provider from a dwindling number of options that hold a monopoly over the marketplace. My vote acquires as much meaning as whether I prefer Pepsi or Coke; something that reflects a personal preference but does not require judgement beyond myself or discussion with others.[20] To be a consumer, not a citizen, is to disregard interests

[20] Chantal Mouffe first discussed this Pepsi-Coke metaphor in her reflections on post-politics and post-democracy (see Mouffe 2016).

outside my own altogether. Subsequently, I do not require shared or common spaces; these can be dismantled, often denounced as extravagant or unnecessary.

At this point, it feels needless to say that the democratic institutions causing disorientation bear little resemblance to authentic experiences of democracy. Yet this is precisely the problem. As Sheldon Wolin (1994) famously concluded, within advanced liberal democracies, democracy itself has become a "fugitive" experience, rare among the people and suppressed by administration. What is this if not an expression of nihilism? Given this, it is no wonder that Rancière ([2005] 2014) claimed we are experiencing a widespread "hatred of democracy," where many citizens have had too much of it (3). Under our modern democracy, we paradoxically encounter a normalizing push for social uniformity and atomized individuals, each cut off from transcendence. Praise for self-governance, freedom, and equality in this context ring of nothing other than shallowness. When people turn away from democracy, it is these aspects that they turn away from; an atomistic set of conditions that fosters widespread indifference to pressing hardships and exposes our lack of control over the forces shaping our lives.

Perhaps neoliberalism is the most intensified version of this modern liberal democracy, escalating nihilism to new heights. A term almost as contested as populism, neoliberalism is often defined as a set of policies promoting privatization, deregulation, free trade, low corporate taxes, support for capitalist markets, and dismantling the welfare state. Yet, the idea is more than just a collection of policies. Neoliberalism is a governing rationality that seeks to expand the rationality of the marketplace to all areas of life, popularized by economists such as Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and the Ordoliberal school (see Brown 2015). Its malleability allows neoliberalism to exist across the political spectrum from the conservative neoliberalism of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher to the "progressive neoliberalism" (Fraser 2017) of

Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

Where neoliberalism empowers nihilism is through its total economization of life and its destruction of shared spaces. Drawing on Nietzsche, Wendy Brown (2019) provides a detailed analysis of this, discussing how economization reduces us to human capital, something to be continually reinvested for future value without meaning of our own (163). Through marketing, our virtues become mere brands without further substance. Moreover, neoliberalism appears indifferent to the ecological and socioeconomic destruction it created, as wealth inequality continually increases, public life becomes more inaccessible, and the planet becomes more uninhabitable. Rather than immediately responding, governments were inattentive for decades and often continue to be, carrying on business as usual. Yet, the identities and values privileged under neoliberalism, such as those associated with whiteness and masculinity, do nothing to protect us against the onslaught of these factors (175). Brown asserts this is where nihilism intensifies beyond what Nietzsche imagined, as the forces generated by neoliberalism reveal themselves as beyond our control and “diminish, mock, reproach, and endanger us, not only devalue us” (181). To say disorientation intensifies here would be an understatement. The widespread trivialization and instrumentalization unleashed by the contradictions of neoliberalism often lead to outbursts of aggression, expressions of ressentiment stemming from a “dethroned entitlement” felt by those who were promised privilege based on their identity but received nothing (174-77).

In the face of arbitrary and seemingly insurmountable forces, many embrace a “wrecking of the will,” unshackled from the necessities of care, concern, truth, consistency or responsibility — manifesting in cruel acts done merely to feel power where one holds none (170-73). Trolling, hate speech, and physical and sexual violence are some of the behaviours which emerge from

this unconstrained will (ibid). Beyond this, nihilism engenders other dangers; leaving values and practices without meaning increases the potential for their misuse in contradictory or hypocritical ways. Conspiracy theories rearrange the truth in convenient ways, while religious politicians blatantly violate the family values they claim to represent, all in the name of nothing other than naked opportunism.

It is these disorienting conditions that devalue and endanger our ideals that populism attempts to address. Populism seeks to revive ethical and political distinctions to regain meaning. Whether this is just or unjust, however, depends on how each movement anchors their values. Before discussing this, however, we must discuss how populism and its democratic critics both fell victim to a nihilistic practice that inverts the resources we use to make sense of the world: that of elite capture.

The Elite Capture of Populism

Among the most insidious consequences of nihilism is elite capture. Once devalued, our hallowed-out virtues and concepts become vulnerable to being captured by others who use them in contradictory or hypocritical ways. Identities that once empowered are robbed by oppressors, and concepts previously used to criticize state domination become used to justify more centralized authority. Beyond further trivialization, this practice uniquely robs us of the concepts and values we use to make sense of the world. The sites of refuge we found amid uncertainty are no longer our own, becoming occupied by adversaries who subvert their meaning and leaving us more stranded than before. The concept is especially important due to how populism itself, as a term and concept, became captured by the elites that movements initially sought to overcome.

Although the concept predates his work, elite capture is most clearly articulated by Olúfẹ́mi

O. Táíwò (2022). Attempting to reconcile the emancipatory origins of identity politics and recent technocratic uses of the concept to shore up the oppressive status quo, Táíwò argues the issue is not inherent in identity politics itself but in how the term becomes used by the well-resourced to hijack promising political projects. Jumping from identity politics to wider problems of conceptual appropriation, Táíwò identifies the problematic use as "elite capture," a practice where "the advantaged few steer resources and institutions that could serve the many towards their own narrower interests and aims" (22). The resources Táíwò mentions are not exclusively material but are "public resources such as knowledge, attention, and values" (10) that constitute the shifting "common ground" upon which we can premise political action and build a shared world (40). Elite capture of these resources does not stem from one or two bad individuals but from structural inequalities that distort our interactions by privileging certain subjects over others (46). For Táíwò, there are no hard rules to defining eliteness; it is contingent on whom social norms decorate as powerful in relation to those interacting with them, giving them more authority over resources than others. The consequences of elite capture are devastating to emancipatory action, imposing limitations onto previously radical projects: "In the absence of the right kinds of checks or constraints, the subgroup of people with power over and access to the resources used to describe, define, and create political realities — in other words, the elites — will capture the group's values, forcing people to coordinate on a narrower social project that disproportionately represents elite interests" (32). Beyond systemic patterns, however, I argue elite capture is a byproduct of nihilistic trivialization and instrumentalization. As our values lose nuance and substance, they become shallow resources easily captured by opportunistic elites. Those who do not attempt to attribute and defend richer meanings to their values become potential victims of this metaphysically violent practice.

C. Thi Nguyen's interlinked conception of value capture reveals this link to nihilism more closely. Invoked by Táíwò to support his description of elite capture as a structural problem (52-54), value capture is a process where we encounter simplified versions of rich and nuanced values we already hold. In a desire for value clarity, these simplified versions replace our nuanced ones, making our lives "worse" (Nguyen 2020, 201). Typically, social structures present these simplified values through "gamification," turning everyday experiences into something quantifiable and measurable. Think of how grades reduce education into a standardized competition, FitBit reduces exercise to mere step counts, or quotas in Amazon warehouses reduce laborious work to the number of packages completed. All are examples of value capture that causes us to internalize these simplistic alternatives that trivialize and instrumentalize values altogether.

Although Nguyen and Táíwò primarily focus on how corporations deploy game-like tactics to achieve value capture, the desecration of values in favour of a shallow simplicity obviously aligns with nihilistic processes. Abandoning complex truths to affirm trivial narratives is nihilism par excellence. Both alt-Right politicians, who blame a widespread economic decline on immigrants, and orthodox socialists, who promise transformation by relying on ideal notions of "progress," are symptomatic of both nihilism and value capture. Of course, elite capture offers more nuance in explaining how hijacks of public resources rely upon existing privileges and social relations, often used to affirm a technocratic status quo.

Where most recent examples vary, however, is their departure from an open defence of existing hierarchies. Instead, elite capture has become an increasingly common tactic of contemporary authoritarians who frame their policies as a break from dominant hegemonies, although the extent of this is debatable. The elites are no longer only technocrats but reactionary

icons of the alt-Right who hijack the values, concepts, and projects connected to radically democratic movements. In this new usage, elite capture is similar to Naomi Klein's (2023) notion of "mirroring," where authoritarians "[mimic] beliefs and concerns that feed off progressive failures and silences" (93). Dangerously, continual acts of mirroring by reactionaries eventually constitute what Klein calls the "Mirror World," where unaddressed fears find a home amid a warped reality that resembles our own but is fundamentally false, built on closed-off conspiracies that justify authoritarian governments and fascist desires. Once something becomes an issue in the Mirror World, it often becomes taboo to address outside of it, abandoning some of the most salient issues to conspiratorial rabbit holes (121). Depressingly, Klein's *Doppelganger* shows how easily people can buy into copycat arguments and fall into the Mirror World when progressives fail to defend their values, leaving them void of substance and ready for capture by shrewd opponents.

There are too many examples of elite capture over the past decade to properly name them all, with the practice becoming a defining feature of our disorienting times. Take, for example, the "anti-gender ideology" movement appropriating the term "ideology" from the Left and using it to delegitimize the field of gender studies (Butler 2024) or Canadian anti-vax protestors mobilizing thousands against supposedly "totalitarian" vaccine mandates under the guise of fighting for freedom. Not only did anti-vaxxers capture and augment the virtue of "freedom" itself but they appropriated the idea of a "truckers' convey" from a Saskatchewan community of farmers who initially did one in 2020 to honour victims of Residential Schools in a manner consistent with social distancing (Klein 2023, 255-66).

Another significant example is the cultural Right's capture of anti-capitalist rhetoric. Steve Bannon, a far-Right icon and former chief strategist to Donald Trump, is perhaps the most high-

profile example of this in recent years. Throughout his career, Bannon found success by touting critiques of capitalism and affirming the working class left behind by globalization (see Klein 2023, 121-22). Previously staples of the Marxist and social democratic Left, Bannon repurposed these arguments to mobilize citizens in favour of an alt-Right political vision. None of this means Bannon's preferred policies would undo capitalism; most political projects he champions would entrench neoliberalism further. What it does mean is that political actors can subvert principles or arguments if left unprotected, using them to defend projects that paradoxically undermine these values themselves. As our values and practices become shells drained of meaning, ill-willed actors can capture them to advance their own interests. Most devastatingly, elite capture inflicts severe metaphysical violence upon the few things we have to make sense of the world. Damaging them leaves us profoundly disoriented, nihilistically violating the virtues most important to us.

The most significant development for my project, however, is the capture of populism itself by reactionary movements over the twentieth century. In the English language, the term populism originated with the agrarian revolts occurring across North America during the late 1800s. The spirit of prairie populism, which I discussed in my second chapter, extended well beyond their rural origins in America, infusing other progressive causes into the mid-twentieth century. Notable among these were the insurgent labour movement and the New Deal, which were monumental victories for the democratic Left (see Kazin [1995] 1998, Chapters 3 and 6). Similar developments occurred in Canada, where populism was heavily associated with the United Farmers and Cooperative Commonwealth Federation. The notion of a "conservative populism" remained an oxymoron. Where populism flourished as an emancipatory and radically democratic project, it was met by the elite backlash that denounced popular participation and

defended governing as the act of consensus-building among a privileged few. Thomas Frank ([2020] 2021) identified this as "anti-populism" where professionals argue democracy necessitates elite governance that would keep us safe from the whims of average people — a common reaction among establishment figures who wished to preserve the status quo against democratic movements in the early 1900s.

Decades before our current conjuncture, however, the notion of populism underwent a profound reversal. It became a victim of elite capture, shifting from the democratic Left to the authoritarian New Right. Similarly, anti-populism and its defence of elite failure were no longer staples of conservative capitalists. Instead, these sentiments found a home in progressive movements that failed to adequately defend and expand the political spaces opened by early populist movements. Simply put, populism became a tactic to lure people into the Mirror World, where their democratic desires became disfigured. Once lost to the Mirror World, progressive movements made little effort to retrieve it. These developments largely birthed the authoritarian variants of populism we see today.

The elite capture of populism varied depending on the context. Like populism itself, no common feature exists among all of them but there are a series of overlapping similarities. Tactics often included appropriating the rhetoric and critiques of democratic populists, capturing ownership over the "common people," and displacing elitism away from the systemically privileged onto the marginalized who became scapegoats for society's woes.

One of the earliest and most successful examples of this capture occurred in Canada. The initial hijacker was William Aberhart and his Social Credit League of Alberta. Campaigning against the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) government, Aberhart realized early that he could not win over the public by touting the technocratic and obtuse social credit theory alone; he had

to translate his appeals into the language of populism itself, redefining conceptions of "the people" and the democracy they wished to practice (Laycock 1990, 204). The political context favoured his attempts at elite capture, as the onset of the Great Depression worsened living conditions across the province and left many longing for immediate political solutions (MacPherson [1953] 1962, 142-149). A less participatory and democratic UFA leadership also contributed to this condition, as elected officials shifted away from local institutions during their time in power, becoming trapped by the confines of cabinet governance (see MacPherson [1953] 1962, Chapter 3). UFA officials also increasingly became more open and reliant on technocratic solutions to social problems which existed in tension with the participatory politics practiced on the ground (Laycock 1990, 55-56; 135). The divide between increasingly technocratic leaders and their radical democratic membership provided an opportunity for Social Credit to capture critiques of the Canadian party system, the state, and financial interests from existing populisms, as well as their endorsement of state intervention.

Through his rhetoric, Aberhart transformed the radically democratic conceptions in existing prairie populism beyond recognition. Instead of allowing the people to emerge through citizens acting in concert, Aberhart reframed the people as a homogenous concept that necessitates unity into a general will (MacPherson 1962, 150-52). The people, according to Aberhart, should only make demands rather than participate in political action themselves. Yes, the general will would be expressed in general elections or plebiscites but the hard work of governing should be left to experts. Freedom was reduced to a consumeristic choice between pre-determined options instead of the freedom to participate in cultivating or contesting the options themselves. This made Aberhart's populism anti-political; contrary to radical democratic citizenship, Social Credit sought to do away with the potential for disagreement or contestation inherent in locally

controlled spaces. Of course, this anti-participatory vision deeply contradicted the self-governance called for by populists. To overcome this contradiction, Aberhart relied on simplified narratives of social strife that blamed enemies and their "special interests" for societal woes (often invoking anti-Semitic conspiracies in the process) while insisting that a centralized government could vanquish politics altogether through implementing social and economic engineering, organizing society to self-regulate under natural, "scientific" processes (Laycock 1990, 264-5). Under this framework, political participation became reduced to a moralistic crusade that "may have built on ambiguity, doublespeak, and policy contradictions, but [was] attractive" (211).

Once elected in 1935, Aberhart showed the devasting consequences of this antagonistic populism, using state power to dismantle political spaces and local institutions that threatened his authority. Among the authoritarian actions taken by his administration were: the complete subordination of the legislature, party, and cabinet to Aberhart's singular leadership (MacPherson [1953] 1962, 193-200; Laycock 1990, 251-52); the amalgamation of 3,750 local school districts into 50 administrative units (Laycock 1990, 251); attempts to legally force the free press to print government rebuttals to stories they deemed inaccurate (Strikwerda 2020); legislation which sought to bring financial institutions under state control (MacPherson [1953] 1962, 175-77); banning employees of financial institutions from exercising their right of appeals in court (Laycock 1990, 235); and requiring citizens to sign "registration covenants" pledging their support for Social Credit before receiving government benefits (Layck 1990, ibid). The Social Credit regime justified this vast centralization by demonizing and overemphasizing the threat of "Money Power" — represented by the federal government, financiers, bureaucrats, and traditional political parties — which allegedly sought to strip Alberta of its sovereignty

altogether (206-08). Aberhart's populist opposition to the federal government's "state socialism," paradoxically justified the centralization of authority under his provincial government. This contradiction is the precise outcome of Aberhart hijacking populism from its origins, cultivating an "anti-political populism" which achieved a "political deskilling" of communities across the province through destroying and policing the boundaries of political spaces (Epp 2001).

The impacts of this elite reversal reverberate into today's politics. In Alberta, many leaders following Aberhart continued to embody authoritarian populism but this elite capture became more expansive under the New Right during the 1980s and 1990s (see Laycock 2005). Harnessing the democratic rhetoric of populist movements, reactionary and authoritarian politicians redrew the frontiers of political struggle in their favour and built a popular consensus around their politics. Preston Manning and the Reform Party mastered this tactic, establishing the viability of neoliberalism by demonizing the "special interests" behind the welfare state. This scapegoating allowed politicians to displace responsibility for all problems onto those subsumed under the header of "special interests," also making them responsible for the fears and anxieties caused by an increasingly nihilistic world. Other reactionary politicians, such as Ralph Klein and Mike Harris, furthered this populism, persuading those dissatisfied with the status quo to join their crusade against the state (see Laird 1998). The enemies of the people contextually but overwhelming included social groups advocating for socioeconomic redistribution by the state, including "feminist lobby groups, native organizations, private and public sector unions, anti-poverty organizations, Third World solidarity groups, minority cultural and ethnic groups, crown corporations, and managers of state agencies" (Laycock 2005, 186).

The associations between these groups, brought together under the banner of "special interests," make specific ways of life the cause of democratic dissatisfaction. If democracy is

broken, it is not the fault of false idols or structural deficiencies — it is those troublesome minorities who direct the welfare state and rob “the people” of our entitlements. Although the falsity of these claims appears obvious to many, their widespread appeal reveals how grave a risk they pose. It also explains why, even if their scapegoats have shifted, we can still recognize the continuing impact of this authoritarian and antagonistic populism on Canadian politics in figures like Jason Kenney and Pierre Poilievre.

Moreover, the elite capture of populism was not limited to Canada; it was a phenomenon that occurred across many liberal democracies. In *The Populist Persuasion* ([1995] 1998), Michael Kazin identifies a similar hijacking of populism in America by conservative movements starting in the 1940s. While early practitioners include Joseph McCarthy, George Wallace, Barry Goldwater, and Richard Nixon, Kazin argues Ronald Reagan achieved the most effective “conservative capture” of populism (Chapter 10). Borrowing rhetoric from earlier progressive populists like Franklin Roosevelt, Reagan cast himself as an outsider opposed to the “special interests” of a liberal elite invested in increasing their bureaucratic power through the expansive welfare state (260-64). A frequent figure Reagan evoked in his presidential campaigns to represent these special interests was the “welfare queen,” a racist connotation that united many of the gendered and racialized practices opposed by neoliberalism. A further example is the rise of an authoritarian populism under Margaret Thatcher in Britain, which advanced a neoliberal conception of “law and order” by demonizing criminals (see Hall [1988] 2021, Chapters 8 and 9). The overlapping goal across these movements is the dismantling of the welfare state and other public services, replacing them with neoliberal orders that escalate the destruction of political spaces.

The success of the New Right and the establishment of neoliberal hegemony globally are

due, in great part, to the elite capture of populism which cultivated popular support for their projects. Without appropriating and subsequently disfiguring populism for authoritarian ends, their visions would have faced more significant barriers. To clarify, we should not disqualify the New Right's populism, or its contemporary manifestations, as "faux-populism." Certainly, an antagonistic type of populism is central to their movements and to ignore it would risk missing the underlying rationalities that make their movements politically viable. We should, however, remain attentive to the fact that reactionary movements managed a reversal of how we conceive populism and that this inversion is integral to the advancement of their interests.

Beyond building popular support for authoritarian leaders, the elite capture of populism can disempower emancipatory projects by imposing arbitrary limits on how we approach the concept. By linking populism with undemocratic practices, this elite inversion disregards the radical history and potential of populism. It also positions progressives as champions of anti-populism and elitism, denouncing popular movements as an authoritarian threat to democracy. This serves to entrench assertions that liberal democracies operate against the people. Unfortunately, some so-called progressives have been too eager to pick up this analysis with populism often becoming a catch-all term for the anti-democratic challenges facing us today. Broad liberal rejections of populism, however, obscure the precise structural conditions that motivate contemporary democratic dissatisfaction and nihilism, while also furthering the historical erasure of radically democratic populism (Frank [2020] 2021). This could explain why many critics of populism, like Nadia Urbinati (2019) and Jan-Werner Müller (2016), remove this history from their conception of populism altogether.

If we wish to overcome democratic disorientation, we must recognize how elite capture remains a pervasive symptom of contemporary nihilism that robs us of many of the material and

cultural resources that could help orient ourselves — including populism itself. Once we start to recontextualize and reconceptualize populism, we can recognize it as a potent response to the nihilistic conditions of our time that carries the potential for renewal and destruction, transfiguration and disfiguration.

Mapping Out a (Post)-Nihilistic World?

Despite its expansiveness, nihilism will not remain forever. As Nietzsche asserts, nihilism is a "transitional stage" ([1967] 1968, §14) — the meaningless permutating our lives can be overcome. Although I do not endorse Nietzsche's solution, his analysis shows us that how we respond to nihilism is among the most important questions we face. Importantly, nihilism does open the possibility of cultivating new values to replace old, broken ones; something Nietzsche cherished and saw as a possible way out of our disorienting age. Creating value in a seemingly valueless world is a difficult act; especially as human-created structures subject us to previously unthinkable acts of cultural and material destruction. Attempting to establish values within this world is a complex, uncertain, and unpredictable endeavour but, without a transcendental authority, we can do this. Perhaps this is why Nietzsche described nihilism as a "critical tension" between the "strength" to expose existing idols as false and the "decline" caused by triviality, a tension which allows "extremes to appear and become predominant" (§10).

It is here where nihilism becomes "ambiguous" for Nietzsche: depending on how we respond to the death of transcendence, our actions express either "active nihilism" or "passive nihilism" (§22-23). Whereas passive nihilism holds onto foundationless values, active nihilism disregards broken ideals to create new ones.

While both are attempts to re-establish meaning, they are not the same. Passive nihilism

clings to debased virtues, asserting a transcendence which will never return, almost as a toddler grips to a soother; as whatever "refreshes, heals, calms, [or] numbs" (§23) takes hold in baseless religious, moral, political, and aesthetic projects. These nihilistic anesthetics do nothing to restore their foundations but merely accept the dissolution of value and meaning, giving way to social disintegration and groundless culture wars. Against this, active nihilism embraces the revaluation of values through acts of critique such as genealogical analysis. Our virtues now acquire meaning through critical reassessment; there is now a purpose behind them, not derived from a transcendental source but from worldly practices. Expressions of active nihilism may appear destructive insofar as they can do away with dominant values deemed inferior. Active nihilism, however, is creative because it embraces new values.

Although Nietzsche identifies the overman with active nihilism, we can reject his individualist solution without entirely disregarding his insights. We can salvage specific conceptions from his thought to develop a post-Nietzschean map of nihilism and potential responses to this condition. This requires recognizing that a post-nihilist meaning can only come from action and speech between us, something that becomes common or shared. Otherwise, my values become trivial beyond myself — something individual strength or violence cannot undo.

Once we reject that individuals alone can create values, we begin to recognize the rise and intensification of contemporary populisms as attempts to overcome disorientation. In redrawing political frontiers and creating collective will, populism seeks to recover meaning by reasserting ethical and political distinctions in a flattened society. Whether populism is active or passive depends on how each populist movement cultivates new values — do they rely exclusively on demonizing an enemy or preserve the conditions for contestation by preserving adversaries with differing values from our own?

From this analysis, we can begin conceptualizing responses to our contemporary nihilism. Specifically, three dominant responses emerge: Zombie neoliberalism, antagonistic populism, and agonistic populism.

Zombie Neoliberalism

Borrowing a term from Jaime Peck (2010), Zombie neoliberalism responds to nihilism by defending neoliberal virtues and practices despite widespread contradictions exposing their lack of meaning. These inconsistencies, shown by neoliberalism's need to remake itself in response to the crises it produced but cannot control, are increasingly apparent. State-funded bailouts show the free market alone cannot save corporations from financial ruin, just as nuclear families alone cannot save individuals from socioeconomic demise. Over the past two decades, this blatant hypocrisy has motivated many to proclaim the end of neoliberal hegemony. Despite its many eulogies, neoliberalism refuses to die entirely, becoming "dead but dominant" (Peck 2010, 109) — an ideological zombie that haunts our politics.

Against polarization, zombie neoliberalism is often expressed by advocating to return to common ground. The issue facing democracy, they claim, is disagreement has made rational discussion impossible; partisanship overcomes "common sense." Populism emerges as a threat, something that drives us further apart. We must discover some post-partisan or post-political consensus that works for all. Instead of radically changing existing institutions, zombie neoliberals insist on cultivating consensus through them, defending existing structures while calling for incremental tweaks over time. These approaches, however, rarely break from the neoliberal rationality that drained democratic ideals of their meaning in the first place.

A global cross-section of figures embody this approach across partisan lines. Politicians that

come to mind include Hillary Clinton, Emmanuel Macron, Olaf Scholz, John McCain, and Mitt Romney. Looking at these figures, it is also important to acknowledge they are not identical. Differences exist between them but their solutions are always limited by neoliberal rationality; their ideologies vary from conservative or "roll-back" neoliberalism to progressive or "roll-out" neoliberalism. Whereas "roll-back" neoliberalism actively dismantles the welfare state, "roll-out" neoliberalism attempts to manage the impacts of its earlier projects without diverting from the consolidation of market rule (106). If the former represents deregulation, privatization, and budget cuts, the latter represents market-friendly reregulation, active social policy, public-private partnerships, and markets-with-morals (ibid).

Justin Trudeau, Canada's Prime Minister, is an exemplary defender of zombie neoliberalism. Throughout his political career, Trudeau acknowledged serious issues such as wealth inequality, climate change, and the lasting impacts of colonialism. During campaigns, he even promises "real change," often appropriating the concepts and language from feminist, anti-racist, environmental, and labour activists. Trudeau's administration, however, undermines these values by not diverting from neoliberal rationality once in power. Governmental spending increases, carbon taxes add cost to pollution, and apologies for colonial injustices abound, but the structures empowering the destructive forces we experience remain untouched. Corporate and income tax structures inherited from reactionary predecessors remain largely unchanged, extractive industries continue to escalate ecological destruction, and the dispossession of Indigenous land remains unchallenged.[21] Political authority remains vested in privileged interests. The contradictory actions of his government ultimately trivialize the values he touts, with an instrumental reason laying waste to freedom, equality, and responsibility.

---

[21] For an in-depth account of the contradictions between Trudeau's rhetoric and actions, see *The Trudeau Formula* by investigative journalist Martin Lukacs (2019).

What people get from this approach is an adaptive neoliberalism that marginally ameliorates material conditions for some, while leaving the institutions and rationality causing today's crises intact. Neoliberal values continue to be undone by the forces they generate.

This doubtlessly begets more nihilism and democratic dissatisfaction. What exposes zombie neoliberalism as a type of passive nihilism, however, is their response to the populist sentiments they evoke. Through anti-populist denunciations, zombie neoliberalism displaces responsibility for its own nihilistic destruction to the populist movements ignited by its contradictions. Take, for example, Pete Buttigieg's claim that populist sentiment "turns you against the system in general and then you're more likely to want to vote to blow up the system," (Moffitt 2020) or Tony Blair's (2017) assertion that populism has an "anarchic feel" and fuels cynical extremism on the Left and the Right. Here, zombie neoliberalism acquires a moralistic character, scolding critics as irrational; politics is no longer between the Left and the Right but, as Blair put it, the "open-minded" and the "close-minded." I do not point this out to disregard the repugnant ideas held by some populists. I discuss it to emphasize that this frontier is overdrawn, employing the moral condemnation of all populists to secure their values. The supposed "deplorables," as Clinton infamously called them, who support populism become something to fear — the enemy of liberal democracy that justifies neoliberalism without consideration over whether existing structures ethically and politically deserve an unequivocal defence.

Again returning to Trudeau, his recent comments dismissing populism provide insight into the logic of these denunciations: "In every democracy, we're seeing a rise of populists with easy answers that don't necessarily hold up to any expert scrutiny. But a big part of populism is condemning and ignoring experts and expertise. So it sort of feeds on itself" (Lewellyn 2024). Never mind that anti-populism merely inverts the structure it claims to oppose or that most of the

politicians I named previously used populist rhetoric to defend their respective political projects. Their expertise grants them epistemic and moral authority over aggrieved masses, reducing the supporters of populism either to reactionary, uneducated hicks or radical, naive idealists (Moffitt 2018, 8). Trudeau misses how this "expertise" is typically constituted by neoliberal rationality which is not neutral but holds normative commitments reinforcing the broken status quo. Invoking expertise over engaging with opponents reinforces the anti-democratic notion that our society cannot trust the people with governing; it is only an activity reserved for an elite class. Handing over decision-making to cosmopolitan, opaque, and faraway institutions becomes the right thing to do (9). Defences of this elite theory of democracy, framed as the rightful opponent of populism, become developed in books like *The People vs. Democracy* (Mounk 2018).

In consistently adapting to manage the contradictions wrought by itself, however, zombie neoliberalism further produces nihilism. Although I have already discussed some examples before, the most dangerous shifts mirror the tactics of authoritarians to placate anxieties. We see this in Clinton's calls for Europe to combat reactionary nationalists by curbing immigration (Wintour 2018), Blair's (2017) instance that progressives acknowledge genuine anxieties "on immigration, the threat of radical Islamism and the difference between being progressive and appearing obsessive on issues like gender identity," or Macron's promise to fight "Islamic separatism" in France (Onishi and Breeden 2020). The mockery exemplified by these actions does not reinvigorate neoliberal and democratic principles, it only exposes them as more shallow.

Ultimately, zombie neoliberalism will not stop the spiral into more nihilism but further beget it. Try as it might to adjust to crises, it only devalues itself more. Although the end of neoliberalism appears inevitable, with many debates over how and when it will end (see Gerstle

et al. 2023), recent events indicate the undead governmentality will continue roaming Earth for the foreseeable future.

Antagonistic Populism

Contra a return to common ground, antagonistic populism sets the status quo ablaze without any remorse. Acknowledging our democratic disorientation, antagonistic populists promise security and orientation by guaranteeing the destruction of a common enemy who alone is responsible for the condition. The meaning of their values arises exclusively from this resentment of the enemy, without a prior conception of the good. The demands gathered by antagonistic populisms, subsequently, require no consistency beyond a shared hatred. What springs forward from this contradictory mix becomes "the people" who fight to restore a hierarchy of values, often framing their projects as "traditional" or "natural" — in other words, above or outside politics. Once in office, antagonistic populists use state resources to suppress and attack their enemies, justifying these anti-democratic measures through their suprapolitical moral authority.

The appeal of antagonistic populism seems rampant, with many abandoning conventional democratic principles and supporting authoritarian leaders who promise mythic greatness if elected. Amid contemporary crises, their allure stems from the false promise of absolute order and certainty, a permanent end to the nihilistic forces unravelling our lives and producing precarity. The issue with this, however, is that their authoritarian promise is always false. No order remains absolute and their projects only acquire a shallow meaning through a destructive hatred of the Other.

Without the enemy, their hierarchy loses all meaning; the only outcomes are either that

antagonistic populists are eventually exposed as false idols, sending their mobs into further nihilistic rage; or their destruction becomes limitless, spiralling unabated into the fascist drive to annihilate life altogether — something made horrifyingly possible by nuclear weapons and climate destruction.

Over the last two decades, we have witnessed an explosive rise of antagonistic populists. Think of Donald Trump, Ron Desantis, and Danielle Smith in North America; Boris Johnson, Giorgia Meloni, and Viktor Orbán in Europe; Hugo Chavéz, Evo Morales, and Jair Bolsonaro in South America. These politicians won elections by unifying "the people" against an all-powerful, corrupt enemy who bore blame for their broken societies. Their projects usually diverge from traditional Left-Right divisions and draw heavily upon existing critiques of liberal democratic societies. Although associated with the far-Right, antagonistic populism is also employed by progressive or Left politicians such as America's Robert F. Kennedy Jr. or Germany's Sahra Wagenknecht.

The virtues and enemies posited by antagonistic populists vary by context. Typically, antagonistic populists name enemies already marginalized or unpopular within society. We see this manifest in Trump's demonization of racialized immigrants (Lopez 2020), Smith's (2022) denouncement of the "global 'woke' establishment," or Meloni's obsession with combatting same-sex parents and the "LGBT lobby" (Rizzitelli 2023). No matter the context, the enemy remains powerful, part of a hidden transnational establishment driving the nihilistic forces fuelling uncertainty and devaluation. The victims of these enemies are the common people who lose foundational, orienting principles and concepts such as race, gender, and nature. The enemy becomes overdetermined, something that supporters of antagonistic populism can identify their opponents with. Similarly, the unified populist identity that emerges from this opposition is also

overdetermined, representing a chain of demands linked through their opposition.

It is precisely through these expressions of ressentiment that moral hierarchies and values become constituted. As I examined in my first chapter, ressentiment becomes the unifying sentiment of the antagonistic people. Their values are always borne from victimization, whether real or false. The shared enemy must always remain powerful, even when antagonistic populists hold office, subsequently legitimizing authoritarian governance. It also displaces responsibility onto the enemy, unburdening antagonistic populists from justifying or explaining their virtues outside of negating the Other. Hypocrisy becomes acceptable, provided it is done against our opponents; even allowing antagonistic populists to continue neoliberal economics while denouncing corporate greed.

Since the various demands become linked through hatred, contradictory demands can become bound to one another, creating odd political bedfellows. The growing alliance between white suburban moms concerned about individual health and far-Right organizers touting vaccine misinformation is an exceptional example but far from the only one (Klein 2023, 130-35). An increasing rightward shift of millennial and Gen Z men also creates coalitions between youth who want affordable homes and aging reactionaries who will not sell them at a loss; opposition to "gender ideology" links orthodox immigrants with white supremacists; and calls for intensified extraction fuelled by climate skepticism link white unionized works with the corporations exploiting them. While conflicting demands exist in nearly every political coalition, the contradictions in these chains require no consistency; their incompatibility is a feature, not a bug, of their resentful union.

Antagonistic populism also takes advantage of nihilism's destructive energy, weaving baseless constructions from the remnants of debased values, practices, and truths. The narratives

constructed through using these broken units serve to solidify antagonistic divisions and the areas where they separate from reality, twisting concepts and facts as need be. Chief among these is the continued elite capture and inversion of democratic virtues, such as freedom and equality. Another key feature is the cultivation of conspiracy theories that orient us towards fictional narratives while amplifying anxieties about hidden enemies. Terms that come to mind here include the "deep state," "new world order," and "Great reset." Devalued principles and facts become a mangled bedrock of authoritarianism.

Ultimately, the demonization of enemies and resultant moral hierarchies attempt to reclaim meaning. The moral distinctions of antagonistic populists try to revive the identities and virtues eroded by neoliberalism, turning them into the rallying cries of mobs. Against a nihilistic world, however, such attempts remain doomed to failure, unable to recover foundations beyond violence. Without a positive project or commitment, the morals posited by antagonistic populism fall apart outside of continuous cruelty and domination. Once the enemy is vanquished, nothing remains — no substance, no distinction, and no unity. Meaning requires continued violence and destruction, a more powerful Other to rally against and overcome. If antagonistic populism loses the Other, it loses the value of its vision altogether, thus plunging us into further nihilism.

Perhaps the clearest demonstration of this comes from Trump's love of "winning." The phrase became a common rallying cry on his first presidential campaign. At multiple stops, Trump said that, if elected president, his supporters may feel there is too much winning: "We're going to win so much you may even get *tired* of winning. And you'll say, 'Please, please, it's too much winning. We can't take it anymore, Mr. President, it's too much.' And I'll say 'No it isn't. We have to keep winning, we have to win *more*.' We're going to win more" [emphasis added] (quoted in Cillizza 2018).

While this may read like an empty campaign line, it reveals much more about antagonistic populism and its lack of inherent value. As Trump biographer and journalist Gwenda Blair perceptively noted in an interview, Trump's "only measure of anything is winning and losing, and he wants to win" (Martin 2016). When winning is the only standard, however, virtues hold no value outside victory. Without an opponent to dominate, the moral hierarchy constituted by antagonistic populism crumbles and is revealed only as another form of passive nihilism. This is what happens when we tire of winning and withdraw from victory — and it is why Trump must continuously impose winning upon society if his vision is to mean anything.

Destruction is the only outcome of this cruel vision. Even if these leaders attempt to shift away from pure antagonism, the populist blaze they ignited remains beyond their control. The flames can even devour unloyal leaders who betray their cause, turning to others to replace them. Examine the cautious tale of ex-antagonistic populists like Jason Kenney to see how the mobs you rally can burn you (see Appel 2024). What unbound commitment to antagonistic populism looks like, then, is escalating violence, a descent into unmitigated fascism, until there is nothing left. While easy to dismiss as impossible, the advent of wartime technology and ecologically destructive industries transform this fascist fantasy into a horrifying possibility.

Agonistic Populism

Against passive adaptation or destruction, agonistic populism rediscovers meaning through acting with and against others to build a shared, common world. Whereas other responses to nihilism turn back to transcendent conceptions of expertise or morality, agonistic populism refuses to turn away from the uncertainty, preferring to assume responsibility for creating meaning alongside others on unpredictable and uncontrollable terms. What this necessitates,

however, is the cultivation and preservation of political spaces; the world in between us constituted by shared interests. Only within these spaces where we relate to and separate from each other can virtues acquire meaning beyond ourselves.

To remain truly political, these spaces require the persistent possibility of contestation, only made possible through caring for our adversaries. When we submit our values to contestation, we assume responsibility for crafting, defending, and distinguishing them against others, seeking to persuade others of their worth. Importantly, their meaning does not depend upon victory or overcoming others. Their meaning arises from the act of democratic struggle itself, where the words and deeds I share with others endow my ethical and political vision with substance. Values arise from the agon itself, rather than the antagonists within it. The establishment and expansion of political spaces is the aim that agonistic populism seeks to achieve. Agonistic populism is, ultimately, a world-building exercise.

What makes this response populist is that participants make ethical and political distinctions within these spaces. Drawing from my analysis of prairie populist movements in my second chapter, pluralistic spaces become where I learn to exercise political judgement. As a participant at the local schoolhouse, town council, or library, I became aware of the political desires of others, how institutions affect those beyond myself, and how to express my distinct desires. The end will never be a perfect society but a collective will that is consistently becoming, acting with and against each other for a common world. Expanding these spaces across different dimensions of life, including the workplace, is paramount to developing these skills. Although the conception of "radical citizenship" developed by Albertan farmers captures much of this, its agonistic ethos can spread beyond the prairies.

Another aspect which separates agonistic populism is its embrace of Arendtian non-

sovereign action and speech. Whereas other responses attempt to overcome disorientation by establishing a sovereign that collapses the political, agonistic populism focuses on cultivating and preserving the conditions which make political action possible. Acting and speaking within political spaces, we only come to understand ourselves and our virtues by enacting them into a shared world. The political, in this sense, is more than where I disclose my values to the world — it is where the world discloses my values to me. In discovering others, I discover myself. Uncertainty, then, is always a condition of my existence but by acting in concert with others I can build those "islands of security," discussed by Arendt. Courage and responsibility become great political virtues precisely because political action is where I simultaneously lose my form of life and win it back in unpredictable ways. There is no sovereign to direct us, only non-sovereign action which remains uncontrolled by any singular entity and something that we wield together.

Despite our stifling conditions, agonistic populism is becoming more common in radical projects. Campaigns by Bernie Sanders in the United States, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil, Podemos in Spain, and Syriza in Greece offer a glimpse into such populist actions. Over the past few years, however, the electoral setbacks faced by radical populists have given reason for pause (see Borriello and Jäger 2023). The withdrawal of Sanders in the Democratic primaries, the seat losses experienced by radical political parties, and the institutional barriers faced by agonistic populists who governed make agonistic projects appear at a standstill to some. To look solely at electoral campaigns, however, is to miss the most dynamic examples of agonistic populism; those which come from broader political movements. Think of the participatory politics and expansion of democratic spaces practised by Occupy Wall Street, those fighting for a Green New Deal, the Idle No More movement, the Black Lives Matter protests, or the unionization drives

happening in Starbucks stores and Amazon warehouses. Each of these invokes agonistic populism, seeking to build new spaces that connect us in the struggle for a better world. Such movements do make ethical and political distinctions, maintaining an adversarial stance. However, they do not seek to destroy others but, eventually, to overcome them through democratic persuasion. The substance of their virtues resides not in victory over the Other (as any progressive who has lost an election or union drive can tell you) but in the justification we forge through democratic struggle. We do not stand by; we create virtues and meaning worth fighting for.

Agonistic populism, therefore, remains an expression of active nihilism — unafraid to reject dominant values and build new ones in their place. Liberal democratic institutions like the Constitution do not remain off-limits to overhauls; agonistic populists will try to radically change them if they contradict democratic values of freedom and equality. The result is a transfiguration of democratic institutions and principles that restores their meaning. Facing profound disorientation, agonistic populism asks us to assume responsibility for collectively creating meaning where we struggle to see any. The process is messy, ridden with potential conflict, and unguaranteed — but such is the price of true virtue.

Conclusion: Stepping into Uncertainty

Throughout this chapter, I argued populism is a potent response to democratic disorientation. The nihilistic forces we unleashed remain beyond our control and leave our values baseless, like a metaphysical typhoon ravaging the virtues we call home. Existing liberal democracies, rather than acting as a barrier against nihilism, exacerbated these forces, especially in their neoliberal variants. Among the most profound symptoms further intensifying nihilism is elite capture which

inverts and trivializes the concepts, principles, and practices we use to orient ourselves. Chief among the victims of elite capture is populism itself, where authoritarians co-opt “the people” for anti-democratic projects — simultaneously rebuilding societies in their favour and amplifying weariness over populist action among democrats.

Anxieties over direct action and decision-making by the people is, perhaps, what often embodies democratic disorientation. As our institutions and structures continue to materially and ideally fail us, we have become increasingly ambivalent towards democracy itself. In the same way that nihilism is where “we are weary of man” (Nietzsche [1967] 1989b, 43), our weariness over populism represents a fear of shared governance and its potential consequences. History shows these concerns are not unwarranted, but if we are to recover value from the dustbin of nihilism, we must embrace a pluralistic democracy that encourages participation, responsibility, and critical exchanges between adversarial stances. Otherwise, loneliness and arbitrariness will continually persist until nothing is left.

Against growing uncertainty and meaninglessness, contemporary populisms try to reestablish virtue. Expanding on active and passive nihilism, I cultivate a post-Nietzschean map of the present. Whereas zombie neoliberalism clings to shattered ideals and antagonistic populism attempts to revive those of the past by scapegoating others, agonistic populism creates value through struggling with and against others. The frontiers of political contestation become redrawn, judgement is exercised, ethical and political distinctions emerge, and values become substantial, inoculated from instrumental capture by opponents.

Although useful, the boundaries between these responses are likely more flexible than I have thus presented them. Slippage between the three is not impossible and distinguishing where a figure falls on the map is not black-and-white. Shades of grey exist. The unpredictability of

political action limits all speculative theory, leaving aspects beyond its reach. What my map does capture, however, is the broad currents of contemporary political projects, their relation to nihilism, and how they attempt to orient us. Put another way, my map is not immune from changing tides but does capture the directions of today's murky political waters. From this, I hope we can begin to orient ourselves within uncertain worlds filled with contradictory impulses. Resisting the neoliberal and antagonistic waves amplifying disorientation, the only site where we can ground ourselves is that of the people — unguaranteed, conflicted, and glorious.

Conclusion: Where to? What Next?

The people say and unsay,
put up and tear down
and put together again—
a builder, wrecker, and builder again—
This is the people.

— Carl Sandburg, The People, Yes (1964, §56)

To say we live amid challenging times for democracy would be an understatement. Since I proposed this project two years ago, rulers have continued to disfigure democratic principles for authoritarian ends, further fuelling ressentiment. The trend seems likely to continue in the immediate future and may even get worse. The potential re-election of Donald Trump this November appears uniquely horrific, as his campaign promises a more authoritarian and fascist regime if he wins and unprecedented chaos if he loses. Trump, however, is only one symptom of a widespread disease. Amid the disorientation fuelled by socioeconomic anxiety, climate disasters, and misinformation campaigns, reactionary forces have poisoned nearly all democracies. Their rise has come through championing "the people" and scapegoating convenient "enemies," blaming them for legitimate concerns about democracy and its lack of contemporary meaning.

As I write, it is hard not to despair over the global popularity of antagonistic populism and what it could mean for us. Under the populist paradox, democracy is at risk of ruin from authoritarian mobs who contradictingly desire more freedom and equality. Too often, their

largest opponents are a complacent neoliberalism and visionless Left that, together, fail to seize the democratic impulses fuelling authoritarian desires. If many feel hopeless now, it is painful to imagine what the coming years may bring.

Against hopelessness, my aim in this thesis was to conceptualize a populism that radically cultivates and expands democracy. I argued we can and should revive populism as a democratic and world-building exercise while also acknowledging the dangerous possibility of authoritarian populism. Contrary to claims that populism is either an anti-democratic ideology or a value-neutral strategy, my analysis shows how populism is practised in different and diverging ways that impact our political projects and values — for better and for worse. As democratic principles become increasingly devalued and debased, the appeal of populism rests in the desire to (re)assert meaning and distinction into a disorienting world. Those advocating for emancipation should consider how we can use the discursive art to craft better visions founded in our relations.

The difference is between populisms fixated on destroying the political spaces between us and those working to expand them. Whereas antagonistic populism emerges through shared ressentiment, agonistic populism grounds itself in creating and preserving the contestatory spaces where we (re)create value.

What my Nietzschean critique of populism shows is that, while antagonistic populism relies upon democratic values, it cannot sustain meaning. By making the constitution of populist projects and identities exclusively dependent upon a shared, supposedly powerful enemy, this populism becomes ridden with ressentiment, creating an antipolitical morality that justifies authoritarian exclusion and oppression. Under this formation, populists must displace responsibility and the perception of power onto a scapegoat who bears blame for society's problems. Antagonistic populists must be both a strongman and a damsel in distress;

commanding the people and requiring their protection against an existentially threatening enemy. The violence generated by antagonistic populism must continue boundlessly or risk exposing their values as foundationless.

The radical and social democratic populisms on the Canadian prairies show us, however, that an alternative is possible and recoverable. By expanding democratic spaces across everyday life and fostering participatory politics, these movements became a form of acting in concert — constituting and caring for a common world through exchanging words and deeds. Our projects emerge not from pure dissatisfaction but from (re)asserting meaning into the world with and against others. The political becomes a non-sovereign space where we (re)discover ourselves and the world through agonal contestation, often in ways which surprise us. Exposed to our contingency — that our lives can always be done differently — we courageously assume responsibility for articulating, and potentially transforming, our projects in a democratic persuasion. The only condition is the preservation of plurality, accomplished through care for the agon and our adversaries within it.

Although our political spaces will contextually differ, it is this agonistic populism — populism as a world-building project — that we must embrace to rediscover meaning through democratic struggle. We can overcome the populist paradox and reclaim the language of democracy from authoritarian capture. Against essentializing ressentiment or isolated individualism, we can create political spaces by coming together to debate shared interests, arguing from “a vision for the commons” as Wendy Brown (1995) says, expressing “what I want for us” (51). No matter who belongs to this “us,” the identity inevitability comes against a constitutive outside, a “them.” What democratic contestation ensures, however, is that we become aware of our project’s remainders and either justify them or shift the boundaries of

ourselves to reflect our (re)newed virtues. What else is this other than an agonistic populism? The bleak horizon may give reason to despair but we can create hope by coming together in concerted action.

Facing an uncertain future, I conclude by finding inspiration in the poetry of Carl Sandburg. An uncommon writer for a political theorist to think with, Sandburg's *The People, Yes* ([1936] 1964) expresses a profound faith in the people's capacity to create and move together in unexpected directions, without a guiding map; something that holds lessons for us today. Originally written and published during the Great Depression, Sandburg identifies the people as a "moving monolith, a console organ of changing themes" with a "tragic and comic two-face: hero and hoodlum" (§107). No matter what, the people remain a constructed myth, indiscernible in material reality, and, while many figures will act in their name, we cannot determine beforehand who will speak for them (§17, 20, 24, 84). The worst aspects of the people arise from being led astray by liars, cheaters, and "humbugs" who poison the public mind with damaging propaganda, "texts torn from contexts," that subjugate the people's desires to that of a ruler (§18, 40, 102). Populism becomes a divide between the ruled-over and the manipulative ruler who pretends to give the people what they want (§62, 100). Who constitutes a humbug varies but, in my reading of Sandburg, includes the forces of capital and white supremacy (§51, 65). By creating the people through lies, Sandburg argues peace and democracy become impossible; "the hanging mob hangs more than its victim" (§ 70, 102). The misleading ruler also damages themselves — the showman becomes "humbugged" by his own lie, losing worldly reality to an empty illusion (§40).

To overcome the cheaters, Sandburg rejects top-down expertise and praises the ordinary people who sustain the world each day through acting, working, and talking together (§14, 19,

30, 59). Although this undoubtedly includes the ignorant, Sandburg reveres the transformative potential of everyday people with “flaws and failings, with patience, sacrifice, devotion” who come together to make a world (§30, 97). Without a fixed ruler, the people do not have certain answers but, acting together, can locate themselves and head in uncharted directions, creating new wonders along the way (§91, 94). We do not do away with differences or contestation (“Love your neighbour as yourself but don’t take down your fence” [§49]), but we act together to remake the world, to “cross out what *was*/and offer what *is* on a fresh blank page” (§26). Against false certainty, we must trust the believers and hopers who belong to the people and dare to offer visions that take us to new horizons (§20, 105). We cannot guarantee that these visions are perfect but, by acting and speaking together, we embrace the people as becoming rather than being, something that will never arrive and always be on the way (§35).

What does an ideal participant and member of the people look like? Sandburg offers Abraham Lincoln as an example and, while I do not endorse his account omitting any of Lincoln’s failures, the attributes Sandburg explores encapsulate what an agonistic populist might look like; someone who embraces “the paradoxes of democracy” and “the hopes of government/of the people by the people for the people,” fostering the people and rejecting attempts to degrade them (§57). It is someone who will embrace institutions like the Constitution but also remake them when they do not embody shared ideals. Among the illusions, we should embrace virtues that become a “sustaining light/to bring [us] beyond the present wilderness.” Above all, the ideal populist accepts this vision can only come through non-sovereign action; a democracy where no one is a slave or master (ibid).

No matter how lost we appear or how often the public is misled, Sandburg asserts the people will reemerge, having a remarkable capacity for “renewal and comeback” (§107). Confronting

the prospect of authoritarian victories in the coming years, I return to Sandburg's closing stanza for hope:

> In the darkness with a great bundle of grief
>
> the people march.
>
> In the night, and overhead a shovel of stars for
>
> keeps, the people march:
>
> "Where to? what next?" (§107)

As we combat the anti-democratic forces haunting contemporary politics, these are the questions we need to come together and answer; creating meaning and hope through an agonistic populism that recovers democracy and orients us towards horizons impossible to discern alone, discoverable only by the people.

Bibliography

Aiello, Rachel. 2022. "'Everything is broken in this country' Pierre Poilievre says, blaming PM Trudeau." *CTV*, November 9, 2022, sec. Politics. https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/everything-is-broken-in-this-country-pierre-poilievre-says-blaming-pm-trudeau-1.6145545.

Alfano, Mark. 2018. "A Schooling in Contempt: Emotions and the Pathos of Distance." In *The Nietzschean Mind*, edited by Paul Katsafanas, 121–39. Abingdon, U.K.; New York, N.Y.: Routledge.

Allcock, J. B. 1971. "'Populism:' A Brief Biography." *Sociology* 5 (3): 371–87. https://doi.org/10.1177/003803857100500305.

Appel, Jeremy. 2024. *Kenneyism: Jason Kenney's Pursuit of Power*. Toronto, ON: Dundurn Press.

Arditi, Benjamín. 2005. "Populism as an Internal Periphery of Democratic Politics." In *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, edited by Francisco Panizza, 72–98. London, U.K.; New York, N.Y.: Verso.

Arendt, Hannah. 1973. "The Last Interview with Hannah Arendt (1973 English & French)." Interviewed by Roger Errera. Aired on Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française. Accessed May 30, 2024. YouTube video, 50:52. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FkoMm1hs1g&ab_channel=PhilosophyOverdose.

———. 1979. "On Arendt." In *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, edited by Melvyn A. Hill, 301–39. New York, N.Y.: St. Martin's Press.

———. (1951) 1994. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York, N.Y.: Harcourt, Inc.

———. (1961) 2006. *Between Past and Future*. New York, N.Y.; Toronto, ON: Penguin Group.

———. (1958) 2018. *The Human Condition*. Second Edition. Chicago, IL; London, U.K.: University of Chicago Press.

Berkowitz, Roger. 2011. "Bearing Logs on Our Shoulders: Reconciliation, Non-Reconciliation, and the Building of a Common World." *Theory & Event* 14 (1). https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2011.0001.

Blair, Tony. 2017. "Against Populism, the Center Must Hold." *The New York Times*, March 3, 2017, sec. Opinion. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/03/opinion/tony-blair-against-populism-the-center-must-hold.html.

Borriello, Arthur and Anton Jäger. 2023. *The Populist Moment: The Left After the Great Recession*. London, U.K.; New York, N.Y.: Verso.

Brown, Wendy. 1995. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

———. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York, N.Y.: Zone Books.

———. 2019. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press.

———. 2021. "Foreword." In *Seven Essays on Populism : For a Renewed Theoretical Perspective*, by Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia, vii–xxi. Cambridge, U.K.; Medford, MA: Polity.

Butler, Judith. 2024. *Who's Afraid of Gender?* Toronto, ON: Alfred A. Knopf Canada.

Callison, William, and Quinn Slobodian. 2021. "Coronapolitics from the Reichstag to the Capitol." *Boston Review*, January 12, 2021. https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/quinn-slobodian-toxic-politics-coronakspeticism/.

Canovan, Margaret. 1981. *Populism*. New York, N.Y. ; London, U.K.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

———. 2002 "The People, the Masses, and the Mobilization of Power: The Paradox of Hannah Arendt's Populism." *Social Research* 69 (2): 403–22.

Cecco, Leyland. 2022. "Canada truckers' vaccine protest spirals into calls to repeal all public health rules." *The Guardian*, January 28, 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/28/canada-truckers-covid-vaccine-mandate-protest-government.

Cillizza, Chris. 2018. "14 deeply revealing words from Donald Trump's '60 Minutes' interview." *CNN*, updated October 15, 2018. https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/15/politics/donald-trump-14-words-christine-blasey-ford/index.html.

Clanton, Gene. 1991. *Populism: The Humane Preference in America, 1890–1900*. Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers.

Cohen, Jean L. 2019. "What's Wrong with the Normative Theory (and the Actual Practice) of Left Populism." *Constellations* 26 (3): 391–407. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12427.

Connolly, William E. 2000. "The Nobility of Democracy." In *Vocations of Political Theory*, edited by Jason A. Frank and John Tambornino, 305–325. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

———. (1991) 2002. *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*. Expanded edition. Minneapolis, MN; London, U.K.: University of Minnesota Press.

———. 2017. *Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy under Trumpism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Coulthard, Glen Sean. 2016. “Resentment and Indigenous Politics.” In *The Settler Complex: Recuperating Binarism in Colonial Studies*, edited by Patrick Wolfe, 155–72. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA American Indian Studies Center.

Eisler, Dale. 2022. *From Left to Right: Saskatchewan's Political and Economic Transformation*. Regina, SK: University of Regina Press.

Epp, Roger. 2001. “The Political De-Skilling of Rural Communities.” In *Writing off the Rural West: Globalization, Governments, and the Transformation of Rural Communities*, edited by Roger Epp and Dave Whitson, 301–24. Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press/Parkland Institute.

———. 2003. “Their Own Schools of Democracy: The Visible Remains of Political Practice in Rural Alberta.” In *Aspenland II: On Women’s Lives and Work in Central Alberta*, edited by David Ridley, 45–54. Red Deer, AB: Central Alberta Regional Museums Network and the Central Alberta Historical Society.

Filax, Gloria. 2007. *Queer Youth in the Province of the “Severely Normal.”* Vancouver, B.C.: UBC Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1977. “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, 139–64. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Frank, Jason. 2018. “Populism Isn’t The Problem.” *Boston Review*, August 15, 2018. https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/jason-frank-populism-not-the-problem/.

Frank, Thomas. (2020) 2021. *The People, No: A Brief History of Anti-Populism*. First Picador paperback edition. New York, N.Y.: Picador.

Fraser, Nancy. 2017. “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump—and Beyond.” *American Affairs* 1 (4): 46–64.

Freedom House. 2024a. *Freedom in the World 2024: The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict*. Washington, D.C.: Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/FIW_2024_DigitalBooklet.pdf.

———. 2024b. “Canada: Freedom in the World 2024 Country Report.” Accessed May 30, 2024. https://freedomhouse.org/country/canada/freedom-world/2024.

Fukuyama, Francis. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York, N.Y.; Toronto, ON: Free Press.

Gerstle, Gary, Amy C. Offner, and Julia Ott. 2023. “Is It Over?” *Dissent*, Fall 2023, 17–26.

Goodwyn, Lawrence. 1978. *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press.

Haberman, Maggie. 2023. “Indicted or Barred From the Ballot: For Trump, Bad News Cements Support.” *The New York Times*, December 20, 2023, sec. U.S. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/20/us/politics/trump-republicans-colorado.html.

Hall, Stuart. (1988) 2021. *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*. Paperback reissue. New York, N.Y.; London, U.K.: Verso.

Heyes, Cressida J. 2020. *Anaesthetics of Existence: Essays on Experience at the Edge*. Durham, N.C.; London, U.K.: Duke University Press.

———. 2024. “Abnormal in Alberta: The Genealogy of ‘Severely Normal’ as a Biopolitical Dog Whistle.” *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 48 (March): 203–22. https://doi.org/10.3138/topia-2023-0049.

Honig, Bonnie. 1995. “Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity.” In *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, edited by Bonnie Honig, 135–66. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

———. 2021. *Shell Shocked: Feminist Criticism after Trump*. New York, N.Y.: Fordham University Press.

———. (1993) 2023. *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. 30th-anniversary edition. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Hyvönen, Ari-Elmeri. 2021. “The Value of the Surface: Reappreciating Embodiment, Labor, and Necessity in Arendt's Political Thought.” *Critical Times* 4 (2): 263–83. https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-9092732.

Ionescu, Ghița, and Ernest Gellner. 1969. “Introduction.” In *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, edited by Ghița Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, 1–8. London, U.K: The Macmillan Company.

Kaplan, Bruce Eric. 2009. *For God’s Sake*. Illustrated cartoon. *The New Yorker*, June 22, 2009. Accessed May 31, 2024. https://www.newyorker.com/cartoon/a14151.

Kazin, Michael. (1995) 1998. *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*. Revised Edition. Ithaca, N.Y. ; London, U.K.: Cornell University Press.

Klein, Naomi. 2023. *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World*. Toronto, ON: Alfred A. Knopf Canada.

Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. “Populism: What’s in a Name?” In *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, edited by Francisco Panizza, 32–49. London, U.K.; New York, N.Y.: Verso.

———. (2005) 2018. *On Populist Reason*. Paperback edition. London, U.K.; New York, N.Y.: Verso.

Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. (1985) 2014. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Paperback edition. London, U.K.; New York, N.Y.: Verso.

Laird, Gordon. 1998. *Slumming It at the Rodeo: The Cultural Roots of Canada’s Right-Wing Revolution*. Vancouver, B.C.: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd.

Laycock, David. 1990. *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies, 1910 to 1945*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

———. 2005. “Populism and the New Right in English Canada.” In *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, edited by Francisco Panizza, 172–202. New York, N.Y.; London, U.K.: Verso.

Leger. 2024. *Is Canada Broken?* Montréal, QC: Leger. https://leger360.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Leger_x_PostMedia_Is-Canada-broken-1.pdf.

Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. 2002. “Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism.” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2): 51–65.

Lewellyn, Amanda. 2024. “Can Canada Stave off Populism?” *Vox*, April 23, 2024. https://www.vox.com/2024/4/23/24137689/canada-populism-justin-trudeau-budget-plan.

Lipset, Seymour Martin. (1950) 1968. *Agrarian Socialism: The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan. A Study in Political Sociology*. Updated Edition. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books.

Lopez, German. 2020. “Donald Trump’s Long History of Racism, from the 1970s to 2020.” *Vox*, August 13, 2020. https://www.vox.com/2016/7/25/12270880/donald-trump-racist-racism-history.

Lukacs, Martin. 2019. *The Trudeau Formula: Seduction and Betrayal in an Age of Discontent*. Montréal, QC; Chicago, IL; London, U.K.: Black Rose Books.

MacPherson, C.B. (1953) 1962. *Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Party System*. Second edition. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Martin, Rachel. 2016. “The Making of Trump: Character in the 2016 Election.” *NPR*, September 4, 2016, sec. National. https://www.npr.org/2016/09/04/492599421/the-making-of-trump-character-in-the-2016-election.

McMath, Robert C. 1995. “Populism in Two Countries: Agrarian Protest in the Great Plains and Prairie Provinces.” *Agricultural History* 69 (4): 517–46.

Moffitt, Benjamin. 2018. “The Populism/Anti-Populism Divide in Western Europe.” *Democratic Theory* 5 (2): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2018.050202.

———. 2020. “The Trouble with Anti-Populism: Why the Champions of Civility Keep Losing.” *The Guardian*, February 14, 2020, sec. Politics. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/feb/14/anti-populism-politics-why-champions-of-civility-keep-losing.

Mouffe, Chantal. 1999. “Introduction: Schmitt’s Challenge.” In *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, edited by Chantal Mouffe, 1–6. London, U.K.; New York, N.Y.: Verso.

———. 2016. “Left Populism and Taking Back Democracy: A Conversation with Chantal Mouffe.” By Andrea Cely and Alejandro Mantilla, translated by David Broder. *Verso* (blog), March 21, 2016. https://www.versobooks.com/en-ca/blogs/news/2566-left-populism-and-taking-back-democracy-a-conversation-with-chantal-mouffe.

———. (2018) 2019. *For a Left Populism*. Paperback edition. London, U.K.; New York, N.Y.: Verso.

———. (1993) 2020. *The Return of the Political*. London, U.K.; New York, N.Y.: Verso.

Mounk, Yascha. 2018. *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Moynihan, Donald P. 2023. “Trump Has a Master Plan for Destroying the ‘Deep State.’” *The New York Times*, November 27, 2023, sec. Opinion. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/27/opinion/trump-deep-state-schedule-f.html.

Mudde, Cas. 2004. “The Populist Zeitgeist.” *Government and Opposition* 39 (4): 541–63. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x.

Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Naylor, Brian. 2021. “Read Trump’s Jan. 6 Speech, A Key Part Of Impeachment Trial.” *NPR*, February 10, 2021, sec. Politics. https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial.

Nguyen, C. Thi. 2020. *Games: Agency As Art*. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1967) 1968. *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and RJ Hollingdale. First Vintage Books Edition. New York, N.Y.: Vintage Books.

———. (1966) 1989a. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. Vintage Books Edition. New York, N.Y.: Vintage Books.

———. (1967) 1989b. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and RJ Hollingdale. Vintage Books Edition. New York, N.Y.; Toronto, ON: Random House, Inc.

———. (1997) 2008. "Homer's Contest." In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, revised student edition, edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson, translated by Carol Diethe, 174–81. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Onishi, Norimitsu, and Aurelien Breeden. 2020. "Macron Vows Crackdown on 'Islamist Separatism' in France." *The New York Times*, October 2, 2020, sec. World. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/02/world/europe/macron-radical-islam-france.html.

Panizza, Francisco. 2005. "Introduction: Populism and the Mirror of Democracy." In *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, edited by Francisco Panizza, 1–31. London, U.K.; New York, N.Y.: Verso.

Peck, Jamie. 2010. "Zombie Neoliberalism and the Ambidextrous State." *Theoretical Criminology* 14 (1): 104–10.

Phillips, Dom. 2019. "Bolsonaro declares Brazil's 'liberation from socialism' as he is sworn in." *The Guardian*, January 1, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/01/jair-bolsonaro-inauguration-brazil-president.

Protess, Ben, Jonah E. Bromwich, Maggie Haberman, Kate Christobek, Jesse McKinley, and William K. Rashbaum. 2024. "Trump Convicted on All Counts to Become America's First Felon President." *The New York Times*, May 30, 2024. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/30/nyregion/trump-convicted-hush-money-trial.html.

Rancière, Jacques. (2005) 2014. *Hatred of Democracy*. Translated by Steve Corcoran. London, U.K.; New York, N.Y.: Verso.

Rennie, Bradford James. 2000. *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy: The United Farmers and Farm Women of Alberta, 1909-1921*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Rizzitelli, Luisa. 2023. "Giorgia Meloni Treasures Italy's Families – Unless They Include Same-Sex Parents." *The Guardian*, October 28, 2023, sec. Opinion. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/28/giorgia-meloni-italy-families-same-sex-parents-rights.

Sandburg, Carl. (1936) 1964. *The People, Yes*. New York, N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.

Schmitt, Carl. (1932) 2007. *The Concept of the Political*. Translated by George Schwab. Expanded edition. Chicago, IL; London, U.K.: University of Chicago Press.

Siemens, H.W. 2009. "Nietzsche's Critique of Democracy (1870—1886)." *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 38 (Fall 2009): 20–37.

Sluga, Hans. 2017. "Donald Trump: Between Populist Rhetoric and Plutocratic Rule." Presented at the Program in Critical Theory, UC Berkeley, Berkeley, California, March. https://www.truthandpower.com/?p=350.

Smith, Danielle (@ABDanielleSmith). 2022. "The Global 'Woke' Establishment Is Causing Economic Chaos around the World. We Need Leaders Who Stand against Their Destructive Policies at Every Turn, Starting Right Here in Alberta! That's Why I'm Running. If You Stand with Me, Sign up Now at Http://Daniellesmith.ca #cdnpoli Https://T.Co/4mA0WMR3Cj." Twitter, July 21, 2022. https://twitter.com/ABDanielleSmith/status/1550201089063936001.

Smith, David. 2024. "Ron DeSantis put nearly all his eggs in the basket of a 'war on woke.'" *The Guardian*, January 22, 2024. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/jan/21/ron-desantis-republican-presidential-candidate-dropped-out-analysis.

Strauss, Barry. 2016. "Populism, II: Populares & Populists." *The New Criterion* 35 (2): 4–11.

Strikwerda, Eric. 2020. "Uncanny Resemblance." *Alberta Views*, June 1, 2020. https://albertaviews.ca/uncanny-resemblance/.

Táíwò, Olúfẹ́mi O. 2022. *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.

Taylor, Casey. 2022. "Truck convoy's message muddies the closer it gets to capital." *BayToday.ca*, January 26, 2022, sec. Local News. https://www.baytoday.ca/local-news/truck-convoys-message-muddies-the-closer-it-gets-to-capital-4994947.

Temin, David Myer. 2022. "'Nothing Much Had Happened': Settler Colonialism in Hannah Arendt." *European Journal of Political Theory* 21 (3): 514–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885119893077.

Tolton, Gord. 2009. *Deep Roots. Promising Future*. Calgary, AB: United Farmers of Alberta. https://archives.ufa.com/viewer/deep-roots-promising-future?p=12&type=static.

Trump, Donald J. 2017. "Remarks at a 'Make America Great Again' Rally in Melbourne, Florida." Speech transcription by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley. The American Presidency Project. Accessed May 31, 2024. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/323658.

——— (contact@support.donaldjtrump.com). 2024a "My private letter for Chris." Trump Campaign mailing list achieves, Archive of Political Emails, January 15, 2024. https://politicalemails.org/messages/1292247.

——— (contact@win.donaldjtrump.com). 2024b. "The Deep State is knocking at my door!" Trump Campaign mailing list achieves, Archive of Political Emails, January 27, 2024. https://politicalemails.org/messages/1306067.

——— (contact@trump-emails.com). 2024c. "I need to know you will never leave me!" Trump Campaign mailing list achieves, Archive of Political Emails, May 14, 2024. https://politicalemails.org/messages/1420607.

——— (contact@trump-emails.com). 2024d. "I need you to be my voice." Trump Campaign mailing list achieves, Archive of Political Emails, May 15, 2024. https://politicalemails.org/messages/1421317.

——— (contact@win.donaldjtrump.com). 2024e. "What are you wearing?" Trump Campaign mailing list achieves, Archive of Political Emails, May 22, 2024. https://politicalemails.org/messages/1429532.

——— (contact@win.donaldjtrump.com). 2024f. "I love you." Trump Campaign mailing list achieves, Archive of Political Emails, May 25, 2024. https://politicalemails.org/messages/1432723.

——— (contact@win.donaldjtrump.com). 2024g. "Chris, are you awake?" Trump Campaign mailing list achieves, Archive of Political Emails, May 29, 2024, 1:48 a.m. https://politicalemails.org/messages/1435624.

——— (contact@win.donaldjtrump.com). 2024h. "I'll never forget what you did for me." Trump Campaign mailing list achieves, Archive of Political Emails, June 1, 2024. https://politicalemails.org/messages/1440808.

United Farmers of Alberta. 1919. *How to Organize and Carry on a Local of the United Farmers of Alberta*. Calgary, AB: Office of the Province Secretary, U.F.A. Accessed May 30, 2024. http://peel.library.ualberta.ca/bibliography/4540.html?pagesview=3dwall#pages.

Urbinati, Nadia. 1998. "Democracy and Populism." *Constellations* 5 (1): 110–24.

———. 2014. *Democracy Disfigured : Opinion, Truth, and the People*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. 2019. *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vinx, Lars. (2010) 2019. "Carl Schmitt." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Fall 2019

revised edition. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schmitt/.

Weyland, Kurt. 2013. “Latin America’s Authoritarian Drift: The Threat from the Populist Left.” *Journal of Democracy* 24 (3): 18–32.

Wiles, Peter. 1969. “A Syndrome, Not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on Populism.” In *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, edited by Ghița Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, 166–79. London, U.K.: The Macmillan Company.

Wintour, Patrick. 2018. “Hillary Clinton: Europe Must Curb Immigration to Stop Rightwing Populists.” *The Guardian*, November 22, 2018, sec. World news. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/22/hillary-clinton-europe-must-curb-immigration-stop-populists-trump-brexit.

Wolin, Sheldon. 1994. “Fugitive Democracy.” *Constellations* 1 (1): 11–25. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8675.1994.tb00002.x.

Young, Clifford. 2024. *Populism in 2024*. Paris, France: Ipsos. https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2024-02/Ipsos%20Populism%20Final%20February%202024.pdf.

Young, Walter D. 1978. *Democracy and Discontent: Progressivism, Socialism, and Social Credit in the Canadian West*. Second Edition. Toronto, ON; Montréal, QC: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited.

Young-Bruehl, Elisabeth. 1982. *Hannah Arendt: For Love of The World*. New Haven, CT; London, U.K.: Yale University Press.

Zerilli, Linda M.G. 2005. *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. Chicago, IL; London, U.K.: University of Chicago Press.