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Beyond Moral Condemnation: Confronting Ideological Populism in Democratic Politics

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Only possible because of

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Friends & lovers near and far

Fiona Apple's "Fetch the Bolt Cutters"

The Stevenson Library

My Mother

To my father, who is my greatest influence, even in his absence.

Preface

"the criminal regimes were made not by criminals but by enthusiasts convinced they had discovered the only road to paradise. They defended that road so valiantly that they were forced to execute many people. Later it became clear that there was no paradise, that the enthusiasts were therefore murderers"[1]

-Milan Kundera

This current moment in global, political history is being shaped by the presence and success of right-wing populist politics. Notably, the growth and dominance of right-wing populism has shocked political systems and culture in the United States, where the conceptual thread of 'the people' has run through history since the founding of the nation. This far-right populist movement is perhaps the most divisive of any modern political campaign, and it has furthered the already profound polarization of the American public. The election of Donald Trump, and its aftermath, reveal the irony of his form of far-right populism. This is a movement which claims to represent the 'American people', yet its slim electoral victory sparked one of the strongest debates about elections and representation in modern American history.

Populism is understood and applied as an incredibly generalized term and is mostly intended as a pejorative in political discourse.[2] To be more transparent, being called a populist is tantamount to being accused of fascist thinking, of committing a serious moral misstep if not a more fundamental injustice. Yet, the only notions directly signified by the term populism are of

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[1] Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 176.

[2] Jennifer Rubin, "Bernie Sanders and the populist conceit," *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/03/03/populist-conceit/
Mark Rice-Oxley and Ammar Kalia, "How to spot a populist," *The Guardian*, December 3, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/03/what-is-populism-trump-farage-orban-bolsonaro
Take, for example, just the headline of an opinion piece in the Washington Post: "Bernie Sanders and the Populist Conceit", or in a news piece in the Guardian: "How to spot a populist". The term 'populism' is a signal of difficult or dangerous politics, of political threat and/or upheaval.

popularity, of being of 'the people'. In his book *What is Populism?* Jan Werner-Müller acknowledges the "complete conceptual chaos" we face as we approach the topic of populism.[3] So, to allege 'populism' as a statement of moral opposition, and only that, scarcely brings us closer to material political progress. If there is to be a politically viable opposition to populism, it must be robust in its claim of what populism *does* and why that matters, and it must move beyond a superficial moral condemnation.

At this point, I am interested in observing the loud, apparent opposition to the far-right politics of the moment and identifying both the limits and insights of this popular critique of populism as dangerous and anti-democratic. This involves taking seriously claims that far-right American politics are populist, moving beyond the assumption that the allegation of 'populism' as a pejorative is simply a self-conscious response to success on the Right. It is fundamentally a project about democracy: as a cultural influence, a system of governance, a social reality, an ideal. I am writing it in response to the "need for nuanced political judgment to help us determine precisely where democracy ends and populist peril begins."[4] The language of democracy is central to populism, both in populist rhetoric itself and in critiques of populism. When populists or their critics use the language of popular sovereignty, national identity, belonging, and rights status, they are also exposing their deeply held convictions about the nature of political organization.

Any kind of otherwise legitimate commentary on far-right politics risks being marked hypocritical, if not overlooked altogether, if it does not consider its own relation to the kinds of ideological trappings that it recognizes and condemns in the movement under criticism. If we believe that it is what is ideological about populism that makes it dangerous, we must be aware

[3] Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (London: Penguin Random House, 2017), 10.
[4] Müller, *Populism*, 6.

of our own ideological tendencies. There is a sense that, even with careful effort, we cannot avoid ideology in our thinking: philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek notes to this point that "the subject who maintains his distance towards the ritual [of ideology] is unaware of the fact that the ritual already dominates him from within."[5] In his writing on populism in particular, Žižek suggests that "the automatic dismissal of entertaining any thoughts outside the established postpolitical coordinates as 'populist demagoguery' is hitherto the purest proof that we effectively live under a new *Denkverbot.*"[6] This comment addresses two separate conversations: one about ideology, and the other about populism. The German *denkverbot* translates roughly to "thought ban", and reminds us of the pressing danger of ideological thinking: that it de-incentivizes critical thought and misleadingly (though conveniently) superimposes onto the process of history a "consistency which exists nowhere in the realm of reality."[7] Žižek suggests that the critique of populism itself tends toward an ideological form; he may be correct in his observation that the term 'populism' is used too broadly, in a manner that overlooks particular circumstances and flattens out the nuances of political reality. However, this should not steer one away from using the term 'populism' as a conceptual tool of understanding as parts of society begin to confront and challenge politics on the far-right. Rather, it should incentivize the pursuit of bringing forth a thoughtful critique of far-right politics, especially those which may be best understood as populist.

To confront political reality, to play an appropriate role in the progress of history, we must give ourselves the benefit of full context by doing historically grounded political theory. This involves not only detailing 'populist' narratives or acts, but considering why it is useful, or

[5] Slavoj Žižek. *The Plague of Fantasies*. (London/New York: Verso, 1997), 6
[6] Slavoj Žižek, "Against the Populist Temptation," *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 553.
[7] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1948), 471.

even essential, to think of a movement as populist at all. Each iteration of populism plays its own distinct role in political history. Part of understanding populist movements, then, is looking back in history to identify what conditions their politics emerged from. The way that we think about the processes and the movement of history is often crucial in how we process and then respond to political movements. In his famous critique of historicism, "Theses on the Philosophy of History*"*, Walter Benjamin poses that "the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule."[8] It is not out of turn to say that contemporary American politics is the 'emergency situation' in which we live. The election of President Donald J. Trump in 2016 signaled a decisive shift in the political landscape of the country. Even if Trump's success has been many years of history in the making, his election itself was unprecedented and is recognized as such by those on both ends of the political spectrum. The Left (and the center, as represented by some standard news establishments) have declared this particular emergency to be a democratic emergency, concerning the integrity of our political systems and the rights of the people as citizens of a democracy. We cannot, then, dismiss right-wing populism as a chance phenomena having nothing to do with democratic politics.

In thinking about the particularities of contemporary politics as they relate to a broader historical moment, it is helpful to have a framework that grounds us in the process of history. In addition to the notion of the historical emergency, Benjamin puts forth in his *Theses* a metaphor explaining the role and function of progress in history.[9] He refers to an image of "the Angel of

[8] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 257.
[9] The metaphor of the "Angel of History" is Benjamin's interpretation of an early-20th century monoprint by the Swiss-German artist Paul Klee.

History", interpreting the movement and disposition of the Angel as insights to the historical process as a whole. The passage reads:

> [The Angel's] face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[10]

By this understanding, history is written by the victors of contention and conflict, and the narratives that are recognized as historical reality are in fact only partial recollections of the whole. Countless historical phenomena are left behind, unaddressed, as history moves blindly into the future, driven by the idealism and ideology of "that which we call progress." The fervor of politics and ideology as "progress" suggests to us that the flow of time is linear, and that the left-over phenomena of history, the debris existing outside of dominant narratives, are truly *of* the past, and therefore are without bearing on the present moment. Benjamin's historical-materialist perspective points to the necessity of examining the material realities that are seen as existing outside of history. This mode of historical critique is, in some sense, a defense against ideology, against a conception of history that would lead us to act according to an idealism which is unrepresentative of reality. In the context of the current project, the process of examining left-over historical phenomena will require that we come up against the paradoxes inherent in democracy, both in practice and in theory. It will also require that we loosen the grip on our own attachments to democracy as a political ideal, as an indicator of "that which we call progress."

[10] Benjamin, "Theses", 257-258.

If we think of politics as an attempt to organize society according to our understanding of the world, in line with how we think of human need, behavior, and aspirations, then it is also an embodiment of the concept of progress. There is a practical necessity for politics at the same time that there is a fundamental impossibility of developing structure without relying on uncertainties or on idealism. It is for this reason that it is crucial to look at dominant political movements with a critical eye towards their ideological tendencies and to identify specific notions of progress within the narratives that they put forth in the public sphere. This is important as we confront the "emergency situation" of the rise of populism in contemporary American politics. There is an extremely wide disconnect between the political Right and Left, yet both identify with the values of liberal democracy and with the institutions of the American constitutional republic.[11] The rise of far-right populism within a state whose political culture and institutions are deeply connected to concepts of 'the people', of national identity and popular sovereignty, calls for a moment of reflection on the concepts and values of what we call 'American democracy'. What do we mean by it? And what do we want from it?

[11] Having entered into this project primarily interested in the analysis of populism on the political Right, I have repeatedly come up against the issue of my own personal blind spot as it concerns such analysis of Leftist populism. In many ways, this is an issue of my own relationship to Leftist politics: regardless of my individual political persuasion, my intention in writing this project is not to define or discuss far-Right politics from a Leftist perspective, but rather to engage with the critical dialogue surrounding populism and far-Right politics while also *keeping in mind* the status of Leftist politics—in other words, what do today's far-right movements mean for those on the Left? How might those on the Left respond to the same social and cultural forces that have been the impetus behind far-right political success?

Contents

Introduction

In recent historical memory, liberal democracy in the United States has faced the challenge of limited political participation. The democratic institutions of representation and equal political participation that the nation was founded with are often taken for granted: voters are apathetic, and turnout in even the most crucial elections runs low.[12] These patterns point us to broader questions that we must ask about our political system: what do we believe or expect Democracy, the State, or politics to do for us and our communities? The robustness of democratic practices and institutions mirrors our own understanding of the political system. If we sense that the promises of democracy are never realized, our dissatisfaction will be reflected in the health of the democracy, and its systems will cease to function. In other words, if we do not think that democracy works, we will not feel motivated to participate in the ways that make it work, and our lack of faith will transform democratic apathy into a self-fulfilling prophecy. This appears to be especially likely in a nation which was founded with a system of representative democracy and whose citizens do not fully recognize the value of their right to participate. Such a populace enjoys a lengthy historical distance from the dangers of an opposing system and lacks a cultural memory that urges it to take advantage of its freedom. But this conclusion is shortsighted—large sections of the population have struggled for equal rights within the democratic system, and still face structural barriers to participatory equality today.

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[12] Drew Desilver, "U.S. trails most developed countries in voter turnout," *Pew Research Center*, May 21, 2018. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/21/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/
Voter turnout in US elections is consistently lower than turnout in most developed countries. Even in the highly politicized and contentious 2016 election, only around 56 per cent of the voting-age population voted. These numbers raise questions about the accessibility of voting and the fairness of voting systems, but are also indicative of factors that are less easily measured, including attitudes toward voting and systems of democratic representation.

Another explanation for the decline of popular participation in politics is that some basic faith in the system of American politics and democracy, some unshakeable image of the nation's fairness and freedom, suspends the population in the comfortable belief that things could never really get *that bad*, that the American political system will never sink to authoritarianism or fascism. This is, after all, the promise of our democracy as a constitutional republic: protection against abuses of power and against the suppression of basic liberties. Yet there is plenty of dormant discontent, uneasiness, and anger—on the Right and the Left—about the state of politics and society. Discontent about the state of things has come to the fore as a crisis of representation. The dominance (real or perceived) of the educated, increasingly liberal elite in America has left large parts of the population feeling as though they lack proper representation. The appearance and structure of American society has changed dramatically since the mid-twentieth century, and there is a vastly different conception of who 'the people' are, in the sense of which people tend to hold power and influence. This is why, as Müller puts it: "populism is seen as a threat but also as a potential corrective for a politics that has somehow become too distant from 'the people'."[13] In a representative democracy, a politics that is distant from the people is one of low citizen engagement and participation. Slavoj Žižek tells us that "when people awaken from their apolitical slumber, it is as a rule in the guise of a rightist populist revolt."[14] The populist moment in the United States, although not entirely unique, has a particularly complicated character. The reason being that this populism is operating within a democratic culture which has a particularly strong tradition of the very ideals and language that appear in populism more generally: popular sovereignty and the image of 'the people'. It is a movement that has moved from an "apolitical slumber" to a radical claim of true identity and pure democratic politics.

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[13] Müller, *Populism*, 8.
[14] Slavoj Žižek, "Against the Populist Temptation," *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 552.

It is important to note that, for the purposes of my analysis, I will be focusing on the phenomenon of populism on the far Right, rather than on the far Left, as it would be ill-considered to pretend that Leftist populism does not also warrant an in-depth analysis. Although there are precedents for populist success, measured by democratically-elected regimes, on both ends of the political spectrum—some of which are arguably stronger or more intuitive for Leftist populism—I will argue that the rise of right-wing populism in the United States reveals something fundamental about American cultural and political identity which has serious implications for the status of human rights and democratic freedoms. The contemporary incarnation of populism on the Right of American politics lends a clearer view of the evolution of the nation's political culture and identity, and of the tensions which continue to draw the evolution forward.

Ultimately, the momentum of the right populist movement is centered as an antidemocratic response to the opening up and progressivization of American politics and society. I will argue that this populism appears in an ideological form that draws upon common wisdom and historical narratives in order to revive the foundational political myth of 'the people' and of popular sovereignty in order to reconstruct an exclusive, narrow conception of 'people' and political legitimacy. Far-right populism in American politics uses democratic language and appeal to achieve illiberal ends.[15] It is an ideological rendering of the people within an exclusive imaginary of legitimate American identity. But before elaborating on this claim, I

[15] Popular will and national character are called upon as justifications for the militarization of borders, the detainment and exclusion of migrants, the integration of xenophobic and racist language into official government usage, and the narrowing of an otherwise expansive legitimate American identity. The Trump administration regularly attacks other key elements of liberal democratic society, including civil society and the free press, in the name of 'the people'.

feel it is only appropriate to trace a brief history of the understanding of ideology in society and politics.

Chapter One: Ideology in Political Movements

I. Ideology in Relevant Political Philosophy

In the lexicon of modern politics, 'ideology' is a concept that dominates our understanding of political thinking. We often hear and think of individuals, politicians, parties, organizations as being driven by ideology; while such usage suggests ideology as cause or belief, its definition is still vague at best and is difficult to pin down. Perhaps our understanding of ideology is foreshortened by its predominant existence within the realm of politics, where it is scarcely considered to be anything other than a force of political will and power, or simply of political opinion. The process of politics is ultimately an expression of humanity's will to organize life and society—political will begins with the perception of the world through a particular lens, a way of thinking. At its very simplest, this is ideology. But how and why does ideology function, and what does this functioning reveal about humanity's tendencies in politics that can help us to better understand the political circumstances we find ourselves in? What are the implications of processes of political thinking on the outcomes of politics?

Here, my understanding of ideology is as follows: ideology is a form of response to difficult questions or seemingly paradoxical realities. A political ideology responds to the challenges of governing and organizing human communities. These challenges are perhaps also the impossibilities of governance. Such challenges arise from the relationship between political ideals and material realities. There is always a dialectical tension between the language of ideals associated with a national politics or identity and the language of political movements which seek to gain power. This is especially true in a liberal democracy, where the principles of free expression and popular sovereignty mean that parties and movements can make diverse claims

and appeals which all have equal potential to be legitimized via receipt of public support. A political movement becomes ideological when it responds to political problems using a language of strict idealism.

My framing of ideology as a response to the challenges of particular political and historical circumstances draws heavily upon Theodor Adorno's work in the section on "ticket thinking" in *The Authoritarian Personality*. Here, Adorno suggests that ideology helps us approach "the task of understanding the ununderstandable, [the] paradoxical in itself."[16] Ideology in politics appears as a response to the paradoxes of politics, the tension between ideals and implementation. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels add to my framing that ideology always begins in reality, though it does not reflect it. This assumption about ideology's relationship to reality helps us understand how ideologies hold onto an image of legitimacy and truth even as they devolve into idealist fantasy. Louis Althusser's outlining of the process of interpellation is also relevant here, as it points to the way that ideology engages with individual subjectivity and identity. This will eventually help to explain how political ideologies involve the individual in the image of a greater narrative, a broader movement of history. Finally, and importantly, my understanding of ideology rests on Hannah Arendt's notion in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that ideology discourages critical thought.

It is appropriate to begin with the work of Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* and of Althusser in *On Ideology*. These thinkers are historical materialists who are considering ideology as part of the functioning of production and capital within the broader context of class struggle and consciousness. The works are in conversation with one another. Althusser writes: "As Marx said, every child knows that a social formation which did not reproduce the conditions

[16] Theodor Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality* (London/New York: Verso, 2019), 664.

of a production at the same time as it produced would not last a year. The ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production."[17] Ideology facilitates the reproduction of the conditions of production and allows for the perpetuation of social formations that depend on and aid the production process. "The reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also… a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology."[18] This tells us that ideology, which is initially a metaphysical concept, shapes the relations of power in society. It also tells us that ideology demands submission, in the sense that total adherence to a way of thinking is unnatural. In this submission, we must forgo our intuitive forms of thinking and accept rigid ideological structure. Ideology is borne out of the material necessity for organizational structure and fixed, authoritative truth. It is completely inclusive in that it designates a fixed position for each group and individual in society, yet because of this same rigid structure can only serve a select few out of the diverse totality of a population. Ideology comes into being when relations within society are such that there are large populations of individuals who do not govern themselves, but who must be the subjects of ideological structure and function in order for the division and exercise of power to remain constant. Put simply, the ways of thinking and understanding embodied in ideologies come to affect and determine material realities and processes of history.

In some ways ideology is a 'practice' which extends to include forms of disposition and behavior that embody corresponding ways of thinking about the world. This practice is so robust that ideology comes to be associated with the state and institutional structure more generally. Althusser famously calls these "Ideological State Apparatuses", which are "a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and

[17] Louis Althusser, *On Ideology*. (London/New York: Verso, 2008), 1.
[18] Althusser, *On Ideology*, 6.

specialized institutions."[19] Notably for the discussion of ideology in politics, Althusser includes political parties as institutions that act as ideological apparatuses. This can be taken to mean that ways of thinking in politics crucially shape political realities, regardless of the extent to which they truly reflect reality and relevant politicized topics.

This is not to say, however, that ideology appears from nowhere—if that were the case, its semblance to reality would be so weak that it would be difficult to truly *believe* in, or even to passively accept. Ideology does not reflect, but rather *begins* in reality. Marx and Engels themselves emphasize this: "We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process."[20] At first, this seems to seriously contradict the notion of ideology as "pure illusion." A more careful reading, though, reveals that Marx and Engels simply mean to say that ideology, though never reflecting reality, is always beginning from it, is always referencing materiality. In Althusser's writing, ideology brings us into conscious subjecthood: "*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects.*"[21] Ideology provides the individual a static role in society, a stable identity within a world that is fundamentally unstable and changing. Ideology calls forth from the individual "the *recognition* that they really do occupy the place it designates for them as theirs in the world, a fixed residence."[22]

Althusser's conception of ideology is contained within the frames of Marxism: ultimately, ideological State apparatuses facilitate the reproduction of capitalist relations of exploitation. The analysis of ideology in contemporary politics requires a much wider view of ideology, but nonetheless rests on the insights of Marx, Engels, and Althusser. That is, ideology

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[19] Althusser, *On Ideology*, 17.
[20] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 38.
[21] Althusser, *On Ideology*, 47.
[22] Althusser, *On Ideology*, 52.

is to be understood as a metaphysical phenomenon that structures our ways of thinking and, in turn, determines our material conditions. Ideology "is conceived as a pure illusion, a pure dream, i.e. as nothingness. All its reality is external to it."[23] The irony of ideology is that it is totally unreal at the same time that it is the *most* real, a parent of reality.

Where this understanding of ideology—from Marx and Engles, and from Althusser—is unclear is in the dimension of individual adherence and behavior. While ideology may undeniably structure, even guide, the reproduction of certain conditions, it only does so to the extent that it engages with the individual psyche and all of the social and cultural components that it seeks to organize. Althusser's formulation of the *interpellation* of the individual as a concrete subject via ideology reaches toward the idea that ideology engages with individual subjectivities—experiences which are highly specific and dependent on historical circumstances and conditions. In his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek emphasizes a similar critique of Althusser's work on ideology, claiming that Althusser:

> never succeeded in thinking out the link between Ideological State Apparatuses and ideological interpellation: how does the Ideological State Apparatus… 'internalize' itself; how does it produce the effect of ideological belief in a Cause and the interconnecting effect of subjectivation, of recognition of one's ideological position? … Althusser speaks only of the process of ideological interpellation through which the symbolic machine of ideology is 'internalized' into the ideological experience of Meaning and Truth: but we can learn from Pascal that this 'internalization', by structural necessity, never fully succeeds, that there is always a residue, a leftover, a stain of traumatic irrationality and senselessness sticking to it, and that *this leftover, far from hindering the full submission of the subject to the ideological command, is the very condition of it*[24]

This formulation is best understood in conjunction with Žižek's proposition that

> Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our 'reality'

[23] Althusser, *On Ideology*, 33.
[24] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London/New York: Verso, 1989), 43.

> itself: an 'illusion' which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel [antagonism].[25]

Ideology functions only with the recognition from those interpellated subjects that it is not entirely unreal (a dream) but rather an interpretation of social reality (fantasy). What Adorno refers to as the 'ununderstandable', Žižek may call the 'unfaceable'. The individual submits fully to the ideological command because he retains, through and despite this ideological domination, an element of his subjectivity that is strong enough to allow him to exercise his full belief in a Cause.

Other important theoretical insights on ideology come from Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and from Adorno in *The Authoritarian Personality*. Unlike the historical materialists, who primarily consider the relationship between ideology and material conditions, both Arendt and Adorno are thinking about ideology in terms of political life.[26] They are interested in understanding how individual thought and behavior, as part of a larger constellation of politics, are influenced by ideology. This approach is less abstract than the historical-material conception of ideology, and it is perhaps more useful in the analysis of contemporary political movements and trends, as it is more clearly applicable to case studies and examples from recent political history.

In chapter thirteen of *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government", Arendt discusses ideology within the frame of totalitarian government and politics. To some extent, she follows the historical materialist point concerning the falseness, the illusory quality, of ideology. However, she is importantly more specific and articulate about how ideologies take form within political thought, and she focuses largely on the structure of

[25] Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 45.
[26] This is not to say that the work of either Arendt or Adorno is not connected to historical materialism.

ideology. For Arendt, ideologies are "—isms which to the satisfaction of their adherents can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise."[27] This equates in practice to a flattening out of reality, a dismissal of the complexity of subjective experience in the interest of constructing a reality that is simple to grasp and to process. Still, it must be noted that this is an extremely broad definition, and that it does not imply that every "—ism" is a threatening specter of totalitarianism. It does not suggest that ideology is entirely neutral; it admits that "all ideologies contain totalitarian elements", but qualifies that these are only fully developed by totalitarian movements.[28] Thinking about ideology in the context of totalitarian politics can help us understand its tendencies, characteristics, and its essential statement about the relationship between the individual and the realm of politics.

Politics not only draws forth some of the most urgent and consequential questions of this world, but also demands answers that will structure policy plans. Ideological thinking provides a shortcut past the difficult work of critical reflection in this process by allowing political actors to reach conclusions based on a highly specific and unusually definite interpretation of history and of present reality. This general structure of ideology, as well as the limited way it encourages the individual to engage with reality, is where Arendt sees the patterns of totalitarianism. To be submerged in the world of ideological thinking prepares the individual to live in—or under—a political society where critical thought about structural and policy decisions may reveal a basic incongruence between individual and regime morality. In the end, the fantasy-construction of ideology betrays those who believe in it.

Human efforts to analyze and philosophize about the world are remarkably productive and meaningful, but are in the end always limited in their ability to provide answers or a sense of

[27] Arendt, *Origins*, 468.
[28] Arendt, *Origins*, 470.

absolute understanding. William Wordsworth famously wrote in the early 19th century: "The world is too much with us; late and soon."[29] Facing the limits of our own understanding is one of the defining challenges of modernity. The way that ideology shapes the thought process and puts forth a complete and structured understanding of the world allows us to ignore this challenge. Arendt thoughtfully observes that "ideologies are never interested in the miracle of being."[30] Interest in the miracle of being leads inevitably to the reality of inconclusiveness. As a result, and in response to this problem, "ideologies pretend to know the mysteries of the whole historical process—the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, the uncertainties of the future—because of the logic inherent in their respective ideas"[31]. That ideologies "pretend" to know so much implies that the mysteries of the historical process, whether past, present, or future, are perhaps not fit for precise explanation or understanding. A mode of thought which acknowledges uncertainty and plural subjectivity is difficult to follow in politics, where the task of organizing human life and society requires us to always have an answer. In politics, we must constantly make decisions and provide answers. Even if we are (to ourselves) unsure of our response, it comes from some basic belief in knowledge and truth. Ideology functions to affirm the decision-maker's right to political action: if the action is made on the basis of truth, then its consequences are justified and placed beyond the pale of criticism.

Adorno explores this problem in *The Authoritarian Personality*, a sociological work written in collaboration with Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford. The famously lengthy book was written after the Holocaust, and attempted to deconstruct and understand the sociology behind fascism and antisemitism. A section titled "Ticket thinking and

[29] William Wordsworth, "The World Is Too Much With Us," Poetry Foundation, accessed 26 April 2020. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45564/the-world-is-too-much-with-us
[30] Arendt, *Origins*, 469
[31] Arendt, *Origins*, 469.

personalization in politics" addresses the psychological function of ideological thinking. Adorno explains that "the individual has to cope with problems which he actually does not understand, and he has to develop certain techniques of orientation, however crude and fallacious they may be, which help him to find his way through the dark, as it were."[32] Individuals, depending on their political and historical surroundings, face different sets of "ununderstandable" problems. They turn to "techniques of orientation" which take the form of patterns of thinking and believing and which serve as a basis for political action or allegiance to parties and movements. While the "ununderstandable" problems that prompt the development of ideological thinking may well be different incarnations of the same basic problems or questions, they are nonetheless specific to their time and place in material history, and so are the frameworks of thinking that emerge in response. Again, ideologies "ascend from earth to heaven", responding to reality, but not necessarily reflecting it.[33] What may be "crude and fallacious" in an ideology should not be unthinkingly dismissed as illusion, but rather carefully examined as historically-specific phenomena.

II. Is Populism an Ideology?

It is only productive to discuss a form of politics as ideology if the understanding of the term is well-defined. In the absence of a clear theoretical consensus on what constitutes ideology, the concept should not be avoided or abandoned, but continually revisited. The concept of ideology should be recognized as a tool of understanding, rather than as an authority or as meaningless in itself. To this point, I have found the concept of ideology helpful in thinking about far-right populist politics, particularly in contemporary America.

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[32] Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality*, 663-664.
[33] Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 37.

As we approach the question of populism as ideology, let us begin with the claim that populism, as a form of political thought, is neutral. This is not to say that *populisms* as political movements are neutral, but that the concept of populism in itself is. The neutrality is necessarily lost as each incarnation of populism enters the realm of politics and is shaped by the historical and material conditions of its day. Populism is an equally slippery and difficult concept as ideology, and the qualities of its structure and content will receive a complete exposition later in my writing. The following comment on populism's neutrality comes again from Žižek: "populism is inherently neutral… [it] occurs when a series of particular 'democratic demands (for better social security, health services, lower taxes, peace, and so on) is enchained in a series of equivalences, and this enchainment produces 'people' as the universal political subject."[34] Here, populism is formally neutral, rather than inherently totalitarian or fascist. It loses this neutrality, however, when 'people' becomes exclusive and ceases to reflect real relations among society and between the people and the State. At this point, populism becomes ideological; this is exactly what has happened with the emergence and dominance of far right American populism, which weaponizes the language of democracy as it develops a limited notion of 'people' and intends illiberal, antidemocratic ends.

In his article "Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective", political scientist Paris Aslanidis posits that populism is not an ideology but rather a "discursive frame". He argues against populism's status as ideology by comparing it to other "fully developed — *ism[s]*" which he believes to be truly ideological. Liberalism and socialism are two primary examples that Aslanidis gives of 'full' ideologies. From his perspective, an ideology "connotes a series of far-ranging policy implications and captures the hearts and minds of dedicated partisans

[34] Žižek, "Against the Populist Temptation," 553.

around the world."[35] Although Aslanidis intends in this article to be *more* specific about what counts as ideology—and to prove through this conceptual narrowing that populism is not ideological—his argumentation blows the concept of ideology wide open. If all political movements or philosophies that have broad policy implications and mobilize or inspire the public are considered to be ideology, then all efforts to organize human communities (including populist movements) are ideological. His is an irresponsible interpretation of ideology—in it, all politics is ideological, and the concept of ideology becomes a tautology that does not give us any insight into the structure of political thought. Aslanidis' implication that all politics is ideological should not be dismissed completely; it is entirely possible that ideology is inescapable, and that especially in the modern world we must grasp onto frameworks for thinking that are, to varying degrees, removed from reality. However, in acknowledging this possibility, we must remain critical of the relationship between political forms and reality. In practice, and in the context of the discussion of populism, this means that we cannot discount 'discursive frames' like populism from being considered ideological. This is not to say that all populism is ideological, but rather that certain populist movements are best understood as ideology.

Aslanidis puts forth a structural analysis of ideology which subjects the reader to superfluous mental gymnastics and ultimately misses the analytical point. The question of whether or not populism is an ideology concerns the relationship between political narrative and truth. It also urges us to identify what is 'ununderstandable' or 'unfaceable' about our social reality that exists behind the wall of ideology. Aslanidis misinterprets this struggle of truth and politics to be an issue of conceptual organization, classification, and measurement. Portraying ideology as a quantifiable category forecloses analysis of its most significant dimensions—its

[35] Paris Aslanidis, "Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective," *Political Studies* 64, IS (2016): 89.

reflections on consciousness and belief, the nuanced and unpredictable interplay of lived experience and moral valuation. Eventually, Aslanidis concludes that the "conceptual genus of populism" is best understood not as ideology but as "*anti-elite discourse in the name of the sovereign People* [emphasis original]."[36] The point is not that Aslanidis is *incorrect*, but rather that his conclusion is not inconsistent with the understanding of ideology as I have presented it thus far. In fact, it may strengthen the argument for populism as ideology: the *discourse* of populism is put into motion, gaining political power and significance, not on its own, but rather through its ideological tendencies. To use Althusser's language, this discourse is what frames the ideological *interpellation* or *hailing* of the individual as a subject. The discourse of a political movement enables it to function ideologically and to construct "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."[37]

The tendency toward ideology is observable in the extent to which a way of thinking is divorced from reality and organized by an external concept or principle in its place. Arendt refers to this "emancipation of thought from experience" as she discusses ideological political movements.[38] This also concerns the extent to which political ideals are recognized as *only* ideals, rather than absolute truths. Political philosophies like liberalism and socialism are much more adaptable and responsive to real developments than is an ideological form of populism. An ideological populism depends on highly specific historical circumstances, ie. the conception of a national people and its character, and is less likely than a more developed political philosophy to accept uncertainties.

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[36] Aslanidis, "Is Populism an Ideology?," 64.
[37] Althusser, *On Ideology*, 36.
[38] Arendt, *Origins*, 471.

Let us return to Adorno's notion that ideology is what helps us to understand the 'ununderstandable'. If ideology is a response to a set of social and political challenges that are difficult to grasp, then ideological movements respond to specific patterns and occurrences, and far-right populism responds to an apparent series of important yet difficult questions about the nature of American politics and democracy (who are the people, what is the national character, who counts, etc.). Populism as an ideological response to democracy installs it as a *shadow of democracy.* Jan Werner-Müller makes a similar suggestion: "I believe that a proper grasp of populism also helps deepen our understanding of democracy. Populism is something like a permanent shadow of modern representative democracy, and a constant peril."[39] Approaching an analysis of today's far-right populist movement in America in terms of ideology lends us an insight not only into populism as a form of politics, but also more trenchantly into the contradictory nature of American democratic systems and culture.

[39] Müller, *Populism*, 11.

Chapter Two: 'The People' of Democracy

I. Populism as a Form of Democratic Politics

The surge of populist politics in modern democratic history has revitalized the effort among political scientists and historians, among other thinkers, to come to a stronger consensus on what populism really is. There is a renewed interest in—and urgency to—what constitutes populism as a form of politics, what the emergence of populist movements reveals about society, and what it may mean for the future of politics and governance. Iterations of populism in contemporary politics have largely occurred on the far-right: notable figures including Donald Trump in the US, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Recep Erdoğan in Turkey. However, this by no means indicates an absence of populism on the far-left and otherwise. Broadly, populism—as a politics of 'the people'—is a form of politics unique to the modern era of democratic sensibility. For better or for worse, populism is a democratic politics, in that it responds directly to the expressed ideals of the modern democratic state.

In fact, the first populists were on the American left. In *The Populist Persuasion*, Michael Kazin explains the circumstances of the original Populists: in the late nineteenth century, the People's Party emerged as left-wing grassroots movement of farmers who adopted the "populist persuasion" in the struggle against their political discontents.[40] Populism was a phenomenon of left-wing rebel politics until the late 1940s, when "populism began a migration from left to Right… [and] the rhetoric once spoken primarily by reformers and radicals… was creatively altered by conservative groups and politicians."[41] Populism, then, can refer to vastly different forms of politics, to movements which advocate separate or even conflicting frameworks for political progress and change.

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[40] Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 3.
[41] Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, 4.

What these disparate populist movements have in common is their use of language: "the vocabulary of grassroots rebellion now [post-1940s] served to thwart and reverse cultural change rather than to promote it."[42] Populist movements rely on the imaginative capacity of their adherents to have a pre-existing notion of 'people' and of the relationship between individuals and systems of governance. Such conceptions of who 'the people' may be based on mythical cultural narratives as much as they are on lived or historical experience, and yet they take on the appearance of grounded reality. All populists, regardless of their position on the left-center-right political spectrum, make use of similar language and of similar conceptions of the structure of society. Such broad terms, however, end up signaling remarkably specific political positions as they interact with deeply held social convictions on national identity, rights, and power. The language of populism may be apolitical, even anti-political, in a way that populism in practice never is.

At the risk of stating what is obvious, the reason why populism cannot be removed from representative politics, and from political aims, is that it always exists alongside a claim to democratic legitimacy. This is to say that populism is coherent *because* of the democratic ideals that it claims as its own mission. Even more simply, populism would not make sense as a form of politics, or would not be viable, without the backdrop of democracy. Populism has, since its beginning, been a statement about democracy. Lawrence Goodwyn's *The Populist Moment* is a history of the original Populist movement in America, which began when

> Millions of people came to believe fervently that a wholesale overhauling of their society was going to happen in their lifetimes. A democratic 'new day' was coming to America. This whirlwind of effort, and the massive upsurge of democratic hopes that accompanied it, has come to be known as the Populist Revolt. This book is about that

[42] Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, 4.

> moment of historical time. It seeks to trace the planting, growth, and death of the mass democratic movement known as Populism.[43]

Here, populism has come to be associated with an "upsurge of democratic hopes" and is characterized unequivocally as a "mass democratic movement." To speak and act in the name of 'the people' assumes that the ideal of popular sovereignty is held as valuable. It is a move that reclaims the ideals of democracy and promises to restore to the people a culture of democratic rights and freedoms that has been adulterated through the process of politics and representation.

It is not only that populists can emerge out of systems with robust, institutionalized democratic practices, but out of any political system that uses the language of democracy in its politics. In the modern political world, what we might call 'democratic sensibilities' are generally assumed as a goal of political processes and outcomes, whether or not a state has truly adopted practices of democratic governance. Even repressive, authoritarian regimes in modern global politics adopt this subtext of democratic assumptions that may or may not apply to political realities. Democracy has become the zeitgeist of the modern political era, and concepts of or relating to 'the people' are now a common language within politics. As a 'democratic sensibility' becomes the norm for the rhetorical and linguistic appeals of political movements, it follows that there is a greater opportunity for a parallel rise of populism. Here, populism is indeed a "degraded form of democracy that promises to make good on democracy's highest ideals ('Let the people rule!'). The danger comes, in other words, from within the democratic world."[44]

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[43] Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (Oxford University Press, 1980), VIII.
[44] Müller, *Populism*, 6.

II. The *Dêmos* of Modern Representative Democracy

In order to understand what populists are doing when they co-opt the language of democracy, and to understand why populism emerges from systems of representative democracy, we must also identify what it is about 'the people'' that is inhered in the concept of democracy and in the 'democratic sensibility' of modern politics. I will begin with a focus on the etymology of the ancient Greek *dêmokratia*. While the form of direct democracy *dêmokratia* is different from modern representative democracies, its notions of 'people' and of the organization and exercise of power are nonetheless relevant in any discussion on the rhetoric of democratic politics. Considering the meaning of *dêmos* in *dêmokratia* can point us to the basic existential questions of representative democracy, and for this reason is useful in the analysis of populism. The English word 'democracy' is drawn from the ancient greek *dêmokratia*, where *dêmos* refers to 'people' and *kratia* roughly translates to 'power' or 'rule'—democracy is literally "rule by the people". English renderings of ancient Greek terminologies are, like many projects of translation notoriously skeletal, unable to communicate original language in its full depth. The rendering of *dêmokratia* as 'democracy', 'rule by the people', is no exception. Although its basic meaning is widely agreed upon, there are nuances to *dêmokratia* which have implications for the relationship between democratic culture and imaginaries of 'people'. And although modern representative democracy does not claim to be the same as ancient Greek *dêmokratia*, it does nonetheless rest upon the same fundamental principle—the rule by the people.

Daniela Cammack, after providing a brief overview of the various meanings of *dêmos*, suggests her own definition:

> "*dêmos* denoted all those who participated in politics through collective action, in explicit contradistinction from those who had personal political significance. The former category

> comprised the great majority of citizens, but not the entire citizen body, since those who performed leading roles were by definition not part of the *dêmos*"[45]

Cammack's definition makes a distinction between the collective people and the elite in a way that echoes the distinctions posed by populists. Taking Cammack's understanding of *dêmos*, *dêmokratia* is close to 'the rule of the common people'. It is also importantly rooted in the formation of group subjectivity as 'people' through participation in collective action. The theme of populist reasoning based on this conception of the people versus the elite is deeply ironic when taken in the context of representative democracy. The populist leader claims to be the representative of 'the people', the *dêmos*, who are marked by their collectivity. Collective action is the means by which the *dêmos* exercise self-rule, beyond the scope of elite power. The *dêmos*, characterized by their participation in politics through collective action, by definition cannot be represented through the action of a representative. Cammack writes that her definition of *dêmos* "is perhaps closest to that of Jacques Rancière, who identifies the dêmos as 'the uncounted.'"[46] The *dêmos*, the common people, by this understanding are impossible to represent: that which is uncounted, which is so diverse that it is unrecorded, cannot be conceived in a simplified, representative form. In modern representative democracy, the principle of collective action has been transformed into the ideal of popular sovereignty. Thus, a representative who appeals to the ideal of popular sovereignty maintains the connection to a *dêmos* which is formed through its collectivity.

The historical associations, and the accepted view, of *dêmos* suggest that it more specifically "implies 'entire citizen body' … *dêmos*, on this understanding, comprised rich and poor, leaders and followers, mass and elite alike."[47] *Dêmokratia* also "implied self-rule, and with

[45] Daniela Cammack, "The Dêmos in Dêmokratia," *Classical Quarterly* (2019): 5.
[46] Cammack, "Dêmos", 6.
[47] Cammack, "Dêmos", 1.

it the dissolution of the very distinction between ruler and ruled."[48] In modern democracies, popular sovereignty is exercised through systems of representation, rather than by direct self-rule. Democracy as we know it does not *really* involve the 'entire citizen body', and the principle of self-rule is only peripherally accessible. Yet the concept of an undifferentiated, single citizen body, and the ideal of self-rule, persist in democratic politics. It is indeed the rhetorical basis of populist movements. Although populists recognize a distinction between the 'people' and an antagonistic 'elite', they imagine the *dêmos* as an undifferentiated body by identifying themselves as part of 'the people'. While populists in power may be elite simply because of their status in systems of governance, they draw rhetorical power from the notion that they are part of 'the people' just the same, and that true self-rule will be exercised through their power and their power alone.

The concepts of people and power that are rooted in *dêmokratia* have also become integrated into the 'democratic sensibilities' of representative systems and of modern politics more generally. This persists despite the paradox inherent in the representation of a plural body. The representative aspect of modern democracy complicates the understanding of who 'the people' are, because in order to be represented they must first be defined. A 'people' which is the entire citizen body will necessarily be conceived in insufficient and potentially exclusive terms. The issues of representation, then, are always beneath the surface of democratic society. Populist reasoning is not only a claim to exclusive representation of 'the people', but also a statement on the identity of 'the people' as a coherent entity. Populists will "persist with their representative claim no matter what; because their claim is of a moral and symbolic—not an empirical—nature, it cannot be disproven."[49] The populist claim to representation relies on myths of culture and

[48] Cammack, "Dêmos", 2.
[49] Müller, *Populism*, 39.

society that are unshakeable in the psyche of many citizens. These myths strike a balance between an excessive vagueness that would make them forgettable or unconvincing and a specificity that is dangerously vulnerable to criticism over historical truthfulness.

III. So, What Makes a Populist?

As we move towards an analysis of particular populist movements, we should begin to think more conclusively about the rhetorical forms that characterize populism in the modern era of representative democratic sensibility. In his 2017 book *What is Populism?*, political theorist Jan-Werner Müller responds to the rise of populism in contemporary politics by developing criteria and frameworks for thinking about populism (importantly, though, without foreclosing other theoretical possibilities). Though he does not pose a definition *per se*, Müller identifies and returns to two criteria of populism: 1) antielitism and 2) antipluralism. He argues that "it is a necessary but not sufficient condition to be *critical of elites* in order to count as a populist,"[50] and that "in addition to being antielitist, populists are always *antipluralist*. Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people."[51] Müller's suggestion that populists be identified by these criteria prompts a more complex understanding of what populism is. It gives us a framework for thinking of populist politics in relation to its origins in liberal democratic society, and encourages us to think about how populists form ideas about who 'the people' are.

Conventional wisdom of populism recognizes the way that populists use a variation of the 'Us versus Them' narrative in an attempt to unify a 'people'. Müller clarifies that populists identify themselves with the 'people', the 'us', who stand in opposition to the elite 'them'. Here, the people are marked by their non-elite status, their identity formed around or as a result of their

[50] Müller, *Populism*, 2.
[51] Müller, *Populism*, 3.

average- or common-ness. Populists construct the elite as a threat to the character, identity, and power of a 'common people'. Populist movements have a paradoxical relationship to the principles of representative politics. A fundamental assumption of populist politics is that representation is failing, that there is something essential about the people that is endangered when their political will is expressed by an elite representative who cannot relate to their mode of being. Populist leaders try to dissolve the distinction between themselves and 'the people' they represent in order to make their own politics the exception to the failure of representation. This is what Müller refers to as populism's *antipluralism*—its claim to exclusive representation.

The process by which populism emerges from a system of representative politics leaves room for different forms of populist politics, where 'people' signify different narratives of struggle. Žižek, responding to Ernesto Laclau's work on hegemony and populism, explains Laclau's assumption that "populism provides a neutral, 'transcendental' matrix of an open struggle whose content and stakes are themselves defined by the contingent struggle for hegemony."[52] In my previous chapter, I made mention of populism's formal neutrality, and in this one I have already suggested that populism cannot be separated from the realm of politics because of its connection to democracy. Although these statements may seem contradictory, they are in reality not mutually exclusive. A type of politics that is formally neutral and also permanently political can also be described as a style of reasoning that emerges from pre-existing political tensions and which will necessarily adopt the tone of the politicized narratives employed to make sense of reality. Žižek writes that, for Laclau, "the fact that some particular struggle is elevated into the 'universal equivalent' of all struggles is not a predetermined fact but itself the result of the contingent political struggle for hegemony."[53] The elements of populism

[52] Žižek, "Against the Populist Temptation," 554.
[53] Žižek, "Against the Populist Temptation," 554.

are "purely formal, 'transcendental', not ontic."[54] Populism constructs a 'people', yes, but it is *how* it does so that really matters.

If populism is accepted as a formally neutral style of political reasoning which produces 'people' as the universal political subject, it takes on a dimension of political significance on a case-by-case basis. There are roughly three modes of populist thinking in the production of a universal political subjectivity: 1) a populism that functions loosely to address a non-exclusive, undefined 'people', 2) a populism that tries to define 'people' in real-time, dependent on contemporary political alliances and struggle, 3) a populism that operates based on a 'people' that is already marked by political history (by nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, etc.). The latter two of these possible modes of populist thought are the ones that emerge in representative politics. The former seems less applicable to our discussion of populism, as it describes populism outside of representative politics, if that were a possibility.

In theory, a loosely-functioning populism can exist when 'the people' are not one thing, but are rather an open and unmarked group that nonetheless shares common interests and demands. As an example, a general reference to the 'rights of all people' fits the qualification of producing 'people' as the universal political subject. This form of populism is, however, only a hypothetical, because such an unmarked people does not exist in modern democratic society. The concept of representative government presupposes distinctions between groups of people in society. Further, the dominance of representative democratic sensibilities in the modern political world reinforces the notion that society is composed of distinct groups of people who require individualized representation before they are ever considered as a singular 'people' at a national

[54] Žižek, "Against the Populist Temptation," 553.

or otherwise centralized level. A non-exclusive form of populism is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine in an era of 'democratic sensibility'.

Populism as we know it, then, is exclusive, is political, and is indebted to representative democratic politics. Müller reflects on this conclusion:

> What follows from this understanding of populism as an exclusionary form of identity politics is that populism tends to pose a danger to democracy. For democracy requires pluralism and the recognition that we need to find fair terms of living together as free, equal, but also irreducibly diverse citizens. The idea of the single, homogeneous, authentic people is a fantasy.[55]

Here, Müller references the narrative of populism as a threat to the integrity of democracy; this is a narrative that has become increasingly common in contemporary politics as far-right populism in particular continues its ascent to political power. His commentary also, perhaps unknowingly, points to a paradox of modern democracy that moves the conversation beyond the phenomena of populism. This paradox concerns the relation of this democracy to pluralism and diversity, on one hand, and to the fantasy of a single, homogeneous, authentic 'people' on the other. The problem is that the idea of democracy that persists in modern politics signals both at once. Müller is not wrong in stating that populism poses a danger to democracy, but he stops short of expressing the essential observation that 'democracy' potentially poses a danger to itself. Populism may be "a degraded form of democracy" that flies in the face of the image we have of a democratic society as fair and plural, but it is a form of democracy nonetheless, and any responsible treatment of the present and future states of democratic politics will have to reckon with it.[56]

[55] Müller, *Populism*, 3.
[56] Müller, *Populism*, 3.

IV. The Paradox of Democracy and the Populist Response

As much as 'democracy' refers to established institutional structures and political processes, it also names (and creates) certain modes of being and relational dynamics of collective life. Jacques Ranciére's essay *Hatred of Democracy* addresses the movement of democracy's definition and redefinition. It peripherally engages concepts of democratic representation, popular sovereignty, and political identity. It boldly claims that democracy is a *fact*—the reality of "the reign of the limitless desire of individuals in modern mass society."[57] This understanding of democracy assumes the plurality of the citizen body as the complex, perhaps even chaotic, reality of life. It echoes Claude Lefort's notable insight that "Democracy inaugurates the experience of an ungraspable, uncontrollable society in which the people will be said to be sovereign, of course, but whose identity will constantly be open to question, whose identity will remain forever latent."[58] Democratic politics always demands a 'people', despite the basic fact that 'the people' in a democracy is ungraspable, that "there will never be, under the name of politics, a single principle of the community."[59] Democracy, therefore, requires a consistent and forward-looking attempt to understand the citizen body in all of its chaos and expansiveness—it is not the place for conservative politics.

Citing the example of the drawing up of the US constitution, Ranciére argues that the institutions and mechanisms of the constitutional republic are in some way only 'appearances'—in other words, representations—which frustrate the public and incite a struggle "leading to 'real' democracy, where liberty and equality [are] no longer represented in the institutions of law and

[57] Ranciere, *Democracy*, 1.
[58] Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 303-4.
[59] Ranciere, *Democracy*, 51.

State but embodied in the very forms of concrete life and sensible experience."[60] Democracy via constitutional republic reproduces itself by providing its people with both the opportunity and necessity that they represent themselves in public in order to be 'seen' by the representative. This is the notion of popular sovereignty: that the power in politics ultimately rests in the hands of the people to make themselves known, even in spite of their subordination to potentially faulty systems of representation. Democracy is in some sense a continuous reclaiming of the ideal of popular sovereignty by those who take political action, who eventually become the 'people'. Thus, the struggle for sovereignty becomes part of the social expression and experience of the people.

Ranciére explains this well: "the power of the people, which is not the power of the population or of the majority, but the power of anyone at all, the equality of capabilities to occupy the positions of governors and of the governed."[61] Because the actual people are so plural, so realistically hard to define and collectivize, there is always the chance that an exclusive, self-identified 'people' (on the basis of race, nationality, gender, citizenship, etc.) will make the claim to popular sovereignty. The sense that individuals gain from political alliance and collective political action mimics the ideal of popular sovereignty. A political movement of 'the people' which has claimed its exercise of popular sovereignty is not just a 'people', then, but a 'democratic people' which can claim the success of democratic politics.

A far-right populism which imagines an exclusive 'people' drawn from foundational cultural mythologies is evidently a response to the plural reality of democracy and the paradoxical nature of representation and exercise of sovereignty. Ranciére scarcely makes

[60] Ranciere, *Democracy*, 3.
[61] Ranciere, *Democracy*, 49.

mention of populism in *Hatred of Democracy*, but in a brief fragment provides meaningful insight:

> Populism is the convenient name under which is dissimulated the exacerbated contradiction between popular legitimacy and expert legitimacy, that is, the difficulty the government of science has in adapting itself to manifestations of democracy and even to the mixed form of the representative system. This name at once masks and reveals the intense wish of the oligarch: to govern without people, in other words, without any dividing of the people; to govern without politics.[62]

The notion of governing without people and without politics is an example of the ideological simplification of complex realities, the providing of answers where they are not possible. Populists in power act on the "compulsion to get rid of the people and of politics."[63]

At this point we can fairly address the reasons why an exclusive form of populism functions as ideology.[64]

1) This populism is a response to the fact of democracy, the "paradoxical in itself" reality of 'the people' as an unimaginably plural social collective, with a simplified and digestible image of who 'the people' really are.
2) These images of 'people' begin in reality, but do not reflect it—they are based on moralized mythologies of 'the people' expressed in terms of familiar democratic ideals and are thereby placed beyond the pale of legitimate criticism. They draw forth a roughly-formed, nostalgic image of American character in their adherents, who recognize and therefore identify with the image.
3) Once an individual identifies with the collective democratic struggle for self-definition and following that popular sovereignty, they are involved in the broader movement of

[62] Ranciere, *Democracy*, 80.
[63] Ranciere, *Democracy*, 81.
[64] It is important to note that this taxonomy of populist thought is structured as a direct response to my framing of ideology on page 6, in section I. of Chapter One.

American democratic history. The involvement of the individual in any political movement is a rearticulation of democratic agonism.

However, because an exclusive form of populism poses a simplified rather than properly reflective image of 'the people' in a democracy, it is especially vulnerable to criticism from virtually every sector of society that is vaguely 'expert' or 'elite. Such an 'expert' or 'elite' responds to the world's complexity through collective and diverse efforts to produce specialized knowledge. The first step of their project is to make understandings more, rather than less, complex; in other words, to assume, against ideological thinking, that the world is not simple. This example shows us, finally, that

4) In its anti-elitism, the exclusive populism of the political far-right discourages critical thought.[65]

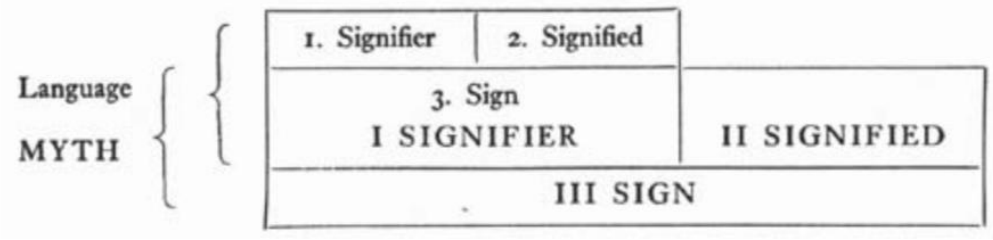
V. *Mythologies* and the American Example

At the ideological core of far-right American populism is its exclusive notion of 'the people' which defies the fact of democracy. However, in the struggle against this style of populism as a form of anti-democratic politics, it is not enough to simply claim moral opposition to the principle of exclusivity or to ideological thinking. We must also deconstruct the narrative that links an exclusive people to 'democracy' and legitimizes their universalized political

[65] Jan-Werner Müller, "Why do rightwing populist leaders oppose experts?," *The Guardian,* March 26, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/26/rightwing-populist-leaders-oppose-experts-not-elites
Dan Diamond, "Ousted vaccine expert battles with Trump team over his abrupt dismissal," *Politico,* April 22, 2020. https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/22/hhs-ousts-vaccine-expert-as-covid-19-threat-grows-201642
In March 2020, Müller revisited his criteria of populism and suggested that populists are not just anti-elitist, but more specifically anti-expert. This narrowing of criteria further confirms the antagonistic relationship between rightwing populism and critical thought. Also concurrent to my completion of this project, there are political developments in the United States regarding scientific expertise on COVID-19 that exemplify the populist anti-expert sentiment. On April 22, 2020, a doctor leading the federal agency involved in developing a COVID vaccine was abruptly removed from his position. The doctor, Rick Bright, "told The New York Times on Wednesday that he believed his removal was because of his internal opposition to pursuing investments in malaria drugs as potential treatments for Covid-19, which President Donald Trump has touted without scientific evidence."

subjectivity and subsequent domination in a system of democratic politics. Approaching 'the people' of the populist imaginary as *myth* reveals the extent of its separation from real democracy. In discussing populism's 'people' as myth, I will use Roland Barthes' semiological framework of myth and metalanguage. The final chapter of Barthes' book *Mythologies*, titled "Myth Today", is a semiological perspective on myth. It outlines the structures of meaning within myth and explains how these structures make it politically useful and persuasive. Barthes introduces myth as "a system of communication… a mode of signification."[66] By this understanding, myth easily becomes a deceptive form of political speech which "is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system."[67] It is a system of values and political judgment that presents itself as a system of objectivity and truth.

Semiology begins with the relation between two terms: the signifier and the signified. In a basic sense, the signifier (an image) expresses the signified (a concept). However, what emerges out of this relation is a third term, the sign, which is a form of the signifier that has been imbued with meaning through its relation to the signified. Recognizing the sign as the product of the signified-signifier relationship allows each term to remain separate despite its interaction with the other. Barthes provides the following visual representation of the semiological structure of myth:



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[66] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972), 107.
[67] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 130.
[68] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 113.

As expressed by Barthes, myth is "a *second-order semiological system*. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second."[69] Myth is in this way a *metalanguage*—it is a hollowed-out second language used to speak about the first. The sign of the first-order system, already filled with meaning, is the signifier of the second. This signifier is the form of myth: it is an image emptied of the history that made it meaningful. The form, or meaning, of myth "is already complete, it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions."[70] All of that which lies behind the meaning of myth is never expressed; rather, it is the assumed (and silent) subtext. All of this history which "drains out of the form [the signifier]" of myth is then "wholly absorbed by the concept [the signified]."[71]

Myth has origins in the historical past and purpose in the historical present. Barthes says that "mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things."[72] Like broader ideology, myth begins in reality without reflecting it. A type of speech which does not evolve from the nature of things is necessarily a fantasy. And this fantasy is carefully drawn to align with political aims. Myth, a simple form with immense depth, is perfectly suited to become the foundation of ideological political movements like the far-right form of American populism, which relies on loose ties to historical meaning. Rightwing populists employ the myth of the American 'people' such that their rhetoric, on a surface level, actually appears as a championing of democracy and its principle of popular sovereignty.

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[69] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 113.
[70] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 116.
[71] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 117.
[72] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 108.

The populist myth of the American 'people' is a second-order signifier drawn from the first-order sign of the 'American people' as a political and historical subject. The original *signifier* is the image of a 'democratic people', which appears not as a plural, unbounded citizen body but rather as a limited, exclusive group. This image *signifies* the concept of the triumph of popular sovereignty against the ongoing struggle of defining and representing a people. The image of the 'American people', the form of the populist myth, has never included democracy's principles of liberty and equality as universal. And the shadow of American exceptionalism, the imagine of American democracy as a model for the status of rights and liberties in the modern world, discourages the critique of America's fairness and inclusiveness. The use of the myth of the 'American people' allows populists to mask their unwillingness to engage with democracy as such. It facilitates their desire to govern without the people, without politics. When rightwing populists adopt the myth of the American people, they enter democratic politics without having to accept the reality of a complex, diverse citizen body.

Myth is also a means by which populists frame their image of the 'American people' as moral rather than political. Expressed by Barthes, "myth is depoliticized speech."[73] The construction of a 'people' within a system of representative democracy is a highly political act; it concerns the formation of the subject of politics. There is a vast history of exclusionary politics latent in the populist myth of the American 'people', and as a result the populist construction of an exclusive 'people' is nothing if not a political statement. This basic refusal of politics is a response to what is "paradoxical in itself" about modern democratic politics: the continuous confrontation with the task of representing an incoherent image, of organizing what is unclassifiable.[74] Myth, like ideology, flattens out reality:

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[73] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 142.
[74] Adorno

> In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity.[75]

The myth of an American 'people' that is racially, morally, and socially homogeneous is an historical interpretation of democratic politics that is made to seem natural and matter-of-fact. Populists on the far-right of democratic politics reject more inclusive notions of 'the people' because they reject the possibility of the redistribution of political power. A shift in the identity of 'the people' necessarily equals a shift in the expression of political will, and inevitably disrupts the status quo of power. Hence, democracy is not the 'rule of people', but properly the rule of anyone at all. This is a difficult reality to come to terms with, and it stands as a certain threat to any pre-marked 'people' who seek to gain and maintain political power.

The American 'people' of right-wing populism is not a group that has its ties at the level of occupation, class, or other common interest such as in a union-style alliance, but rather identifies with the notion of exclusion itself. To 'Make America Great Again' is to make America's 'people' homogeneous again (as if they ever were). It is to reassert the 'democratic' power of the nationalist, conservative, and patriarchal minority. The claim of popular sovereignty becomes a justification for its exclusive monopoly over liberty and equality. The redemption of popular sovereignty, in this case, does not allow for the democratic flux of the social body; the populist configuration of democratic politics tries to erase plurality rather than manage it. The emergence of this form of politics is the consequence of the gradual disempowerment of a minority that has been overrepresented for most of American democratic

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[75] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 143.

history. The fact of democracy is not only antithetical to the populist imaginary of ‘people’, but also stands as an entirely separate understanding of democratic politics and the organization of power and governance.

The rise of far-right populism in contemporary American politics is the consequence of an ongoing misinterpretation of the nature of democracy. The democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and popular sovereignty are not missing in the populist imaginary—in fact, they are voiced as ideals above all else, used to demonstrate the populist ‘commitment’ to democracy. The issue is that populists are not involved in a truly democratic politics. Populists imagine a democracy devoid of its fundamental and defining aspect: the politics of representing a plural and expansive citizen body such that governance is, in some capacity, a ‘rule of the people’. The erasure of the political struggles of democratic representation has created a false image of the future of democratic agonism. The populist fantasy is ultimately the fantasy of non-political life.

Conclusion

"the absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects [of ideology] recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right: Amen—'So be it'."[76]

Thinking of far-right American populism as ideology is characteristic of a broader, existential critique of contemporary political movements. Such a mode of critique focuses on the relationship between truth and politics, the tension between ideals as such and the forms they take in practice. This process requires us to make the seemingly counterintuitive move of looking backwards rather than forwards in history as we try to understand political phenomena. Non-ideological politics involves the constant re-visiting of foundational ideals, and in some sense a constant willingness to re-interpret their meaning based on current realities. This is especially true in modern democracies, where plurality is a basic principle of politics. Its promise is that governance will reflect and respond to the will of 'the people', the whole social body, which is always in flux.

As a form of politics, democracy always invites the rearticulation of society and its demands. Ranciére explains that "democracy is first this paradoxical condition of politics, the point where every legitimization is confronted with its ultimate lack of legitimacy, confronted with the egalitarian contingency that underpins the inegalitarian contingency itself."[77] Democracy is, in some sense, a politics of uncertainty; while this may be an unsettling notion, it is also a fact that human life and communities are shaped and defined by their own uncertainty and precarity. The ideals of modern democracy—liberty, equality, and popular sovereignty—are not given realities, but are rather the underlying impetus for political action and progress. The

[76] Althusser, *On Ideology*, 55.
[77] Ranciere, *Democracy*, 94.

future of democratic politics must embrace the political struggle towards the realization of such foundational ideals. And it must also gain the capacity to discern between real and imagined democratic struggle—the ability to identify ideological distortions of what is happening within the citizen body.

The far-right populist movement in America does not represent real political struggle. Its representative claim lends it an image of integrity and legitimacy in modern democratic politics, yet the represented ‘people’ are not an actual constituency. Rather, this ‘people’ is a mythical construct drawn from a history of exclusionary politics, a selective interpretation of democratic ideals, and a moralized understanding of political subjectivity. This populist movement relies on the ideological fabrication of scenarios of genuine democratic agonism in order to secure additional power and exercise antagonistic sentiments against the properly democratic people of American society.

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