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consume and understand without a knowledge base to appreciate it fully" (Rafferty, 2020).

Each form of populism and elitism has its own benefits and drawbacks. Populism in modern art has the potential to increase its accessibility and appeal to a larger audience. However, it could result in the homogenization of art, emphasizing use over creative merit. On the other hand, elitism in contemporary art might lead to a more exclusive and constrained view of art, but it also permits a more rigorous curating process, which can produce higher quality art. Finding a compromise between the two ideas that helps democratize art while still upholding high artistic standards is crucial.

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New Populism, New Conspiracism, and the Old Rhetoric of Purity

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Abstract

This entry investigates the connections between neo-populism and neo-conspiracism in the USA. One central thread is the rhetoric of purity that fosters rigid dichotomies of thought about identities, contributing to both populism and conspiracism, eliciting a neologism: *conspirapopulism*.

The New Populism and the Old Rhetoric of Purity

The multitudes of populist movements make defining "populism" extremely difficult (Laclau 2005, chapter 1; Revelli 2019, 9–10). I will focus on right-wing populism in the USA because at the moment left-wing populist movements are not clear and present threats to democracy.

"The American people..." is one of the most common phrases uttered by US politicians. Less innocuous-sounding is "The will of *real* Americans," or "*We* need to take *our* country back." Who the "we," "people," "our," or "real" refers to is left imprecise. This tactic allows the populist to weasel out of questions regarding who they believe are citizens worthy of ethical concern and to evade charges of racism when the outsiders are painted as immigrants or minorities. But, the language is also simple and clear, at least to most followers of populist leaders: I am part of the "we," the "real hard-working Americans" fighting against the "Others."

Populist rhetoric of purity invokes absolutist language that fixes identities, pitting the majority against minority groups thought of as usurpers and outsiders. Furthermore, the rhetoric presumes, these minorities are unjustly protected by a class of elites who dominate most of the economic and informational institutions. The ruling elite in politics, education, science, and the media have continually ignored working-class Americans, while disproportionately and unjustly favoring minority groups who are growing in numbers, creating a "sense that the country is changing culturally in ways deeply objectionable to a certain percentage of American citizens" (Müller

2016, 91). The use of "elite" is pejorative rather than meritocratic, as Cas Mudde explains: "Populism . . . considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the . . . (general will) of the People" (Mudde 2007, 23). The elite did not earn their place in power, nor do the immigrants and minorities deserve their special treatment at the expense of everyday Americans.

This common will of the people, often coupled with appeals to "common sense" in contrast to reliance on expertise of any sort, can even take precedence over other values such as human rights; such is the significance of purity in determining identity groups. If the populist can convince their followers that they are not being heard, and those folks just ARE the people, then infringing on the rights of minorities (such as invoking unnecessarily stringent voter restrictions in predominantly Black districts) is viewed as a necessary action to uphold democracy. This is a dangerous exclusionary element of current right-wing populism. But how does the rhetoric of purity work?

Populists throughout American history relied on rigid categorizations between pure white, Christian, heterosexual, male citizens, and everyone else. Charles Mills points out that "For over 80% of U.S. history, its laws declared most of the world's population to be ineligible for full American citizenship solely because of their race, original nationality, or gender" (Mills 1998, 132). This *original identity politics* cannot succeed without underlying stereotypical rhetoric that constructs unchanging essences of Others. Class and social standing cannot be ignored here, but that has been largely determined by what racial category one belongs to, or is perceived to so belong. Michael Monahan discusses the political motivations for purity of racial categories: "Each category is thus pure, and each individual is purely of one category . . . On the more individual level, the politics of purity demands an account of identity that is purged of ambiguity and indeterminacy" (Monahan 2011, 88). Noting a lack of clarity

regarding categorization of others slows our thinking down. The populist can avoid this unpleasant feeling of doubt and even anxiety, by habituating themselves and their audiences to unambiguous stereotypical thinking.

This populist rhetoric is more than mere throwaway verbiage. According to Ernesto Laclau, "far from being a mere adornment of a social reality which could be described in non-rhetorical terms, [populist rhetoric] can be seen as the very logic of constitution [*sic*] of political [and social] identities" (Laclau 2005, 19). We see the motivation for comfort, ease, and purity of thought about oneself, the world, and especially other people, that can foster the habituation of stereotypes that are necessary to maintain a strict separation among identity groups, which provides the grounds for differential treatment.

The overriding theme is the perceived (and in some cases actual) grievances of the "real" people over and against the "other" who have been granted special dispensations. When populists like Donald Trump use "we" and "our" it is clear to his audiences that he is not referring to all citizens, though a literal interpretation of his language hides that fact. Even with the rhetorical use of "America First" the entire population of the nation is not included, or with "Make America Great Again," it is not harking back to some nostalgic period in which all citizens were equally free; there was no such time.

Demographic changes in the USA where whites will be a numerical minority by around 2040 is driving a lot of the neo-populism, and, as addressed in the next section, conspiracy theories like the "Great Replacement." According to this theory, "there is a concealed attempt to replace the white Christian population . . . by promoting mass migration from African and Arab [and South American] countries, as well as encouraging their demographic growth" (Pirro and Taggart 2022, 6). But it should be noted that it is not consistent with the facts. Being a numerical minority is not the same thing as being a power minority; see South Africa. While non-whites will be a numerical majority, they will not be a power majority, at least economically if the patterns remain the same in the next 20 years.

The rhetoric of purity is not about tracking the truth, but rather taking sides and digging in with one's socio-political identity group, and its current manifestation, at least regarding racial and religious identities, comes predominantly from the center of society, which is novel: "Post Twentieth-century populism is, in a sense, a 'revolt of the included' who have now been pushed to the margins" (Revelli 2019, 9). More accurately, it is a revolt of those who *feel* they have been pushed to the margins as a result of successful propagandistic rhetoric. The data do not support "this largely rhetorical operation" that "operates at the level of the imaginary" (Revelli 2019, 54); a rhetoric of purity which can be far more persuasive than pure argumentation and logic.

Information technology and social media have accelerated the pace and breadth of populist messaging. Demagogues can now bypass traditional institutions of knowledge-seeking or creation, such as journalists whose work is fact-checked and edited, or universities, and scientists all of whom engage in rigorous peer review. Populists have the tools available today to spread propaganda and conspiracy theories, creating a vicious feedback loop cultivating ignorance and arrogance, further dividing the populace into rigid segments unwilling to communicate with each other in good faith. Part of this divisiveness is driven by conspiratorial thinking, which, when coupled with populist rhetoric, creates dangerous situations where the hitherto extreme term "evil" gets bandied about as a verbal cudgel against people simply by virtue of their identities.

The New Conspiracism and the Old Rhetoric of Purity

The new populism and conspiracism are so entangled, this calls for a new coinage, unwieldy at first perhaps, but useful: *conspirapopulism*. This newer form describes political opponents as not only mistaken on policy, but morally flawed to their core. This moral dimension, often backed by presumptions of a divine foundation, is not inconsequential. Along with the global informational

reach comes the rhetoric that divides people into clear dichotomies of "good v. evil," and it is the good folk who have been unjustly harmed and ignored. The populist leader proclaims to speak for them, "I am your vengeance," "I am your voice," "they are out to get you." This provides a link between new populism and new conspiracism. Not all populists are conspiracists, and not all conspiracists are populist, but there is a large overlap between the two that cries out for analysis.

Populists seeking office, and some successfully in positions of power, will make use of conspiratorial thinking to exaggerate, or completely fabricate, powerful enemies who are plotting against them, and by extension, their voters. There is an irony lost on their supporters when a significant portion of their platform was that "government is *the* problem," and their leader is head of the government. The conspirapopulist is portrayed as an outsider in contrast to the typical bureaucrat who ignores the people. The populist is one of us, and this message is perpetuated even if the populist makes it into government; the enemy is now the "deep state," driven to undermine the people's leader from within every government institution.

The old rhetoric of purity fosters "us vs. them" thinking where "you are either with us or against us"; there is no inclusive middle in the logic of purity. If "they" are out to get Trump, for instance, then his followers are next. In order to justify assertions that the populist leader is in fact, a martyr rather than a potential criminal who has been indicted on multiple credible federal offenses, conspirapopulists seek explanations for how everyone is out to get them, and repetitively, it is "The greatest witch-hunt in history!" After yet another set of indictments, Trump warns his fans, "They're coming after me so they can get to you."

While running for office, the populist might make generous use of as many of the mainstream media sources as possible, even ingratiating themselves to appear as often as possible. But once in power, the "media" are painted as the opposition to ordinary folk for whom the conspirapopulist is their only real voice. In some cases, the media is viewed not only as an adversary, but as lying,

corrupt, evil, and "the enemy of the people." The conspiratorial nature of the rhetoric usually comes in the form of accusations that these media conglomerates are funded by powerful oligarchs who wish to control the news so they can control the people. Constant repetition and ubiquitous spreading of the rhetoric is necessary. Importantly, these hidden cabals are not only fighting in the shadows to undermine the populist hero but they are tagged as "traitors" and "un-American" in their assaults on the heart of America.

The rhetoric of purity can be used to cultivate conspiracy theories that are then employed to propagate populist ideologies:

> According to [Gustave] Le Bon, there are three such [rhetorical] devices: affirmation, repetition and contagion. 'Affirmation pure and simple, kept free of all reasoning and all proof, is one of the surest means of making an idea enter the mind of the crowds. The conciser an affirmation, the more destitute of every appearance of proof and demonstration, the more weight it carries.' As for repetition, its 'power is due to the fact that the repeated statement is embedded in the long run in those profound regions of our unconscious selves in which the motives of our actions are forged. At the end of a certain time, we have forgotten who is the author of the repeated assertion, and we finish by believing it.' Finally, Contagion … In the case of men collected in a crowd all emotions are very rapidly contagious, which explains the suddenness of panics. (Quoted in Laclau 2005, 24)

The rhetorical devices for populists overlap with those used by new conspiracy theorists, where "affirmation" is analogous to "bare assertion" or the vague "people are saying…," where the ellipses are filled in with whatever current position the conspirapopulist wishes to advance regardless of the lack of, or inclination to seek, evidence for it.

New Populism (Without the People) and New Conspiracism (Without the Theory)

Conspiracy theory, like populism, is not new, but "conspiracism today introduces something new – conspiracy without the theory. And the new conspiracism betrays a new destructive impulse: to delegitimate [sic] democracy" (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, 2; Revelli 2019, 26). Current

conspirapopulists begin from the hegemonic center where not only their language has gained traction but the main figures who had formerly been consigned to the margins of society are now centered and normalized; indeed, many have become leaders of their nations (Trump, Orban, Erdogan, Berlusconi). The conspiratorial rhetoric that helped them get and stay in power has proliferated in a manner similar to populist rhetoric:

> The new conspiracism seeks to replace evidence, argument, and shared grounds of understanding with convoluted conjurings and bare assertions. Among the threats to democracy … the new conspiracism does double damage: delegitimation and disorientation … There is no punctilious demand for proofs, no exhaustive amassing of evidence, no dots revealed to form a pattern … The new conspiracism dispenses with the burden of explanation. Instead, we have innuendo and verbal gesture: "A lot of people are saying" … Or we have bare assertion: "Rigged!" – a one-word exclamation that evokes fantastic schemes, sinister motives, and the awesome capacity to mobilize three million illegal voters to support Hillary Clinton for president. This is conspiracy without the theory …What validates the new conspiracism is not evidence but repetition. (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, 3, 9)

Notice the rhetorical overlap between this account of the new conspiracism and Le Bon's analysis of populism. The bare assertion, repetition, and contagion are all elements of the new conspirapopulism.

This is fueled by rhetoric that is pure and simple, we all know who the "we" and "other" are and those categories are unchanging regardless of counter-evidence, but at the same time vague, question-begging, and so ambivalent toward reason as to never assume the remotest attempt at taking on the burden of proof. Much of their success lies in the minimal effort on both the producers and receivers of this rhetoric: bitesized, highly replicable, meme-like tweets, for instance, that are laced with absolutist and hyperbolic language, gets people's attention and keeps it enough for them to share (very easily through social media platforms) the emotional messages.

The stark contrasts within the messages dividing in-group and out-groups further entrenches audiences who, because of the accessibility of narrowly focused websites, need not bother with

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alternative viewpoints. In this way, conspirapopulism contributes to the maintenance of otherwise absurd beliefs, that the 2020 Presidential Election was "the most fraudulent election in history," for example, that stand as ideological litmus tests to remain in good standing in their group.

An additional element that follows from conspirapopulism is the facade of a movement of and for the people; the reality is that those at the top are manipulating the very people presumed to be benefited from it: "populism is often seen as an ideology of the dispossessed, and it may indeed recruit them, but it is not articulating their political agenda" (Rossi 2023, 2 quoting Freeden). Explicit, straightforward argument is rarely adopted by the conspirapopulists, as that would open them up to rational scrutiny and fairly obvious inconsistencies between their rhetorical messaging and their actual socio-political status: ". . . relying on conspiracy theories might help populists divert attention from their 'establishment' status and preserve their 'outsider' quality while sitting in government" (Pirro and Taggart 2022, 2). Being perceived as the "underdog" but now for those who actually are in positions of power, is a rhetorical element of the new conspirapopulism. This works by consolidating a power base conditioned through repetition, contagion, and a distaste for critical and collaborative logical analysis, to sow animosity and perpetuate divisions based on moral absolutes: "conflict is portrayed by conspiracy theorists as a wider moral struggle between good (the people) and evil (the elites)" (Pirro and Taggart 2022, 3). The conspirapopulist in power, the most powerful position in the world for Trump who is hardly working class, succeeds to the extent that they are seen as a victim, "heinously and evilly" attacked by elite institutions.

But this victimhood status for the conspirapopulist is not enough, they must also persuade The People that those same corrupt elite institutions are coming after them as well, just because of who they are. A wedge is manufactured, or at least exacerbated, "between the whole people in its uncontaminated original purity, and some other entity that unduly stands above it (a usurping elite, a privileged gang, a hidden power) or insinuates itself from below (immigrants, foreigners, travellers)" (Revelli 2019, 15). The rhetoric of purity advances this narrative by constructing enemies out of other identity groups which can include minorities, LBGTQ, Muslims, even agnostics and atheists. They are protected, enticed to vote against traditional values of The People, and in many cases brainwashed by the liberal educational systems that spread critical race theory and secularism. But, in place of evidence, argument, or epistemic effort to support these opinions, brute assertions take their place. This rhetoric is dangerous, indeed, "it is propaganda against (the ideals of) democracy as we know it" (Mueller 2009, 1045–6), as witnessed with the attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Conclusion

One irony of the new conspirapopulism is the undermining of democracy and freedom *for the people*. The rhetoric of purity incorporated by populist propagandists expresses freedom, access, recognition, but in the very process minimizes each of these for huge swaths of the populace. If demographics continue as expected and populist rhetoric continues to be effective, the majority of the populace will be harmed in the name of populism. Any group not perceived as belonging to The People are delegitimized and labeled "corrupt," "ineffective," or worse, "evil." The inflexible rhetoric or purity from conspirapopulists, to borrow from Monahan's conception of the politics of purity on race, "can only be maintained through the ongoing repetition of the mythology of purity . . . Internal threats to collective purity . . . take the form of subpopulations who must be controlled or dominated by those who 'best represent' the ideals of the nation or race" (Monahan 2011, 184). As a result, power is maintained in the hands of the exclusive few; the very oligarchic reality conspirapopulists rhetorically proclaim to have been fighting against.

The new conspirapopulist's rhetoric is accelerated and proliferated by conspiracy theories

shared voluminously via social media, narrowly tailored for specific audiences who are repeatedly fed a single story, unadulterated by logic, much less counter-argument. The contagiousness of the rhetoric of purity permits the spread of otherwise unbelievable, even paradoxical, claims: "The fact that the rage of the deprived could identify with a billionaire – his wealth built on rent – is in a sense the watershed between the original populism and the populism that follows the end of the twentieth Century" (Revelli 2019, 55). The rhetoric of purity declares that there can be no "legitimate" opposition; any source of information that shows skepticism in the conspirapopulists' mythology is ignored or outright vilified, and so multiple wells are poisoned at once, whether they be public universities, scientific institutions, or news organizations. This is a manifest danger to democracy.

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New Populism, Religion, and Social Media

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Abstract

This entry discusses the intersection of the new populism, religion, and social media in contemporary society. It examines how religious beliefs and practices are being utilized by populist movements to gain support and mobilize followers on social media platforms. The reasons for the rise of populist leaders to power have also been examined. Additionally, it analyzes the role of social media in shaping public opinion and amplifying the voices of populist leaders and movements, particularly concerning religious issues. The implications of the intersection of the new populism, religion, and social media for political and social stability have also been touched upon.

Introduction

New populism is a term used to describe a recent political trend where populist movements have increased. Instability, economic or non-economic, has acted as a catalyst for these movements. Globalization had already created inequalities and threatened national identities, and the Great Recession in 2008 significantly pushed such movements. A rejection of traditional political

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