

Annual Review of Anthropology

The Anthropology of Populism: Beyond the Liberal Settlement

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Annu. Rev. Anthropol. 2019. 48:45–60

First published as a Review in Advance on
May 28, 2019

The *Annual Review of Anthropology* is online at
anthro.annualreviews.org

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102218-011412>

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This article is part of a special theme on Social
In/justice. For a list of other articles in this theme,
see <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev-an-48-themes>

Keywords

populism, liberalism, democracy, mediation, affect

Abstract

This article suggests that although there is not much of an explicitly defined anthropology of populism, anthropologists have nevertheless been working for many years on the things we talk about when we talk about populism. Anthropologists should thus be exceptionally well situated to divert the debate on populism in creative ways. In particular, I argue that the term populism registers an intensified insistence of collective forces that are no longer adequately organized by formerly hegemonic social forms: a mattering-forth of the collective flesh. The article also shows why populism is such an awkward topic for anthropologists. In part, this discomfort has to do with a tension between anthropologists' effectively populist commitments to the common sense of common people at a time when that common sense can often look ugly. In part, it has to do with how the populist challenge to liberalism both aligns populist politics with anthropological critiques of liberal norms and puts pressure on anthropology's continued dependence on liberal categories for its own relevance to broader public debates.

OUR MAGIC

By late 2016, with the Brexit referendum in the bag and Donald Trump about to enter the White House, the North Atlantic anglophone anthropology world was in a tizzy. Now that the worldwide populist wave had finally crashed onto *our* shores, what were we to do about it? Introducing a *Cultural Anthropology* Hot Spots colloquium on the rise of Trumpism, Bessire & Bond (2017) announced nothing less than an epochal test: “How we respond to this challenge will define the future of our discipline.” This response would require a test of more than ordinary powers: “Our magic may not be up to such an unnerving task. But there is only one way to find out” (Bessire & Bond 2017). At that moment anthropology seemed, curiously, at once both more relevant than ever and almost entirely beside the point. The rising political tide was “anathema to anything and everything anthropological thought has ever represented” (Bangstad 2017a). All hands were now needed on deck to reclaim the public voice of the discipline.

Some suggested that we anthropologists needed to climb down from our ivory towers and get down to brass tacks:

The current rise of ethnic, racial, and religious prejudice throughout Europe—and the United States for that matter—are a call for action to us as academics. ... While we should certainly continue our academic work to the best of our abilities, we also have a responsibility to engage our work with multiple publics, to unsettle and challenge the accounts of the political elites fostering xenophobia and nationalism.” (Stein 2016)

In Fischer’s (2017) irreproachable words, anthropology had to “reinvent itself as a vital public voice, activating society and supporting values of the social good for the contemporary worlds emergent around us.”

But what, concretely, might this reinvention involve? The white-hot anxiety of 2016 has by now receded, but the questions remain. Will anthropology’s engagement with populism require some kind of radical praxis? Is it time to reengage directly with questions of class? And if it is, then what do we do about the fact that class seems to have become an exceedingly poor predictor of political affiliation? How do we hold onto slow scholarship—“work that is both timely and takes time, and that is both empirical and imaginative” (Tamarkin 2018, p. 306)—in a world where whipping public affect into a state of normalized crisis is an elementary form of statecraft (Bangstad 2017b; Masco 2014, 2017)?

This article explores the deep provocation that populism poses to anthropology. Political scientists have in recent years developed a whole subdiscipline of populism studies (see, for example, Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). By striking contrast, there is not much of an established anthropology of populism, although several anthropologists have written with the concept very much in mind (Albro 2000; Coronil 2008; Coronil & Skurski 1991; Hansen 2001; Holmes 2000; Kalb 2009; Mepschen 2016; Samet 2019; Samet & Schiller 2017; Sánchez 2001, 2016; Worsley 1969). I want to suggest, though, that in this regard appearances are deceptive and that anthropologists have, in fact, been working for years on many of the matters that matter most when it comes to talking about populism. One might also safely say that anthropology itself, methodologically if not always ideologically, tends toward a populist stance, habitually aligning with the common sense of the common people, investing hope in “unflagging popular ingeniousness” (Olivier de Sardan 2015, p. 151). This habit is part of the reason that the current worldwide populist wave puts pressure on the anthropological imagination, as the common sense of some common people is becoming increasingly hard to swallow (Falcone 2010, Marshall 2014, Shoshan 2016, Song 2013). But the populist provocation runs deeper than that. In putting pressure on liberal norms of public life, the provocation is both in league with anthropology—insofar as we are used to using the

liberal as a foil for our critiques—and in conflict with anthropology—insofar as we nevertheless rely on liberal assumptions in making ourselves intelligible to broader debates.

WHAT IS POPULISM?

So what is populism? I need hardly add my voice to the massed chorus of those who have bemoaned the slipperiness of the concept. The diversity of phenomena that the term has been stretched to accommodate is truly staggering, from the Russian *narodniks* (or perhaps even the *populares* of Ancient Rome) and the US People's Party of the nineteenth century, via mid-twentieth century titans such as Juan Perón and Getúlio Vargas, to the Trumpists and the Chavistas of the twenty-first century. And then there is the hopeless political promiscuity of the concept, routinely applied to Vladimir Putin, Silvio Berlusconi, Viktor Orban, and Jair Bolsonaro as much as to Bernie Sanders, Podemos, Syriza, and the Occupy movement. Even within individual countries, the range can be confounding. Consider India, for example, which since the 1960s has seen left-leaning and neofascist authoritarian populisms, agrarian populisms, and cinematically mediated regional populisms—quite apart from the question of whether M.K. Gandhi's anticolonial mass mobilization might qualify as populist.

Political scientists have approached populism as a “thin-centered ideology” (Mudde 2007) that can cohabit with any number of political positions, as a political strategy (Weyland 2017), and as a vivid political style (Moffitt 2016, Ostiguy 2017). All these perspectives share what Isaiah Berlin once called the Cinderella complex—the belief that “there exists a shoe—the word ‘populism’—for which somewhere there must exist a foot” (quoted in Finchelstein 2014, p. 472). Against this definitional urge, one might usefully recall what Paley (2008b, p. 5) has written regarding the parallel desire to define democracy: “An anthropological approach is not about developing a somehow more precise set of mechanisms for determining whether a country is or is not a democracy. That would cordon off definitions of democracy precisely at the moment we seek to open them up.”

So it is with populism. The available definitions seem either too general, so that populism is, in effect, the assertive face of democracy as such (Laclau 2005, Rancière 2014), or too specific, so that only, say, the “classical” populisms of mid-twentieth-century Latin America really fit the bill (Finchelstein 2014). Samet (2019) tellingly prefers to enumerate what populism is not; it is not, he argues, inherently antidemocratic, not reducible to charismatic leadership, not aligned with any particular economic program, not exclusively a movement of the left or of the right, etc. Still, certain phenomena do seem to have a habit of popping up in the vicinity of populism talk: for example, a Manichean division of the population into a valorized majority us—the people—and a demonized minority them; a folksy or vernacular tone, coupled with an organicist emphasis on community and place; a suspicion of high-flown expert discourse and cosmopolitan rootlessness; and a powerful impulse toward bypassing mediating and moderating institutions and procedures in pursuit of an immediate, redemptive and affect-intensive presencing of popular sovereignty (Canovan 1999).

Speaking of affect, populism seems to excite its critics just as much as its adherents (Bilgrami 2018, Ostiguy 2017, Stavrakakis 2014). Populism is at once a descriptive and an overwhelmingly normative word. Hardly anyone calls themselves a populist. Rather, the term most often serves, as Jean Comaroff (2009) notes, as a weapon of “reciprocal defamation.” Faced with such intense antipopulist sentiments, we may wish to find ways of reliably differentiating progressive from reactionary populisms (Green 2017, Judis 2016, Mouffe 2018, Samet 2013, Samet & Schiller 2017). But perhaps it is worth asking a different question: What does the affective intensification around questions of populism tell us that we do not already know about our political investments? Rather

than fixating on what differentiates good populisms from bad, perhaps we might ask why it is that they are frequently grouped together as tokens of a type.

The literature on populism often proposes that populist energies are symptomatic of one or another fundamental contradiction in the structure and/or process of mass democracy. Populism, on this reading, is a kind of political *pharmakon*, at once lifeblood and poison. Take, for example, the highly charged Spanish-language term *el pueblo*, which in Latin America suggests at once the valorized, authentic people and the object of elite condescension (Skurski 2015). Populism both renews and corrupts the democratic order and is, as such, ambiguously both inside and outside formal politics (Arditi 2003). Populism radicalizes the performative paradox of democracy: It seeks not just to express but rather directly to embody the will of the very people that it simultaneously, performatively brings into being (Frank 2009, Samet 2019). Populism expresses the structural scandals of democracy: the presumptive sovereignty of the unqualified, the tension between liberty and equality, the apparently lockstep parallel growth of mass enfranchisement and administrative opacity (Appadurai 2007, Canovan 2002, Rancière 2014).

THE LIBERAL SETTLEMENT

I suggest that, these days, “populism” is a word that we reach for when we sense the possible breakdown of what I call the liberal settlement.¹ The liberal settlement was the imaginary division of the world after World War II into a zone—the “free world”—where the norms and forms of liberal democracy were presumed to be hegemonic, and a zone—the communist countries and the “developing world”—where they were not. With the passing of state socialism around 1990, the line was redrawn, roughly speaking, between the Global North and the Global South. One of the effects of the current populist wave is the blurring of that line, a line that was, in any case, always more ideological than empirical and always riddled with returns of the repressed. The kinds of markedly illiberal practices that were popularly supposed to be signs of the Global South’s liberal lag (i.e., residual “savagery”) are now explicitly acknowledged as ordinary political currency in the centers of the Global North.

But is there anything really new about this predicament? Is not the agitation over populism just one more iteration of “the familiar Eurocentric practice of granting world-historical significance and generalizability to a phenomenon only when it occurs in Europe and North America” (Chakravartty & Roy 2017, p. 4074)? Is not all this just a matter of middle-class folks suddenly feeling troubled by realities that have always defined nonelite lives (Mepschen 2016, Mouffe 2018, Nugent 2012, Tambar 2016)? As one of Muir’s (2015, p. 311) Argentine interlocutors puts it, “We middle-class people now know what the poor have always known.... Things are fucked.” Why should we pay any special attention to these middle-class folks, until recently contemptuous (if not terrified) of unruly crowds, just because they have now themselves decided to take to the streets (Sitapati 2011, Tambar 2009)? And why should anthropologists, of all people, be surprised? As the heralds of “theory from the south” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012), have we not long anticipated precisely such illiberal homecomings?

The problem is that a vague, generic liberalism has long served anthropologists as a reliable critical foil against which the nonliberal (illiberal? postliberal?) practices of our informants could be granted the culturally situated integrity that the other social sciences—as well as the rest of the world—have generally denied them. At the same time, and paradoxically, this same generic liberalism (tolerance, diversity, rights, etc.) has also been the default currency of whatever broader public intelligibility anthropology has managed to achieve. Decades ago, the ambivalence played

¹ For a general discussion of settlements as analytics, see Mazzarella (2017, p. 10).

itself out around the tension between so-called primordial sentiments and the secular, modernizing aspirations of newly decolonizing nation states. More recently, anthropologists have spoken of multiple or vernacular modernities, “disjunctive democracies” (Holston & Caldeira 1998) in which liberal pieties cohabit with illiberal pragmatics. But now, insofar as we face the problem of analyzing and explaining the current populist wave, the wavering of the liberal settlement means, first, that we are no longer able to sustain the fiction of an actually existing normative liberalism against which the difference of our informants’ life-worlds can be measured and, second, that the project of making anthropology more relevant to public debates about the political present can no longer, if we are seeking any real intellectual yield, latch onto a tacit liberal shorthand.

Anthropologists continue to do what they are best known for: redeeming (or at least holding space for) the situated integrity of political practices that other social scientists too often dismiss as corrupt, cynical, or entirely instrumental (Anjaria 2016; Björkman 2015; Duno-Gottberg 2015; Hansen 2005, 2019; Holston 2009). But how, today, are we to defend the redemptive potential of populist protest against the pragmatics of (neo)liberal statecraft, while at the same time refusing the slide into blood-and-soil purity politics (Holmes 2016)? That such violently reactionary claims to place are intellectually entangled with anthropological culture theory is yet another reason to think twice about the terms of our public interventions (Banks & Gingrich 2006, Gutmann 2002).

The pressure is beginning to tell. As Rosa & Bonilla (2017) note, the real opportunity to theorize politics differently too often collapses back into a defensive reassertion of the old liberal norms. This defensive maneuver is driven by the parallel conjuring of a new spectral savage, this time at home: the figure of the Brexiteer or the Trump voter, which, as Martin (2016) points out, “smacks of the kind of pillorying of allegedly ‘irrational’ beliefs that anthropologists would be the first to challenge in most other contexts” (see also Harding 2017, Smith 2017, Walley 2017). Against this reactive liberal posture, we may yet again point out all the ways in which Euro-American liberalism—in practice as in imagination—has always been constitutively exclusionary, indeed actively racist, not just in the imperial expansion of “normative democracy” (Nugent 2008) but on its home ground as well. Likewise, anthropologists have been consistently attentive to the ways in which the ostensibly universally tolerant spaces of civil society are always already—constitutively—defined by intolerant exclusions. To fall back on liberal basics, then, is to refuse to take these exclusions seriously.

MATTERING FORTH THE COLLECTIVE FLESH

The point is not just the one that has been made over and over again: that the normative liberal conception of the public sphere silences nonwhite, nonmale, nonstraight voices. That norm has, in any case, never adequately described actually existing publics, in the Global North or anywhere else. As Cody (2015, p. 55) remarks, “[T]he forms of mass mediation characteristic of industrial society have intersected with modes of collective social life that do not correspond to the coolly cultivated stranger sociality attributed to reading publics.” Rather, what the word populism marks is a challenge to mediation as such. Populism puts pressure on the liberal settlement by dreaming of a direct and immediate presencing of the substance of the people and, as such, a reassertion, a mattering forth of the collective flesh—where the matter is at once the sensuous substance of the social, the flesh, and the meaningful ways in which it comes to matter (Santner 2016). The liberal settlement did not just carve up the world into liberal and nonliberal zones; more subtly, it also effaced the presencing of the people that, within the republican tradition, had always intimated the possibility of revolution. Liberalism oscillates between an (anxious) invocation and a (scornful) abjection of the affective and corporeal substance of social life. Witness, when it comes to imaging popular sovereignty (in itself an abstraction), the restless oscillation between hopeful figures of

the people and the ominous *Gestalt* of the crowd (Chakrabarty 2007; Chowdhury 2019; Gaonkar 2014; Hansen 2005, 2019; Mazzarella 2010b; Sánchez 2016; Tambar 2009; Tambiah 1996).

Analytically, then, our task is not to welcome the collective flesh into spaces from which it has hitherto supposedly been excluded. Rather, the collective flesh has always been the ground of the social and, therefore, of the political. The task, therefore, is to track the specific ways in which any given social and therefore political formation is always built on a (necessarily vain) attempt to manage—which is to say to mediate and thus to organize—collective sensuous potentials. To speak of a mattering forth of the collective flesh, then, means to note the moments in which the affective and corporeal substance of social life makes itself felt as an intensification that exceeds or has fallen out of alignment with prevailing institutional mediations. Such intensified affect is not just a problem of the regressive enchantments and retarded modernity of the postcolonial “magical state,” as has sometimes been implied; it is, rather, a general predicament of social life as such, albeit one that smoothly functioning social dispensations tend to occlude (Cody 2015, Coronil 1997, Mbembe 1992). By the same token, the mattering forth of populism does not so much invalidate liberalism per se as remind us that what we have been used to calling “liberalism” involves its own projects of inciting and containing public affects.

In the Euro-American world, two endings have arrived together: We see the end of neoliberal hegemony (which is not the end of neoliberalism) along with its postpolitical, technocratic-administrative hubris (Sandel 2018, p. 358; Bilgrami 2018; Kalb 2009); and at the same time, the fantasy of postracism has also collapsed (Jackson 2008, Rosa & Bonilla 2017; compare for Latin America, Coronil 2008, Duno-Gottberg 2011, Perelman 2017). In short, a broadly renewed politicization goes hand in hand with a reassertion of the (raced, classed) precarities, susceptibilities—but also vitalities—of bodies. This doubling is not surprising. Many analyses of the current populist wave remark on the sense that formerly stable mediating institutions (political parties, unions, civil society, experts, banks) seem to have lost much of their authority.

In the place of these mediations, we see and feel a new hunger for immediacy: for the direct and unmediated apprehension and acknowledgment of embodied experience, for a presencing of the political. This terrain is often rough and painful; certainly the tonality of what goes on here tends toward the defiantly uncivil. As Jean Comaroff (2009) notes, “The fire of populism often excoriates the putative ‘sophistry’ of analysis, theorization, complexification.” In response, one may lament the coarsening of a once-civil public sphere, or one may consider the patrolling, policing violence these norms of civility inflict (Nyong’o & Tomkins 2018). But we are also seeing experiments with bringing democratic communication down to earth, with low-tech forms such as the Occupy movement’s “people’s mics” and popular assemblies (Garces 2011, Juris 2012, Razsa & Kurnik 2012) that draw on longer histories of scaling publicness back down to the body (Cody 2011, Mazzarella 2010a).

Under the liberal settlement, the mattering forth of the collective flesh, when it has not been ritually routinized, has typically been apprehended as dark matter: abjected as sacrificial excess, as the insufficiently civil substance of disposable, harmable (nonwhite and/or queer) bodies. The would-be smooth surfaces of technocratic postpolitics have always been rippled by symptomatic returns of the repressed: xenophobic outbursts, race and sex panics. When, in a now-classic article, Coronil & Skurski (1991, p. 290) observe that in moments of crisis “the body is defiantly risked,” it is tempting to retort that some bodies have always been chronically at risk and that the newfound political activation of the previously privileged, recently precarious middle classes risks effacing these longer histories of violence. To be sure, we have plenty of evidence to suggest that white democratization has long gone hand in hand with antiblack racism (Vickery 1974). And it is certainly not hard to conclude that a large proportion of the political movements that are today called populist thrive on bigotry if not outright fascism. But the re-enfleshment of the political

might also activate other embodied archives and, as such, effect a shift in the aesthetic formations by which our lives in common are “felt in the bones” (Meyer 2009, p. 5; see also Finkelstein 2019, Mazzarella 2017).

COAGULANT AND SOLVENT

The acknowledgment that there is something uniquely affect-intensive and corporeal about populism generally goes hand in hand with the proposition that the affect is a symptomatic expression of an underlying problem that, if it were fixed, would also tamp down the unseemly excitement. Consider what happens when, for example, well-meaning liberals do their best to understand radical rage, of the right or of the left, while being careful not to condone it. Here, populist affect becomes a symptom in the sense of a distorted surface expression of a real (read “sober”) underlying political reality: “the uncompulsory linking of sound questions with unsound anxieties” (Bilgrami 2018, p. 455). No doubt “legitimate grievances” are often channeled into “ugly sentiments” (Sandel 2018, p. 355). But we should not dismiss the possibility that xenophobic racism, for example, may not always be a displacement or a distortion of the kinds of social and economic problems that liberal governmentality is used to recognizing. As Hage (2016, p. 45, emphasis in original) puts it, “[W]hy can’t Islamophobia be a racist mode of *coming to terms* with a real threat, a threat to the colonial order, as opposed to the racist *manufacturing* of a nonexistent threat? ... [I]f Western societies are feeling besieged, it might be because they are.”

Likewise, having acknowledged the affective intensity of the populist symptom, we should avoid dismissing it as either cynically instrumental (a mode of manipulation) or as tactically ornamental (political style as surface distraction). How would our analysis look different if we granted the symptom its own integrity, its own truth? We might note, to begin with, that we are all—opponents as much as adherents—fascinated by populist affect (Hall et al. 2016, Smith 2017). The populist idiom generally involves a “flaunting of the low” (Ostiguy 2017, p. 73), a “tabloid style” (Canovan 1999, p. 5)—in short, a defiant refusal to be politically polite. The populist politician is the “impolite guest” at the civic dinner party; his or her charisma thus has less to do with any specific political content than with the sheer fascination of “the element that ‘falls out’ of the gentrified system” (Arditi 2003, p. 27).

The lusty disinhibition of populist style is a direct provocation to a liberal ethics of self-control and deferred gratification. This apparent disinhibition is an important reason why populist style triggers such a strongly affective counterreaction, which in turn deepens the populist investment (Gusterson 2017, Mazzarella 2019). In a general way, by pushing back on the considerable antitheatrical puritan prejudice that continues to undergird mainstream liberalism, populism reminds us of the constitutive role of aesthetics in politics. But it does so in a characteristic way, which we might call a politics of immediation (Mazzarella 2006). That is to say, it pursues immediacy effects by mobilizing representations that are, paradoxically, supposed to signal an overcoming of the mediating detour of representation.

Latour (2005) emphasizes the self-defeating side of this dynamic (without identifying it specifically with populism): “We are asking from representation something it cannot possibly give, namely representation *without* any representation” (p. 26, emphasis in original). Frank, by contrast, figures the symptom as productively inherent to the tension between representative democracy and popular sovereignty: “The defining claim of populism emerges from the democratic necessity and impossibility of the people speaking in their own name. ... Populism emerges as an event by exploiting this tension between the authorized representation of public authority and the enactment of popular power that proceeds without authorization” (Frank 2017, p. 631). But let us not forget that the political ambiguity of populist affect rests in no small part in the fact that this immediating

urge is as likely to appear in the form of a revolutionary crowd as in that of an authoritarian leader who “resolutely casts representation aside [...] and] returns to lay direct, unmediated claim to his nation” (Sánchez 2016, p. 13).

It is not surprising, then, that populist charisma tends to be expressed in one of two paradigmatic figures: either as the radical potentiality of the kind of clearing that a crowd can occupy *qua* popular assembly (Butler 2015, Graeber 2009, Mitchell 2012) or as the radical fullness of the body of a leader in which the people may find a palpable image of their own substance (Lomnitz & Sánchez 2009, Sánchez 2016, Taussig 2017). In both cases, representation is paradoxically deferred or denied by means of representation—either by figuring a new opening in which the event of the people can occur or by transubstantiation via the fetish-flesh of a leader. None of this means that we are living in a postrepresentational age, as some would claim. It suggests, rather, that the characteristically modern border between sign and substance (the separation that was at stake, for example, in the Protestant refusal of Catholic “magic,” as well as in any prejudicial discourse on the “primitive”) is blurring (Mazzarella 2017).

The effervescence associated with both of these scenarios is absolutely of the essence; it is constitutive, and it makes worlds. Nothing is as threatening to populist conviction as waning affect. Witness the crisis that besets popular uprisings as soon as the physical assembly proves difficult to sustain (Juris 2012). Witness, likewise, the predilection of populist leaders for continual mobilization, the never-ending plebiscite of rallies and referenda. By the same token, however, populist *jouissance* is also powerfully *destitutive*: defiantly dissolving the institutional frames that its votaries, rightly or wrongly, see as obstacles to the presencing of the people. We might say, then, that populist enjoyment operates politically at once as a coagulant and as a solvent. In either case, the collective flesh is assembled and activated, and in both cases this assembly and activation are as much the content as the form of populism.

WORLD AND WAGER

Freeman’s analysis of Malagasy premier and dairy magnate Marc Ravalomanana’s political potency exemplifies such a populist activation of the collective flesh, in which a chain of identifications simultaneously matter forth the land, the nation, the people, and the leader:

The material process by which Ravalomanana gathers and absorbs the potential of the Malagasy land and people, and thereby comes to embody it, is mirrored in the democratic process that has made him leader. ... His ability to coalesce material elemental power has led to his success in coalescing democratic political power. (Freeman 2007, p. 288)

Again, what comes alive here is more than the pragmatic-secular political meanings that we generally lend to the terms “representation” and “participation.” Rather, experienced as a vitally “physical connection” (Freeman 2007, p. 293) between land, people, and leader, this populist transubstantiation is experienced as a biomoral continuity (Michelutti 2013). This feeling of identification without remainder, this sense of quasi-sacred union, troubles many critics of populism, whether because it hints at political theology in a purportedly secular age (Arato 2015) or because it tends, if not toward fascism, toward intolerance of anyone who refuses the vibrant fusion (Müller 2016).

Anthropologists have for several decades now been critiquing such immediating identifications between place, culture, and people, even as some of our informants continue to find pressing reasons to retain and revive them (Appadurai 1996, Gupta & Ferguson 1997). We have explored the many ways in which substance travels and is reinvented as affective relation across space: through networks, transnational connections, and virtual publics. Equally, a populist politics of

immediation prompts anthropologists to retort that place and identity are never given, but rather always the outcome of historically specific “regimes of circulation” (Cody 2009; see also Bate 2009, Manning 2007, Spitulnik 1997). In fact, while at the level of ideological content, populism tends to celebrate authentic and immediate dwelling-in-place, its real homelands are the mass media. In the age of big data, we are, in a sense, being continually and virtually reassembled—often involuntarily so, as Kely (2017) points out. The cloud, too, is an archive—a virtual companion species, perpetually and enigmatically in formation on behalf of projects that have yet to be defined.

Indeed, the populist mobilization of the collective flesh is necessarily grounded in archives of experience. These are the potentialities embedded in shared histories, memories, and forms of life that, when activated, will necessarily proliferate affective “surfeits” (Nakassis 2013) that far exceed any attempt to inscribe them in a singular ideological narrative. This archival density is, perhaps, why moments of populist upsurge can feel at once like rigid vulgarizations of public discourse and as wild destabilizations of previously reliable narratives. As Sánchez (2016, p. 405) puts it,

[P]opulist interpellations are always addressed to a highly mobile and volatile field that is not ‘real’ but itself a patchwork of already proliferating fictions and explosive social antagonisms. . . . If, then, all these myriad decisions at times seem to converge on the institution of some broadly shared identity such as the ‘people,’ at other times the populist letter simply does not reach its destination.

In any case this activation, this mattering forth of the archive is one reason why populist immediations are more than shortcut “pseudoconcretizations” of the political (Žižek 2006).

Without necessarily calling what they are studying “populism,” anthropologists have long been attentive to two modes in which populist mattering happens: as “integral” (Holmes 2000) claims to immediate identity between a people, a place, and a way of life; and as charismatic activations of shared terrains. These are, in fact, two sides of the same world-making coin. In the integral mode, shared worlds are asserted as already existing but under threat from outsiders or callous states; in the charismatic mode, shared worlds are brought into being through performative acts of wager.

On the integral side, claims to autochthonous belonging include, today, the appropriation by white nationalists of the legitimating discourse of indigeneity (Evans 2012, 2017; Koch 2016). Meanwhile, in the last couple of decades, in Bolivia and Venezuela most notably, indigenous-identified populist regimes have been able to seize national power. This process has been a real departure from the way that autochthony has long been officially curated by Latin American cultural elites as the authentic substance of the nation (Sánchez 2001). Promising to move beyond both liberal-multicultural acknowledgments of indigeneity and long-standing nationalist tropes of *mestizaje*, the recent Latin American populisms of Evo Morales and Hugo Chávez have animated, among anthropologists as well as embedded activists, tentative hopes of a more fundamental “cosmopolitical” challenge to the ontology of liberal statecraft (de la Cadena 2010, Escobar 2010). That such hopes have largely been disappointed is perhaps not altogether surprising (Albro 2010, Grisaffi 2019, Postero 2017). But it would be a mistake to conclude that liberal governmentality remains our only real-political analytical horizon—or that charismatic leadership is necessarily what stands in the way of a “better” populism.

What might we gain by taking seriously the popular fascination with, indeed the intense enjoyment of, spectacular charismatic action—whether on the part of leaders beyond the law or of big men, vigilantes, and paramilitaries (Anderson 2018; Ghassem-Fachandi 2012; Hansen 2001, 2019; Smith 2004)? The disinhibiting discharge of pent-up frustration in such moments, especially when they come infused with a “low” disregard for civil gentility, is hard to miss. But if we stay at the level of disinhibition, then we are going to miss the world-making power of charismatic action. As Mbembe (1992, p. 14) reminds us, the fascinating “obscenity” of illiberal action is an activation of

socially palpable potentialities: “The notion of obscenity has no moral connotation here; it harks back to the ‘radiation’ things can emit, to the headiness of social forms.” This headiness, in turn, illuminates and sustains collective worlds, by braiding affect and narrative: “[T]he *work* of power also involves a process of ‘enchantment’ in order to produce ‘fables’” (p. 15, emphasis in original).

This enchantment and these fables are often sustained in explicitly dramatic ways, for example through the sponsorship of festivals as social stages on which power brokers can appear at once as the charismatic patrons and the police powers of their performative dispensations (Mazzarella 2013; see also Albro 2000, Kaur 2003). But political brokerage is also tied into place making and world sustaining in more prosaic ways, through carefully calibrated wagers on the political potential of neighborhood exchange relationships (Bedi 2016, Björkman 2014, Evans 2012). As such, “latent charismatic potentials” reside in the gap between local resources and the talents of those who may be in a position to activate them. This is what Hansen & Verkaaik (2009) call “infrapower”—a kind of profanely esoteric ability to activate exoteric social environments. Hustlers and brokers “can read, master and ‘work’ the city to make it yield benefits, magical power and eros if one runs the risk and has the courage to ‘play’” (p. 22). Of course, entrepreneurial wagers may, and often do, fail. And if the “headiness of social forms” can both enchant and enchain, then we must also be prepared to acknowledge that none of us—not the people, not the leaders—may be the masters of the powers that we summon.

SURPRISING OURSELVES

The current populist wave is one of those rare moments that deserve to be called “world-historical,” not because it brings something substantially new into the world—it does not—but because it marks the moment when aspects of world making that have always been fundamental demand to be recognized as politically decisive. Finding a language for that recognition could be the task of a revitalized political anthropology.

We already have the tools. We understand style as political substance and have the semiological means to explain its efficacy (Hall et al. 2016, Hristova 2017, Lempert & Silverstein 2012). We are good at accounting for “the social construction of the people, the boundary practices that bring ‘the people’ to social life in particular local contexts” (Mepschen 2016, p. 63). While other disciplines might worry about whether universalizing concepts such as “democracy,” “property,” “citizenship,” or “liberalism” are adequate to situated, concrete experience, anthropologists fold the inquiry back onto the social grounds of the concepts. We like to show not only how universals are locally “vernacularized” (Michelutti 2007), but also how universals are themselves the particular, provincial products of vernacular circumstances that, in circulation, may become detachable from those circumstances (Campbell 2014, Hetherington 2009, Nugent 2008, Spitulnik 1997). The recent wave of infrastructure studies in anthropology can be understood as a development of this longer engagement with the circulatory forms that allow social life to be assembled and imagined across multiple medial scales (Anand 2017, Björkman 2015, Chalfin 2014, Larkin 2013).

Anthropologists are good at paying attention to dispositions and practices that other social scientists would generally dismiss as prepolitical or, at best, parapolitical—all the apparently informal sayings, doings, and feelings that in fact become decisive for formal political outcomes, especially in populist times (Das 2006, Gutmann 2002, Spencer 2007). We tend to look behind the scenes, focusing on the quotidian, ongoing groundwork that easily gets obscured by the more apparently event-ful and spectacular dimensions of politics (Postero 2015, Samet & Schiller 2017). We are more likely to shy away from prediction than are other social scientists, perhaps precisely because we are more attuned to the lived complexities of political becoming. In Spencer’s (2007, p. 92) starkly memorable words,

There is no necessary and inevitable progression from a style of politics in which children are taught to sing that our side is good and the other side is bad, to a situation two decades later in which piles of defaced corpses by the roadside are an everyday sight. But we need to see the possible connections.

Even as the political urgency of our moment rightly reminds us of our disciplinary commitment to in-depth empirical fieldwork, we should resist the risk of sliding back into simple empiricism—not least when the acceleration and amplification of the news cycle, implacable partisanship, and cresting anti-intellectualism make it harder than ever to hold a space for the slow and open-ended work of interpretation. Unconscious processes remain fundamental to political life. The point is of course not that anthropologists somehow stand apart and know better. The point, rather, is that the founding principle of anthropology is that nothing about the social is self-evident. Too often, however, this radical suspension of certainty in our many ethnographic elsewhere has been sustained by a stable foil: some figuring of “the liberal state,” “the liberal subject,” and so on. Now that the liberal settlement is under populist pressure, this intellectual bargain is no longer sustainable. To cling to a reified image of the liberal—either as a foil in support of populist claims against it or as a haven against populist attacks on it—is to miss the challenge of the present.

What is the value of anthropological expertise in an antiexpert climate, especially when the rejection of expertise takes place in the name of the ordinary people whom anthropologists have generally claimed as their first and most important interlocutors? For anthropologists the temptation is, naturally enough, to find ways to matter again by rejoining or restoring a conversation whose norms and forms have already been enshrined as “civil” and “significant.” But what the mattering forth that we call populism tells us is that these norms and forms are already faltering. Other archives, other matters, are waiting to be activated.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For early pointers, thanks go to Karin Ahlberg, Dominic Boyer, Nusrat Chowdhury, Giovanni da Col, Saurabh Dube, Marisol de la Cadena, Ryan Jobson, Ralph Litzinger, Valentina Napolitano, Camille Robcis, Jay Schutte, Jessica Winegar, and Jarrett Zigon. For late eyes, much gratitude goes to Maura Finkelstein, Dianna Frid, Robert Samet, Kabir Tambar, and an anonymous reader for the *Annual Review of Anthropology*.

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