

Populism, Pluralism, and the Ordinary

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Abstract: Leading contemporary theorists of populism have converged on the view that populist movements are necessarily antipluralist. But antipluralist movements are poor vehicles for achieving social justice, which should not make equal status contingent on homogeneity. This paper contests the emerging consensus that populism is necessarily antipluralist, arguing that it is better understood through an analysis of “the ordinary.” Using Stanley Cavell’s suggestive analysis of “the uncanniness of the ordinary,” I argue that populist politics faces a paradox: truly ordinary things don’t emphasize their own ordinariness – they just *are* ordinary – so populism tends to frame itself as a perpetual, never-fully-achieved reassertion of the ordinary. It’s no coincidence, then, that both defenders and critics of the status quo often figure populism as a “return of the repressed” –precisely what Freud defines as the uncanny. Populist antipluralism is best understood as one method for managing this uncanniness, but other strategies are available, illuminating the potential for a more inclusive populism.

It is a commonplace that populist movements frame politics as a battle of ordinary people against corrupt elites. It’s also widely noted that in the US and Europe, claims to speak for “ordinary people” have often implicitly or explicitly meant “white people.”¹ Many political parties have been rewarded at the ballot box for portraying themselves as the voice of a virtuous white people betrayed by predominantly white elites allied with people of color and immigrants, who are portrayed as outsiders unfairly draining resources. What is the nature of this connection between populism and racism? Is populism inevitably racist and anti-immigrant or can an inclusive, anti-racist populism be built and succeed?

¹ See Joseph Lowndes, “Populism and Race in the United States from George Wallace to Donald Trump” in *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism* Ed. Carlos de la Torre (New York: Routledge, 2019): 190-200; Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

To some, this question will sound self-evidently absurd. Many advocates of populism see contemporary reactionary movements as more obviously fascist than populist while, on the other side, many critics of populism think it equally obvious that populism is necessarily exclusionary and dangerous.² In this paper, I am not chiefly interested in pursuing political typology for its own sake, but rather with the emancipatory possibilities that are revealed or obscured by different conceptualizations of populism. To that end, it is striking that many leading contemporary theorists of populism, from proponents like Ernesto Laclau to critics like Jan-Werner Müller, identify populism's defining feature as its anti-pluralism. When politics is posed as a contest between the people and the elite, they identify an accompanying tendency to see the people as homogenous, reinforcing their difference from the elite and, simultaneously, their equality with each other. This view helps explain why racism and anti-immigrant sentiments so often recur in populist politics, even though populism doesn't always explicitly avow them. However, the anti-pluralist view also makes inclusive populism virtually impossible since discomfort with diversity is asserted to be defining of populism.

As informative as the anti-pluralist explanation of the connection between populism and racism can be, it thus implausibly requires us to say some prominent self-described populist movements, like Spain's Podemos party and Bernie Sanders's campaign, are not really populist since they imperfectly seek to embrace diversity. In this paper, I argue that anti-pluralism captures an important dynamic in populism, but not a necessary one. A framework that can explain the elective affinity between populism and anti-pluralism without writing out the rest of

² On the identification of reactionary popular politics as fascist rather than populist, see, e.g., William Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy under Trumpism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Lia Haro and Romand Coles, "Eleven Theses on Neo-Fascism and the Fight to Defeat It" *Theory & Event* Volume 20, Number 1 (January 2017): 100-115. For a forceful criticism of populism as necessarily exclusionary, see Paulina Ochoa Espejo, "Populism and The People" *Theory & Event* Volume 20, Number 1 (January 2017): 92-99.

the populist tradition better helps us construct an emancipatory politics. If we want to preserve room in the populist tradition for movements that seek to be inclusive – or if we think that there is some value in describing inclusive emancipatory social movements as populist – we need to go deeper and find a common source to explain both inclusive and exclusive varieties of populism as well as why the latter often seems to predominate.

I think a solution is embedded in the commonplace statement with which I began: our concept of “ordinariness” both does a better job defining populism than does anti-pluralism and better lends itself conceiving an emancipatory politics. To be ordinary is to be an unexceptional part of everyday life and populist political movements see themselves championing those who live ordinary lives against the elites who look down on them. Crucially, there is no one way to be ordinary, so we can capture the intuitions that lead to describing populism as anti-pluralist when we say that populism pits “ordinary people” against the elites without suggesting populism necessarily requires a homogenous people. Ordinariness more aptly describes the nature of the populist subject than similar words like “normal,” with its ties to norms of identity and practice that do not justly apply to a diverse people. What distinguishes populism as a political movement is that it self-consciously stresses its own ordinariness, but in doing so, also reveals its own alienation from ordinariness. That is, truly ordinary things don’t emphasize their own ordinariness – they just *are* ordinary – so populism tends to frame itself as a perpetual, never-fully-achieved reassertion of the ordinary.

It’s no coincidence, then, that both defenders and critics of the status quo often figure populism as a “return of the repressed.”³ Yet prevailing conceptions of populism are surprisingly ill-suited to explain the affects and emotions associated with this term or with anti-pluralism

³ See, for example, Wolfgang Streeck, “The Return of the Repressed” *New Left Review* Vol. 104 (March-April 2017): 5-18.

generally. Notably, this phrase functions not only as a description of “the people” returning to claim their rightful place in politics but also precisely as a mark of what Freud calls “the uncanny.”⁴ The casual invocation of psychoanalytic concepts – often without being named as such – is striking and, while I am mindful of the risk of offering a pathologizing and condescending diagnosis of political actors, I think that taking these concepts seriously can nevertheless be illuminating, especially for exploring the emotional dimensions of populism that escape many prevailing analyses. For Freud, familiar things become uncanny when we see in them the embodiment of elements of our mental life that seemed to have been repressed or surmounted and we become anxious or even frightened by their reappearance, which threatens to upend the status quo. As Stanley Cavell points out, the ordinary often exhibits this structure, as ordinary things like language seem to recede and become extraordinary when we turn our focus to them.⁵ We can understand the dynamics of different forms of populism through looking at how they cope with this dilemma – how is their assertion of ordinariness marked by disavowal of their own extraordinary nature?

In this paper, I argue that framing populism as an uncanny politics by and for “ordinary people” helps us make sense of several features of populism better than other frameworks. Populism is often described as a particular style and while it is not reducible to style, it does stand in a particularly close relationship to aesthetics.⁶ That’s because populism often copes with its own uncanniness through spectacle, which splits the subject of populism into a visible,

⁴ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” in *The Uncanny* Trans. David McClintock Ed. Adam Phillips (New York: Penguin, 2003), pages 121-162.

⁵ Cavell, “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary” *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (April 3 and 8, 1986): 83-117. Available online at <https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/documents/a-to-z/c/cavell88.pdf>

⁶ For populism as “a persistent yet mutable style of political rhetoric,” see Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion, 2nd Edition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), page 5; more recently, Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

extraordinary leader and his ordinary supporters, who draw their political identity not from their own actions but from identifying with the leader's. Populism's uncanniness also explains the persistent connection between populism and kitsch, since both juxtapose sincerity with an appearance of inauthenticity.

Importantly, populism's uncanny relationship to the ordinary helps explain the recurrence of antipluralism, which tries to quiet doubts about populism's authenticity by asserting and trying to realize the homogeneity of the people. But if populism is a politics by and for ordinary people, there is conceptual and practical space for inclusive populism if we break with the antipluralist view of the ordinary. Against the spectacular politics that makes it easy for some to fantasize homogeneous representation, I argue that recognizing the pervasiveness of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of injustice can help us to see not only the ways in which ordinary politics already affects and engages ordinary people but also the way in which a genuine defense of ordinary people requires acknowledging their heterogeneity. An inclusive, emancipatory populism frames these divisive forms of oppression as threatening the ability of ordinary people to represent and rule themselves.

Populism as Antipluralism

It's generally agreed that populists claim the system is rigged by elites against the ordinary people whom populists claim to speak for.⁷ But who counts as "ordinary"? That is itself a political question of enormous consequence. For many on the right and left, the traditional image of the populist subject remains a white male working in manufacturing or a similar form

⁷ For example, in their survey of recent work on populism Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser note "Beyond the lack of scholarly agreement on the defining attributes of populism, agreement is general that all forms of populism include some kind of appeal to 'the people' and a denunciation of 'the elite.'" See Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), page 5.

of employment. But in the US, manufacturing employment as a percentage of the workforce has been declining since 1953, when it constituted around roughly 30% of American jobs. White male workers in industrial sectors now make up just 11% of working class laborers and the majority of working class employment is found in the service industry, where jobs like hotel housekeepers, retail clerks, and home care aides are very often filled by women of color.⁸ This makes it all the more striking that populism, which purports to speak for ordinary people, continues to exhibit significant racist and anti-immigrant components. This conflation has a long history: the founding platform of the People's Party of America, which gave populism its name, in 1892 denounced immigration policy that "opens our ports to the pauper and criminal classes of the world and crowds out our wage-earners," called for "the further restriction of undesirable emigration," and demanded that "all lands now owned by aliens should be reclaimed by the government and held for actual settlers only."⁹

For Jan-Werner Müller, one of the most prominent contemporary critics of populism within political theory, this strain of populism is no surprise. Müller writes, "In addition to being anti-elitist, populists are always *antipluralist*. Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people."¹⁰ They are untroubled by the actual diversity of the population because, as Müller explains, "The claim to exclusive representation is not an empirical one; it is always distinctly *moral*." Some people aren't members of the people and consequently their participation in politics and their receipt of benefits from the government is inherently illegitimate. That illegitimacy then licenses measures to prohibit their participation in politics, strip them of

⁸ Sarah Jaffe, "The New Working Class" *The New Republic* February 22, 2018 <https://newrepublic.com/article/146904/new-working-class>

⁹ See "People's Party Platform," *Omaha Morning World-Herald* July 5, 1892. Reprinted in *A Populist Reader, Selections from the Works of American Populist Leaders* Ed. George Brown Tindall (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 90–96.

¹⁰ Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 3. Emphasis original.

benefits, and even remove them from the country. Müller argues that such actions stem directly from the conflict between populism's homogenous understanding of the people and the diversity of contemporary democracies: "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, and also irreducibly diverse citizens."¹¹ Müller's account usefully captures an important phenomenon, one that plausibly describes the views of Viktor Orbán, Matteo Salvini, and Steve Bannon, whose self-proclaimed populism shades into fascism.¹² Yet Müller's view errs in reducing populism to only antipluralists because this excludes other prominent movements that credibly claim the mantle of populism – including movements that might point the way toward the possibility of a more inclusive populism.¹³ Indeed, Müller is forced to acknowledge that, on his view, "the one party in US history that explicitly called itself 'populist' was in fact not populist" because it recognized itself as advocating for a kind of sectional interest.¹⁴ He writes, "The Populists were an example of advocacy for the common people – without, I think, pretending to represent the people as a whole."¹⁵ This, he says, shows they aren't populist because "Put simply, populists do not claim 'We are the 99 percent.' What they imply instead is 'We are the 100 percent.'"¹⁶ Similarly, he argues that "[Bernie] Sanders is not a left-wing populist" and suggests that the *indignados* movement in Spain that gave rise to

¹¹ Müller, *What is Populism?*, 3.

¹² Jason Horowitz, "Steve Bannon Cited Italian Thinker Who Inspired Fascists" *New York Times* February 10, 2017 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/10/world/europe/bannon-vatican-julius-evola-fascism.html>

¹³ For agreement that Müller's definition is overly restrictive, see Jeffrey C. Isaac "What's in a Name?" *Journal of Democracy* Vol 28 No 2 (April 2017): 170-174.

¹⁴ Müller, *What is Populism?*, 85.

¹⁵ Müller, *What is Populism?*, 88.

¹⁶ Müller, *What is Populism?*, 3.

the Podemos party are also not populist.¹⁷ I think it's clear that making such strident antipluralism a litmus test for populism is implausible; such views may be a sufficient condition for a movement to be populist, but not a necessary one.

Podemos represents an important case because its leaders directly took inspiration from another key theorist of populism as antipluralism: Ernesto Laclau.¹⁸ As a theorist of radical democracy, Laclau is not always understood to endorse populism as antipluralism, but his account of populism explicitly requires that the people be understood as homogenous.¹⁹ Briefly, Laclau defines populism as a kind of political logic that enables individuals to identify with the people as a whole through what he calls an "empty signifier." Such signs – for example, "the American worker" – mean as little as possible so that as many individuals as possible can identify with the populist's idea of "the people," giving them more power to oppose the elite whom they are defined against. This emphasis on the emptiness of the signifier would seem to make populism compatible with diversity, but in fact, Laclau believes that such populist identification through an empty signifier requires suppressing differences as an obstacle to unity. As he puts it, "[i]t is only by privileging the dimension of equivalence to the point that its differential nature is almost entirely obliterated – that is emptying it of its differential nature – that the system can signify itself as a totality."²⁰ In other words, populism is antipluralist because individuals must regard each other as equivalent in order to be unified by the same identity and difference is understood as opposed to equivalence.

¹⁷ Müller, *What is Populism?*, 93 and 98, respectively.

¹⁸ On Laclau's influence on Podemos, see John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016), pages 122-125.

¹⁹ For a fuller account of Laclau's antipluralism, see my "Toward an Inclusive Populism? On the Role of Race and Difference in Laclau's Politics" *Political Theory* Vol 44 No 6 (2016): 797-820.

²⁰ Laclau, "Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?" in *Emancipation(s)* (New York: Verso, 1996): 36-46 at 39.

But Laclau's antipluralism has the opposite of Müller's problem; where Müller excluded even the Populist Party itself from his definition of populism, Laclau is overinclusive, arguing that *all* politics is ultimately populist.²¹ Not only does that reduce the concept's utility, but it worryingly entrenches antipluralism at the heart of politics itself.²² Indeed, since Laclau argues that "populism" is an ontological and not an ontic category," accepting Laclau's view makes the opposition between equality and difference an ineradicable feature of existence, tacitly offering a metaphysical justification of racist and anti-immigrant movements.²³ Using Laclau as a starting point has thus potentially hamstrung Podemos's attempt at inclusive populism; the implicit assumption that differences can never be the basis of unity has arguably aggravated the difficulty that the Catalan independence movement has posed for Podemos, for example.²⁴

Anxieties of the Ordinary

Though one is a vociferous critic of populism and the other an ardent proponent, this convergence between Müller and Laclau is not entirely surprising since both derive key elements of their theories from Claude Lefort's arguments about democracy.²⁵ Lefort describes democracy

²¹ See, for example, his claim that "the political becomes synonymous with populism." Page 154, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2007).

²² Chantal Mouffe's recent work on left populism declares its continuing allegiance to Laclau's approach and so unsurprisingly, she decries the "demonization" of far-right, anti-immigrant parties and argues that it is "necessary to recognize the democratic nucleus at the origin of many of their demands." It is hard for such demands to appear democratic unless one accepts the creation and maintenance of homogeneity as a necessary or desirable task for politics. See Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (New York: Verso, 2018), 22.

²³ Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?" in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* Ed. Francisco Panizza (New York: Verso, 2005); 32-49 at 44.

²⁴ See "Pablo Iglesias Thinks There Is an Alternative" *Jacobin* December 20, 2017 <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/12/pablo-iglesias-catalan-elections-podemos-spain>

²⁵ For Müller's adoption of Lefort's framework, see Müller, "The People Must Be Extracted from Within the People": Reflections on Populism" *Constellations* Volume 21, Issue 4 (December 2014): 483–493, especially 485-488. For Lefort's influence on Laclau's conception of populism, see Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pages 164-171. For Lefort's influence on Laclau's thought more generally, see Jeremy Valentine "Lefort and the Fate of Radical Democracy" in *Claude Lefort: Thinker of the Political* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 203-217.

as characterized by a tension: the people are the source of legitimate power and yet, unlike a king, the people exist nowhere specifically, creating an empty place that can only be filled provisionally and temporarily.²⁶ Lefort thus sees real democracy as necessarily pluralist, since no one can truly claim to represent the entire people, whereas Müller and Laclau both see populism as antipluralist means of filling that emptiness. However, even thinkers drawing their definitions of populism from quite different sources converge on the idea that populism is antipluralist. For example, comparative political scientists Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser argue that populism conceives of the people as “homogenous” and assert “there are at least two direct opposites of populism: elitism and pluralism.”²⁷

This antipluralist consensus is right to draw attention to the character of the representative claim that populist movements make, but wrong to assert that populists always claim to represent a homogenous people.²⁸ An antipluralist representative claim depicts the object it purports to represent according to a logic that identifies “the people” on the basis of their similarity.²⁹ Yet if any genuinely emancipatory politics must recognize that people are diverse and heterogeneous, how can we understand the possibility of an inclusive populism? By what logic would it identify the people to be represented if not their similarity? What would such a representative claim look like? To answer these questions, let’s return to the simple definition of populism with which we began: a politics that claims to speak for ordinary people against

²⁶ See Lefort, “The Logic of Totalitarianism” in *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* Ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 273–91.

²⁷ See Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6–7. They are here drawing directly from Mudde’s earlier work, including “The Populist Zeitgeist” *Government and Opposition* Vol 39 No 4 (2004): 541–563.

²⁸ This agreement that populism necessarily engages in a politics of representation differs from the claim sometimes made that populism is a phenomenon internal to representative democracy. For the latter claim, see Nadia Urbinati, “The Populist Phenomenon” *Raisons Politiques* 3, 51 (2013): 137–154.

²⁹ For a useful typology of representative claims, see Michael Saward, *The Representative Claim* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

elites. Sometimes the definition of “ordinary” adopted is antipluralist and insists that people must be like me in order to be ordinary. But that is not inherent in the term. On its own, ordinariness is an everyday condition, not anything special but the background against which notable events occur. Ordinariness is not necessarily homogeneous because lots of different kinds of things are ordinary. As Thomas Dumm writes, “everybody knows what the ordinary is. The ordinary is what everybody knows. The ordinary gives us a sense of comfort; it allows us to make certain predictions about what will happen; it provides the context for the text we provide. The ordinary allows us to assume a certain constancy in life. It is reliable.”³⁰ For most of our lives, we are ordinary to ourselves and the acknowledgement of this can form a basis for perceiving others as ordinary people, even when they are in other respects quite different from us.

This is an important respect in which ordinariness differs from being normal. To judge something or someone to be normal is both an empirical and a normative judgment; it implies a norm that person or thing should fit itself to. As Peter Cryle and Elizabeth Stephens put it, “The word ‘normal’ often suggests something more than simply conformity to a standard or type: it also implies what is correct or good, something so perfect in its exemplarity that it constitutes an ideal.”³¹ To be a normal person is to act and appear in a particular, expected way; deviations are abnormal, presumptive problems.³² Yet even people deemed abnormal are usually ordinary to themselves (A few years ago, this contrast led so many people to gleefully circulate a photo of horror punk/metal singer Glenn Danzig carrying kitty litter home from the supermarket that it became almost iconic).³³ Ordinariness seems to me to capture more precisely whom populism

³⁰ Thomas L. Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 1.

³¹ Cryle and Stephens, *Normality: A Critical Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 1.

³² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), especially 177-184.

³³ Brandon Stosuy, “Danzig Defends Kitty Litter Pic” *Stereogum* October 29, 2010, <https://www.stereogum.com/560502/danzig-defends-kitty-litter-pic/news/>

claims to speak for than does the antipluralist theory of populism. Invoking ordinariness in the sense that I've described above is compatible with heterogeneity, and consequently makes it possible to imagine an inclusive populism, but also leaves room for some populist movements to give more exclusionary content to their idea of ordinariness, so that the term covers antipluralist populism as well.

Yet being ordinary is a tricky thing. The moment we notice that something or someone is ordinary, it may cease to be so; we've plucked it out of its ordinary context and made it the object of extraordinary attention. Stanley Cavell calls this "the surrealism of the habitual."³⁴ We can easily lock the door or tie our shoes without thinking about it, but attending to the details of our movements often causes us to stumble and to find our actions strange. As Cavell notes, this experience of finding something familiar to be strange is characteristic of philosophy. He writes of one of his favorite authors, "[Wittgenstein] speaks to us quite as if we have become unfamiliar with the world, as if our mechanism of anxiety, which should signal danger, has gone out of order, working too much and too little. The return of what we accept as the world will then present itself as a return of the familiar, which is to say, exactly under the concept of what Freud names the uncanny."³⁵ On Freud's view, we find things uncanny when we experience in them the return of repressed or surmounted emotional impulses.³⁶ For example, Freud proposes that the coincidence of noticing the number 62 in multiple places in one day – for example, on our coat check ticket, our hotel room number, and so on – can feel uncanny because it returns us to earlier stages of our development characterized by the belief that magical forces control our circumstances.³⁷ As Freud explains, we fear whatever we have repressed since its return

³⁴ Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," 84.

³⁵ Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," 100.

³⁶ Freud, "The Uncanny," 147.

³⁷ Freud, "The Uncanny," 144-145.

threatens to shatter our image of ourselves and even our sense of reality; this is what makes the uncanny frightening and why the energetic insistence on repression may succeed only in increasing our fear and anxiety, as the stakes of repression's success become higher and higher. The ordinary can itself become uncanny when we repress our experience of its tendency to become extraordinary under certain forms of attention.

How does this help us to understand political movements? We can see populism's "ordinary people" exhibiting a double uncanniness that both helps explain populism's tendency to antipluralism and illuminates alternative paths. In one sense, the populist subject avows itself as uncanny, since the appearance of ordinary people in politics is portrayed as extraordinary; energetic repression of the ordinary is attributed to the elites. However, there's a further sense in which the populist subject must also disavow this admitted uncanniness in order to assert itself as ordinary rather than extraordinary; as Freud and Cavell argue, the ordinary that is returned to is not the same as the original ordinary, which is now marked by a repression of its transformation into the unfamiliar. The aesthetics of populist politics are shaped by this oscillation between the familiar and the uncanny, often lending it a flavor of nostalgic kitsch. As Theodor Adorno notes, "Kitsch is art that cannot be or does not want to be taken seriously and yet through its appearance postulates aesthetic seriousness."³⁸ Like kitsch, populist assertions of ordinariness are often serious but also impossible to take seriously, precisely because of their inartful artificiality; think of Trump's walking on stage at a campaign rally in Tampa, Florida and literally hugging a flag or Sean Hannity promoting a painting of Trump cradling a flag that had been soiled by football players kneeling on it.³⁹ Yet such kitschy spectacles cannot be dismissed; just as kitsch can make

³⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 315.

³⁹ Sarah Cascone, "Sean Hannity Asked the Left to Weigh In on a Cheesy Donald Trump Painting and Got More Than He Bargained For" *Artnet News* February 27, 2018 <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/sean-hannity-donald-trump-art-1232069>

it harder to take art seriously, so too can populist performances of ordinariness make it harder to take politics seriously.⁴⁰

Aesthetic concerns always accompany representative claims; as Michael Saward notes, “There is an indispensable aesthetic moment in political representation because the represented is never just given, unambiguous, transparent... The interests of a constituency have to be ‘read in’ more than ‘read off’; it is an active, creative process.”⁴¹ But aesthetics and style are of particular import to populism because a spectacular politics can help populist movements to manage their uncanniness, splitting or doubling the uncanny subject into an extraordinary, active leader who appears in politics and an ordinary, passive citizen who identifies with his representative.⁴² As an arena of activity defined by identifying with an extraordinary agent, such politics becomes a spectacle, something that happens essentially elsewhere.⁴³ As Freud notes, a double can embody “all the strivings of the ego that were frustrated by adverse circumstances, all the suppressed acts of volition that fostered the illusion of free will.”⁴⁴ It is thus unsurprising to find that people often talk about populist leaders giving vent to frustrations experienced by ordinary people; Donald Trump is so frequently referred to as “the id” of his supporters that it’s virtually a cliché. But this conventional wisdom relies on a faulty model of the psychic economy. Despite claims that

⁴⁰ Drawing on Susan Sontag’s claim that “One is drawn to Camp when one realizes that ‘sincerity’ is not enough,” we might see the reactionary provocations of Milo Yiannopoulos and the alt-right trolls of 4chan, who claim to be “in it for the lulz,” as the ironic appreciators of antipluralist kitsch. See Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Picador, 1966): 275-292 at 288 as well as Daniel Penny, “#Milosexual and the Aesthetics of Fascism” *Boston Review* January 24, 2017, <http://bostonreview.net/politics-gender-sexuality/daniel-penny-milosexual-and-aesthetics-fascism>

⁴¹ Saward, *The Representative Claim*, 74.

⁴² To use Saward’s terms, the populist leader is the subject and the maker of the antipluralist representative claim while the populist follower is the object and (part of) the audience of the claim.

⁴³ For his part, Laclau embraces this logic of identification, writing, “An assemblage of heterogeneous elements kept equivalentially together only by a name is, however, necessarily a *singularity*... almost imperceptibly, the equivalential logic leads to singularity, and singularity to identification of the unity of the group with the name of the leader. To some extent, we are in a situation comparable to that of Hobbes’s sovereign.” Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 100.

⁴⁴ Freud, “The Uncanny,” 143.

support for populism is driven by “economic anxiety,” people who voted for Trump were likely to have higher incomes than voters for Hillary Clinton.⁴⁵ Claims that Trump gave voice to anxieties about social status also presume that Trump articulated feelings that preexisted his candidacy and were previously kept private.⁴⁶ What a focus on the populist uncanny helps show is that the populist leader does not merely express or vent anxieties that pre-exist the populist movement; rather, populism is itself generative of anxieties, partly through its own uncanniness and the attendant construction of an identity as “ordinary.”

In many respects, as a reality TV star improbably elected to the presidency, Trump is an exemplary instance of the populist uncanny – one who is uncanny not only to his supporters but also his critics. Freud notes, “an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes, and so forth.”⁴⁷ Seeing politics as a spectacle contributes to this blurring of fantasy and reality and a reality TV star is especially well placed to navigate it.

Antipluralism that interprets “ordinary people” to mean a homogenous people represents an additional possible response to this instability in populist identity, one that can work in tandem with spectacular identity. An explicitly antipluralist populism seeks to eliminate anxiety about populism’s inauthenticity and uncanniness by trying to eradicate evidence of the people’s everyday diversity, a political fantasy to be realized in popular representation before being enacted through policy. Extraordinary means are then demanded in order to preserve

⁴⁵ Philip Bump, “Places that backed Trump skewed poor; voters who backed Trump skewed wealthier” *Washington Post*, December 29, 2017 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/12/29/places-that-backed-trump-skewed-poor-voters-who-backed-trump-skewed-wealthier/>

⁴⁶ Diana C. Mutz, “Status threat, not economic hardship, explains the 2016 presidential vote” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, No 19 (May 8, 2018): E4330-E4339.

⁴⁷ Freud, “The Uncanny,” 150-151.

ordinariness – walls, deportations, mass detentions. This also helps explain why, to the perplexity and frustration of those who see populism as a ready vehicle for redistributive policies, such antipluralist populism is often comfortable with economic inequality. For example, Steve Bannon has argued, “Donald Trump is not part of the American elite. Donald Trump has always been an outsider... Donald Trump is totally self-made. He took a small grubstake of his father. His father gave him, what, \$100 million? \$50 million? \$40 million?”⁴⁸ Because antipluralist populism gives ordinariness content through a fantasized homogeneity of race, the leader living in a gold-plated penthouse in no way contradicts his claim to be “ordinary” too.

Such fantasies of identification are readily facilitated by a society of the spectacle, which makes cultural consumption rather than production the primary mode of action. As Michel de Certeau argues, this passive role reinforces the feeling that power is being wielded elsewhere: “Marginality is today no longer limited to minority groups, but is rather massive and pervasive; this cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized, remains the only one possible for all those who nevertheless buy and pay for the showy products through which a productivist economy articulates itself. Marginality is becoming universal. A marginal group has now become a silent majority.”⁴⁹ This invocation of the silent majority suggests how a spectacular antipluralist populism can feed on feelings of marginalization among those privileged with respect to race, class, gender, and other axes of identity.

⁴⁸ Marlow Stern, “Steve Bannon, in His \$1,400 Hotel Suite, Rails Against the ‘Elite’” *The Daily Beast*, September 9, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/bannon-in-his-dollar1400-suite-rails-against-the-elite>

⁴⁹ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* Trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), page xvii.

The Prospects for Inclusion

I'm tempted to say that antipluralism is a kind of neurotic populism, but I'm mindful of Müller's concern that such claims pathologize proponents of a particular politics which should be opposed on normative grounds. However, political analysis need not avoid psychology entirely, since it is an inescapable element of politics; to dream of a politics in which psychological forces play no role is a kind of irrational rationalism. The fact is, every response to our current circumstances can equally be understood as neurotic; ordinariness may be especially elusive in times of great injustice. Consider Sen. Bernie Sanders's comments in 2017: "I think we've got to work in two ways ... Number one, we have got to take on Trump's attacks against the environment, against women, against Latinos and blacks and people in the gay community, we've got to fight back every day on those issues. But equally important, or more important: We have got to focus on bread-and-butter issues that mean so much to ordinary Americans."⁵⁰

Theorists who equate populism with anti-pluralism can't explain why Sanders's attempt at inclusive populism goes wrong in these comments since these rhetorical gestures are, for them, anti-populist by definition. Notably, Sanders's comments are not anti-pluralist, but by counterposing women, people of color, and the LGBT community with "ordinary Americans," Sanders offers a symptomatic failure of inclusive populism – one that parallels Podemos's difficulties outlined above. Seeking justice for all, he nevertheless elevates as properly ordinary only those unmarked by difference. Sanders here fails to break with the concept of ordinariness that assumes a homogenizing representational logic though he acknowledges – and even tries to

⁵⁰ Matt Wilstein "Bernie Sanders Warns Democrats Not to Hang Their Hopes on Robert Mueller" *The Daily Beast* October 31, 2017 <https://www.thedailybeast.com/bernie-sanders-warns-democrats-not-to-hang-their-hopes-on-robert-mueller>

embrace – the diversity of the people. Any populism that fails to challenge antipluralist representational logic will be unable to grapple with the political challenges posed by insights like Stuart Hall’s claim that “[r]ace is...the modality in which class is ‘lived.’”⁵¹ Unless it explicitly recognizes differences among those it claims to represent, populism’s facially unmarked appeals to “ordinary people” or “working families” will continue to assume white male heterosexual identities as the norm.

As I will argue in closing, ordinariness is not foundationally opposed to difference, making a genuinely inclusive and emancipatory populism possible.⁵² Unlike a claim to be “normal,” a claim to be ordinary does not require positioning oneself with respect to a standard of behavior or nature; ordinariness is rather about a shared experience of everydayness. To claim to be an ordinary person is not a demand for recognition of one’s distinctive form of difference, but rather a claim to share a condition faced by many different people. Where antipluralist populism foregrounds a Schmittian conflict between fixed, opposed identities, an inclusive populism emphasizes the common material conditions that shape the experiences of ordinary people.⁵³ Broadly, I understand ordinariness as *a common structure of experience that links material conditions to personal identity*. Specifically, Lauren Berlant describes these contemporary conditions as “crisis ordinariness,” in which “the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impended crises of life-building and expectation whose sheer volume so threatens what it has meant to ‘have a life’ that adjustment seems like an accomplishment.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Hall, “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance,” in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindeborg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 16-60, at 55.

⁵² I distinguish these terms to recognize “inclusion” can itself be oppressive, as when indigenous people are given no choice but to be “included” in a settler colonial society. See Jakeet Singh, “Decolonizing Radical Democracy” *Contemporary Political Theory* OnlineFirst (2018): 1-26.

⁵³ For example, Mouffe proposes to create a shared peoplehood through “confronting a common adversary: the oligarchy.” See Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 24.

⁵⁴ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), page 3.

Berlant's account of crisis ordinariness has two features that I want to draw attention to. First, crisis ordinariness is irreducible to either material conditions themselves or an individual's phenomenological experience of the ground of everyday life; what's shared is a common structure of experience relating these two, as different novels are identifiably part of the same genre. Berlant argues that the prevailing genre for interpreting contemporary ordinary experience is the "impasse"; coping with crises is so consuming that radical change feels impossible and simply getting by feels like the best we can hope for. Under such conditions, the uncanniness of populism seems an apt politics for an ordinariness that never entirely settles down into a routine. Second, while ordinary people share the experience of adjustment as accomplishment, "simply getting by" can be considerably more challenging for some groups, particularly those marked as different, abnormal, and so on. But one can experience one's everyday life as ordinary in important respects even when others refuse to acknowledge that. That provides the ground for abnormal individuals to make a claim to represent ordinary people in a way that diverges from a homogenizing representational logic.

Against the spectacular politics that can reinforce populist antipluralism, other populisms can manage the uncanniness of the populist subject by insisting on politics as already part of our everyday lives, of the shared circumstances faced by ordinary people. This insistence diminishes the uncanniness of the populist subject; by making politics ordinary, it frames the return of ordinary people to politics less as the revenge of those left behind and more as the acceptance of a role they already occupied. But this alone is not enough to make an inclusive populism. Grassroots right wing organizations like the National Rifle Association also engage their

membership in a way that makes politics an ordinary part of their lives and they are adept using this integration with the everyday to mobilize politically.⁵⁵

For an inclusive and emancipatory populism, the pervasiveness of social injustice spurs the acknowledgement of the ordinariness of politics and thematizes the importance of an organized coalition of ordinary people as a reason to oppose discrimination against those marked as different. In the United States, movements led by people of color are rarely called populist because whites generally perceive the discrimination they face as affecting only these groups. That frames the fight against racism as a kind of special interest politics that makes no claim to represent ordinary people generally (as one might when framing racism as a way that the system is rigged against ordinary people). This latter path requires articulating a vision of politics in which the conditions that ordinary people face make it possible for them to identify a shared interest in ending racism, though some benefit from racial hierarchy and actively seek to reproduce it. Unlike antipluralist politics, such a politics necessarily reckons with the need to represent a heterogeneous people.

Angela Davis arguably offers such a vision: “Black women have had to develop a larger vision of our society than perhaps any other group. They have had to understand white men, white women, and black men. And they have had to understand themselves. When black women win victories, it is a boost for virtually every segment of society.”⁵⁶ Davis here goes beyond a commonplace expression of standpoint epistemology by making a representative claim.

⁵⁵ On the NRA as a part of ordinary life, Jennifer Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). On the mobilization of ordinariness in the NRA’s public actions, a representative example is Marc A. Thiessen, “Attacking the NRA is really attacking everyday Americans” *Washington Post* February 28, 2018 https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/attacking-the-nra-is-really-attacking-everyday-americans/2018/02/27/915c8c74-1be8-11e8-9de1-147dd2df3829_story.html?utm_term=.0a79ccc3dce8

⁵⁶ See the interview accompanying her photograph in Brian Lanker, *I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1999), 102-103.

Crucially, she reverses antipluralism's homogenizing logic and offers herself, and black women more generally, as exemplary representatives precisely *because* they are marked as different. Black women become symbols of the people because their intersectional oppression means that addressing the problems they face necessarily entails benefits for all others. Without using the terms, Davis here articulates the logic of a populism that sees heterogeneity as compatible with ordinary people nevertheless having common interests – indeed even suggests ways that heterogeneity facilitates the advancement of their common interests.⁵⁷ What's more, by drawing attention to the politics of everyday life and the way that power shapes identities and experiences, such a vision cuts against the spectacular mode of populism that makes politics something that happens elsewhere.

Davis studied with Adorno and I want to close by considering her populist argument for political leadership by black women in light of Adorno's famous claim that "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption" – a perspective that is "is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair's breadth, from the scope of existence."⁵⁸ Acknowledging that we are always already in politics will not rid populism of its uncanniness entirely, but can refashion it into a kind of critical alienation from the pressures that normalize injustice, making it possible to stand at a remove from our usual existence. If crisis ordinariness makes us feel like simply getting through the day is an accomplishment, an avowedly inclusive and emancipatory populist politics can

⁵⁷ Alicia Garza, one of the founders of #BlackLivesMatter, self-consciously employs Davis's argument when she writes, "When we are able to end hyper-criminalization and sexualization of Black people and end the poverty, control, and surveillance of Black people, every single person in this world has a better shot at getting and staying free. When Black people get free, everybody gets free." See Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement" *The Feminist Wire* October 7, 2014 <https://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>

⁵⁸ Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* Trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005), 247.

unsettle us by calling attention to how the reproduction of these conditions requires ordinary people to engage in extraordinary labor. In doing so, perhaps this can bring populism closer to a democratic politics in which it is no longer extraordinary for ordinary people to have political power.

Of course, as Adorno's quote makes plain, any politics in the real world will have its limits and exclusions. While a populism premised on the common interests of ordinary people may avoid the exclusionary homogeneity of antipluralist populism, a politics of common interest makes it an especially acute question who will sacrifice (or be sacrificed) to advance the interests of the larger group. No matter how widely shared the common experience and conditions of crisis ordinariness, no individual's personal interests will be identical to the shared interests of the movement. Consider the dynamics of a heterogeneous populist movement that identifies a shared interest in ending racism. Prevailing racist social dynamics are likely to be reproduced within the movement so that the personal interests of people of color are sacrificed more readily than the interests of white participants, who might leave if they perceive the costs they are asked to bear to be disproportionate to the benefit they are likely to receive.⁵⁹ A representative claim based on the benefit of difference like Davis's is formulated to address such a problem, but it is unlikely to overcome it entirely. Can such a politics successfully mobilize enough people to succeed? A politics grounded in some claim to shared interest lacks the transgressive thrill of overly exclusionary populism, which can offer the pleasure of domination through sacrificing others. In the past, left movements could offer the adventure of a revolutionary politics that sought to cut off the king's head, but the contemporary experience of political impasse makes such possibilities seem remote. Absent an aspiration to revolutionary transformation, the left has

⁵⁹ On the unequal distribution of sacrifice, see Juliet Hooker, "Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics: From Democratic Sacrifice to Democratic Repair" *Political Theory* Vol 44 No 4 (2016): 448-469.

largely settled for the compensatory pleasures of unmasking the truth through critique, but even this pleasure is now largely blocked by the ascendance of neofascist and rightwing kitsch, which offers nothing to unmask.

So what can make people willing to sacrifice for the common interest? Here I think the concept of ordinariness offers one last resource, which is that loss and even tragedy are part of the ordinary.⁶⁰ Ordinary experience includes suffering and loss; to live without them would be truly extraordinary. Even apart from the material losses that ordinarily occur, people are internally heterogenous, even self-contradictory, which means we only ever realize part of ourselves and must lose other parts. There seems to be a sense in which some parts of the left still see their political losses as extraordinary and unusual, despite decades of setbacks. But if one accepts loss as ordinary – if one gives up the expectation of being able to inexorably advance one’s interests – then the possibility of incurring losses in the course of political action will not seem so daunting.⁶¹ I should add that this expectation of continuous improvement is racialized and importantly tied to whiteness, so in that sense, I have just restated the problem. But I think this restatement brings out some of the emancipatory possibilities that remain in a populist politics of the ordinary.

⁶⁰ See Cornel West, “Pragmatism and the Sense of the Tragic” in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), pages 174-182.

⁶¹ See Joseph Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).