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Rebordering “the People”: Notes on Theorizing Populism

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Wherever we look of late, it seems, there is an anxious and ever-increasing preoccupation with rising or resurgent “populism.” In dominant European discourses (including those of the Left), there is a virtual consensus that populism is an inherently debased form of political expression, to be presumptively equated with far-right (anti-immigrant, racist) nationalisms. In Europe today, the term *populist* effectively operates as an epithet, a derisive label for castigating all that is beyond the pale of elementary decency—“a sort of moral disease which needs to be condemned morally, not fought politically” (Mouffe 2005: 57; cf. Mudde 2007). This, indeed, is likely why there tends to be so little reflection, relatively speaking, on the status of populism as an analytical category. It is somehow similar to the old problem of those who seek to litigate and censor pornography but can never quite manage to define with any precision what constitutes the offense. As with pornography, it seems, so with populism: you know it when you see it. In the United States and much of Latin America, however, populism as a category is distinctly more equivocal. In Latin America, populism has often been chiefly associated with an anti-oligarchical impulse, commonly

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1 and unsurprisingly accompanied by an anti-imperialist one. In the United
2 States, the equivocation around populism owes directly to the ambivalent
3 and contradictory legacies of the late nineteenth-century political movement
4 known as Populism, which prominently channeled a variety of antielitist,
5 antiestablishment, anticorruption, egalitarian, and generally democratic
6 proclivities and impulses, broadly associated with a multifarious coalition of
7 wage workers, independent small farmers, and other “common folk.” Simul-
8 taneously, populism feeds while also cannibalizing the alienation, anger,
9 and resentment of the disaffected, disenfranchised, and dispossessed (Frank
10 2004; Hardisty 1999; Hochschild 2016). Regrettably, the multiplying suc-
11 cesses of right-wing or reactionary populisms have recurrently inspired vari-
12 ous formulations of would-be “left” populisms or, as in Étienne Balibar’s
13 (2017) recent intervention, the tentative formulation, as a counterpoint to
14 “nationalist populism,” of a “transnational counter-populism.”

15 In the contemporary US context, populism has been widely associated
16 with the vulgar and belligerent demagogy of Donald Trump. Aptly charac-
17 terized as the “functional equivalent of the European populist radical right,”
18 but nonetheless a “very American” equivalent inasmuch as he is in fact an
19 “anti-establishment elitist” (Mudde 2015), Trump’s campaign for the US
20 presidency was literally predicated from its outset on an anti-immigrant
21 nativism that was inextricable from a baldly anti-Mexican/anti-Latino racism
22 (De Genova 2017a). Although there is no dispute that Trump’s politics are
23 thoroughly reactionary, it has also been widely recognized that his dema-
24 gogic opportunism—ultimately subservient to his psychopathological nar-
25 cissism and unabashed authoritarianism—has been distinguished chiefly
26 by a political disposition that is so incoherent and plainly ill informed that he
27 is generally depicted as “unideological.” In this regard, the notion of “Trump-
28 ism” is a perfect misnomer. Indeed, Trump is so ideologically inconsistent
29 that the more devout spokespersons of elite, establishment conservatism
30 repudiate him precisely on the grounds of a reckless and feckless “popu-
31 lism.” The editorial board of the eminent *National Review* (2016), for
32 instance, has characterized him as “a philosophically unmoored political
33 opportunist who would trash the broad conservative ideological consensus
34 within the GOP in favor of a free-floating populism with strong-man over-
35 tones” and an outright “menace to American conservatism who would take
36 the work of generations and trample it underfoot in behalf of a populism as
37 heedless and crude as the Donald himself.” The deep suspicion of populism
38 evident in this brand of elitist conservatism is reminiscent of the wry deri-
39 sion regarding democracy itself, famously articulated by H. L. Mencken

([1920] 1956: 21): “As democracy is perfected, the office [of the president] represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. We move toward a lofty ideal. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart’s desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.” It is indeed appropriate to suggest that Trump compensates for his general political illiteracy, his governmental incompetence, and his authoritarian contempt for the law with recourse to a crude populism, but this may be because pandering to “the people” is really the deep grammar of all modern democratic political life and thus something more elemental than any proper political program or ideology. Even if a moron such as Trump cannot speak well or intelligently, to the extent that he can speak at all, he relies on a rudimentary grammar that unites him in discourse with the larger political milieu in which he operates. That elementary grammar that unifies the entire discursive field of bourgeois democracy as such, I am suggesting, is populism. This vexed ambivalence around the relation between democracy and “the people”—“the plain folks of the land”—therefore presents a fundamental starting point for any attempt to apprehend populism as the site of an intellectual and political problem.

Who Are “the People,” and How Do They Uphold Bourgeois Democracy?

What, then, is populism? In an effort to critically theorize populism, it is plainly insufficient to engage in merely historicist readings or purely descriptive empirical accounts of populism as one or another geographically and temporally circumscribed phenomenon. In the strictest but also most capacious sense of the word, populism is the promotion of the interests and prerogatives of “the people.” Who, then—or, indeed, *what*—is “the people,” after all? How are we to distinguish this populist figure of “the people” that periodically but persistently asserts itself in contemporary politics from that presumably more venerable (if ever elusive) figure of “the People” to which we apparently owe the origins of modern (bourgeois) democracy itself? “An anti–status quo dimension is essential to populism,” Francisco Panizza (2005: 3) astutely observes, “as the full constitution of popular identities necessitates the political defeat of *the other* that is deemed to oppress or exploit the people” and, more generally, that prevents “the people” from achieving “the promise of plenitude.” It is crucial to recognize in populism that “antagonism is thus a mode of identification in which the relation between its form (the people as signifier) and its content (the people as signified) is given by the very process of naming—that is, of establishing who the enemies of the people (and therefore the

1 people itself) are” (3). “The refusal to acknowledge the political in its antago-
 2 nistic dimension,” Chantal Mouffe (2005: 51) adds, “and the concomitant inca-
 3 pacity to grasp the central role of passions in the constitution of collective iden-
 4 tities” are, in her view, “at the root of political theory’s failure to come to terms
 5 with the phenomenon of populism.”

6 The illusory appeal of an enigmatic “plenitude” tellingly corresponds
 7 to populism’s most vexing and yet quite public secret—that “the people” is
 8 an *empty* signifier (Laclau 2005a: 67–128; 2005b), so seductive yet so much
 9 the more treacherous precisely inasmuch as its meaning and substance is
 10 dangerously vacuous. “The so-called ‘poverty’ of the populist symbols is the
 11 condition of their political efficacy,” Ernesto Laclau (2005b: 40) incisively
 12 contends. Laclau (2005a: xi), who represents probably the most prominent
 13 exception to the rather widespread theoretical disregard of populism as an
 14 epistemic problem, begins his discussion with precisely the point that “the
 15 referent of ‘populism’ in social analysis has always been ambiguous and
 16 vague.” He writes: “A persistent feature of the literature on populism is its
 17 reluctance—or difficulty—in giving the concept any precise meaning.
 18 Notional clarity—let alone definition—is conspicuously absent from this
 19 domain” (3). Similarly, Panizza (2005: 1) begins his discussion on the same
 20 note: “It has become almost a cliché to start writing on populism by lament-
 21 ing the lack of clarity about the concept.”

22 Notably, Laclau’s (2005a: 4) central hypothesis enfolds within itself his
 23 answer to the riddle of populism: “The impasse that Political Theory experi-
 24 ences in relation to populism is far from accidental, for it is rooted in the
 25 limitation of the ontological tools currently available to political analysis; that
 26 ‘populism,’ as the locus of a theoretical stumbling block, reflects some of the
 27 limits inherent in the ways in which Political Theory has approached the
 28 question of how social agents ‘totalize’ the ensemble of their political experi-
 29 ence.” Indeed, as Laclau contends: “Populism has no referential unity
 30 because it is ascribed not to a delimitable phenomenon but to a social logic
 31 whose effects cut across many phenomena. Populism is, quite simply, a way
 32 of constructing the political” (xi). While I fundamentally disagree with
 33 Laclau’s specific proposition that “populism is the royal road to understand-
 34 ing something about the ontological constitution of the political as such”
 35 (67), in which “a disdainful rejection” of populism is tantamount to “the dis-
 36 missal of politics *tout court*” (x; cf. Laclau 1977), I do agree, nonetheless, that
 37 populism presents a kind of ontological “stumbling block” for the task of
 38 theorizing politics as we know it and am similarly concerned that a more
 39 persistent and rigorous interrogation of populism is crucial for any adequate

consideration of the production of modern conceptions of political “community,” as such. Laclau (2005a: 249) ultimately goes further, however, and proposes that “the people” is nothing less than “the central protagonist of politics.” Without belaboring further my disagreement with Laclau, it will have to suffice to say that such a conception of politics and “the political as such” remains confined by the coordinates of the political as it has been ontologically grounded within the extended historical horizon of “actually existing” bourgeois society. An arguably more useful theorization of populism will aspire to a conceptualization of the political in a manner that can *exceed* the parameters of the political as it is systemically posited under the effectively global sociopolitical regime of capitalism, rather than recapitulate and recuperate its most foundational liberal conceits.

Democracy, in its simplest expression, is understood to be government “of, by, and for the People.” “The People” is thus enshrined with a certain unquestionable halo of integrity as an essential premise of all democratic politics, inasmuch as it supplies the veritable source of modern state sovereignty. The legitimacy of modern state power is presented as originating from a mythical covenant, a “social contract,” among naturally free and equal individuals. Thus the power of the state is purported to derive from the natural-born power for autonomous self-determination and therefore self-government that is said to reside within each and every individual. According to the conventions of social contract theory, once these putative individuals have gathered together into some sort of ostensible political “community,” the effective freedom and equality that are considered to be everyone’s birthright become not an individual power of self-government but a collective one. It thereby becomes necessary to translate this wild, “natural” freedom into the sort of politically and juridically defined liberty that can be used to justify the authority of the state as the consensual “democratic” expression of the People’s will. The state’s sovereignty now appears to be legitimate, ostensibly derived from the innate and natural sovereignty of the People. The People is thus conjured up to serve this foundational and constituent role within the origin myths of modern state power, only then to be laid to rest and relegated to its solemn and hallowed place in the misty past, at the primal scene of a social contract that never in fact happened historically. The People, therefore, supplies the indispensable but immediately vanishing ground of a political order that now may rest assured of the popular origin and democratic legitimacy of its sovereignty. Thereafter, the People is promptly and effectively decomposed, reduced once more to an aggregate of individuals now recoded as “citizens” (De Genova 2015a).

1 The modernity of this form of power derives precisely from the notion
 2 that the Rule of Man (as in a monarchy) has been irreversibly replaced by the
 3 Rule of Law. No longer mere subjects of a monarchical sovereignty, actual
 4 people—embodied persons embedded in dense and complex webs of social
 5 relations—come to be abstracted from the lived forms of communal life and
 6 reduced to “individuals” who, now as “citizens,” may be abstractly figured as
 7 “equals” before the Law. As abstract individuals, therefore, all citizens are
 8 ostensibly equal, commensurable, effectively interchangeable, as the Law is
 9 supposed to apply uniformly to all, and no one is supposed to be enduringly
 10 subjected to personalistic and hierarchical forms of domination and depen-
 11 dency. Citizenship therefore corresponds to a social order in which everyone
 12 is presumed to voluntarily and “freely” engage in exchange, whether it be
 13 the exchange of goods for money or, much more commonly, the exchange of
 14 the capacity to labor for money wages. In short, citizenship is a political form
 15 that abides by the abstract rules that govern the capitalist marketplace (De
 16 Genova 2015a). Thus we may recognize that the popular sovereignty of the
 17 modern state is inseparable from a specifically capitalist social order. Of
 18 course, rather than the presumptive ideal of inclusion and belonging, citi-
 19 zenship has long been a technology for the subordination of women and
 20 various categories of “minority,” deployed as a means for the unequal, con-
 21 tradictory, and differential inclusion/exclusion within the legal regime of
 22 one or another state formation. However unequally in fact, citizenship nev-
 23 ertheless inscribes people as proper “members” belonging to an imaginary,
 24 abstract, and artificial political community of equals, which first appears in
 25 the form of the People, but customarily comes to be recoded as “the Nation.”
 26 This, indeed, is how citizenship serves to stitch together exalted notions
 27 such as “freedom,” “equality,” “democracy,” and purportedly inalienable
 28 “human rights” with state power and nationalism.

30 **The People and the Space of the Nation-State**

32 In Mencken’s telling turn of phrase, “the people” is equated with the “plain
 33 folks of the land.” This seemingly inexorable affiliation of “the people” and
 34 “the land”—indeed, the territory of the state—is revealing and instructive.
 35 Notably, the refashioning of the People as the Nation intrinsically involves a
 36 process of *bordering*. No modern state power is figured as an expression of
 37 the sovereignty of *all* people (the entire human race), but rather such power
 38 is figured only as the territorially delimited and bounded manifestation of a
 39 particular People, a “nation” to which it is presumed to correspond as if by

some natural (birthright) filiation. Benedict Anderson (1991: 7) has famously discerned the necessity for every nation to have limits—the requirement of imagining any nation as a unity defined by boundaries—due to the contingency of all nations that derives from their fundamental lack of any organic unity or natural, immutable boundaries.

Inasmuch as each People is configured at precisely the “national” scale of a particular (territorially defined) state, the citizenship that instrumentalizes and thereby supplants the popular will as such can only be properly examined in the context of the sociopolitical history that has been shaped and disciplined—indeed, bordered—by any given particular (nation-)state. “Each new form of state,” suggests Henri Lefebvre ([1974] 1991: 281), “introduces . . . its own particular administrative classification of discourses about space . . . and people in space.” Despite its broadly inclusive and egalitarian mystique, therefore, once we locate citizenship as a kind of legal personhood within a polity defined by the territorial borders and juridical boundaries of a “national” state, it becomes clearer that citizenship is always an inherently exclusionary and divisive framework for the production of various degrees of noncitizenship and thus legal nonpersonhood. In this respect, we can only properly assess the true meaning of citizenship from a global perspective that is not confined within the borders of any particular state formation. Consequently, rather than the customary liberal plea for the belated realization of the egalitarian promises of citizenship, our greatest challenge is to cultivate a radically open-ended imagination about how to enact various forms of political struggle beyond and against the treacherous allure of citizenship (De Genova 2010b). Simultaneously, inasmuch as citizenship decomposes various formations of communal life and sociality into an aggregate of “individuals” (uniform and commensurable legal persons), it nonetheless reconstitutes all citizens into a “national” community that is presumed to encompass and subsume all other forms of social division and antagonism within a greater political unity: the Nation.

Populism is comparably encircled by the parameters of the Nation. The partition between “the people” and its other—whomever or whatever may be depicted as the “enemy of the people,” in Panizza’s instructive phrase—without which a “popular subjectivity” cannot emerge, according to Laclau (2005b: 38), is tellingly characterized as an “internal frontier” (38), which is effectively articulated as “divid[ing] society into two camps” (42). Apart from the strong likelihood that this notion of “society” is predicated on a rather conventional methodological nationalism, the deeper question that arises is why and whether such a frontier should be imagined to be only “internal.” Every

1 nationalism is inherently predicated on the threat of foreign (*external*) “ene-
 2 mies.” Moreover, it is precisely through a distinctly reactionary populism that
 3 anti-immigrant nativism juxtaposes “the people”—routinely equated with
 4 various exclusionary notions of the putatively authentic “nation”—with the
 5 “alien” menace of migrant or refugee “invasion,” a mob of “foreign” intruders
 6 poised to usurp the ostensible sovereignty and presumptive patrimony of the
 7 People. In this respect, the external frontier of nationhood always operates
 8 simultaneously as an *internal* mechanism for bordering citizenship and
 9 alienage within the space of the state. Furthermore, and importantly, each
 10 nationalism is invariably challenged to confront its own inherent require-
 11 ments for the stabilization of a “national” identity that can not only mediate
 12 the more conventional “foreign”-ness of migrants or refugees but also reme-
 13 diate “the foreign” within and thereby tends to inexorably reveal that there are
 14 particular “internal minorities,” presumed to be essentially inimical to the
 15 “nation.” Given the affinity of nationhood with *nativity*, furthermore, and
 16 thus the natal entitlements of sheer birth, such figures of “foreignness” (both
 17 internal and external) tend to be systematically constituted in racialized
 18 terms. Therefore, every nativism that is ostensibly oriented outward in the
 19 fortification of an external frontier tends always also to ramify inward in a
 20 project of national purification.

21 Nativism, as I have argued elsewhere (De Genova 2005: 56–94; 2010a;
 22 2016), is the specific modality by which every nationalism is supplied with
 23 its defining and definitive politics of “identity.” Nativism is a unifying and
 24 animating force within nationalism itself, and the identity politics of nativ-
 25 ism can never be fully excised. No nationalism is ever truly recuperable from
 26 its nativism. More precisely, nativism equips the nation-state with a “national
 27 identity” in the image of which to produce its People. The spectral People
 28 that authorizes populism and legitimates modern sovereign power thus
 29 must be retroactively manufactured through the persistent nationalist proj-
 30 ects by which states aim to subject their captive populations. Hence popu-
 31 lism in all its guises is likewise always ensnared with one or another nation-
 32 alism and invariably recapitulates some version of the nativism that secures
 33 the Nation with an essential identity. Populism is therefore always impli-
 34 cated in a project of reinstating or reinforcing the frontiers of the Nation by
 35 rebordering the People.

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The Voice of the People?

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There is a well-established left critique of nationalism and populism alike on
 the grounds that they serve to obfuscate the real social inequalities and

antagonisms that are constitutive of any modern social formation. Laclau, in his collaborative work with Mouffe, has thematized the constitutive place of such antagonisms within democracy. Following Claude Lefort, Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 187) discern an affinity of populism with totalitarian projects of homogeneity, and, insofar as democracy tends to expose these differences and antagonisms, they posit a basic tension between a totalitarian populism and democracy:

With totalitarianism, rather than designating a vacant site, power seeks to make itself material in an organ which assumes itself to be the representative of a *unitary* people. Under the pretext of achieving the unity of the people, the social division made visible by the logic of democracy is thereupon denied. This denial constitutes the centre of the logic of totalitarianism, and it is effected in a double movement [here they quote Lefort (1981: 173)]: “the annulment of the signs of the division of the state and society, and of those of the internal division of society. These imply the annulment of the differentiation of instances which govern the constitution of political society.”

Reiterating the fundamental opposition between democracy’s pluralistic facilitation of difference and totalitarianism’s quest for unity and uniformity, Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 188) continue:

In the face of the radical indeterminacy which democracy opens up, this involves an attempt to reimpose an absolute centre, and to re-establish the closure which will thus restore unity. But if there is no doubt that one of the dangers which threatens democracy is the totalitarian attempt to pass beyond the constitutive character of antagonism and deny plurality in order to restore unity, there is also a symmetrically opposite danger of a lack of all reference to this unity. For, even though impossible, this remains a horizon which, given the absence of articulation between social relations, is necessary in order to prevent an implosion of the social and an absence of any common point of reference. This unravelling of the social fabric caused by the destruction of the symbolic framework is another form of the disappearance of the political.

In their effort to formulate a strategy for “radical democracy,” Laclau and Mouffe return to the proposition that the unity of the People, however impossible, supplies a defining horizon for any viable politics. Thus for Laclau and Mouffe, the essential task of any “radical democratic” political project is the articulation of the elementary antagonism between the popular and its other. “What is problematic is not the reference to ‘the people,’” Mouffe states emphatically. “Indeed, I have argued that it is necessary to reassert the democratic side of liberal democracy, and this implies reactivating the notion of popular sovereignty. The problem lies in the way in which this ‘people’ is

1 constructed.” In effect, for Laclau and Mouffe, all political projects—including
2 those of the Left—are required to articulate themselves in an idiom of
3 populism (cf. Laclau 1977).

4 In this regard, it is instructive to recall Wilhelm Reich’s ([1933] 1970)
5 incisive reflections on the mass psychology of fascism and the affective
6 dynamics of its populist appeal among those who would have conventionally
7 been expected to respond to the appeals of the Left. Reich’s poignant critique
8 of the Left’s failure in the face of fascism turns on precisely his appreciation
9 of “trivial, banal, primitive, simple everyday life . . . the desires of the *broadest*
10 masses” (which the Left failed to comprehend or take seriously), in contrast
11 with the “sectarian and scholastic” debates over abstract analysis, rigid
12 orthodoxy, and vulgar economism that prevailed among the self-anointed
13 vanguard (Reich [1934] 1966: 291; cf. Reich [1933] 1970: 6–7). Reflecting on
14 analogous problems, George Orwell ([1937] 1989: 174) memorably argued
15 similarly:
16

17 Fascism is written off as a manoeuvre of the “ruling class,” which at bottom it
18 is. But this in itself would only explain why Fascism appeals to capitalists.
19 What about the millions who are not capitalists, who in a material sense have
20 nothing to gain from Fascism, and are often aware of it, and who, neverthe-
21 less, are Fascists? They could only be stamped into fascism because Com-
22 munism attacked or seemed to attack certain things (patriotism, religion, etc.)
23 which lay deeper than the economic motive. . . . It is a pity that Marxists nearly
24 always concentrate on letting economic cats out of ideological bags; it does in
25 one sense reveal the truth, but with this penalty, that most of their propa-
26 ganda misses its mark.

27 Echoing Reich’s concerns, Orwell goes on to lament that “justice and liberty,”
28 “the underlying ideal of Socialism,” tends to be “buried beneath layer after
29 layer of doctrinaire priggishness, party squabbles and half-baked ‘progressiv-
30 ism’ until it is like a diamond hidden under a mountain of dung,” such that
31 “Socialism . . . does not smell any longer of revolution and the overthrow of
32 tyrants; it smells of crankishness” (201). If one objects that amorphous ideals
33 such as “justice and liberty” resonate with a vague populism, however, then
34 we are confronted by the precise dilemma that Reich and Orwell sought to
35 underscore—that reactionary populism has repeatedly succeeded to appeal to
36 the affective desires of the exploited and the dispossessed, with often devas-
37 tating consequences. The purchase of populism finally turns on this false
38 equivalence between the downtrodden and “the people.”
39

Inasmuch as populism presents itself as an authentic expression of the political will or desires of “the people,” it ventriloquizes the People, which was meant to be consigned to a mute silence in the solemnity of the crypt from which our political modernity was born. Thus populism mischievously invokes the spectral presence of the People, that enigmatic, indeed phantasmatic, fetishized figure of democratic sovereignty. There is quite simply no other credible or legitimate source of ultimate “democratic” authority than the People. Consequently, when “the people” speak, invariably in the odd and sundry idioms of populism, people—all of us—(are compelled to) listen. Yet this apparent “return” of the People is always inherently impure. Populism’s exaltation of “the people” therefore conjures the ghost of the People and appears to present the sovereign power of the state with a more authentic manifestation of the originary and constituent power of popular sovereignty, from which the state officially derives its legitimacy and for which the state presumes to be a permanent and ever-vigilant caretaker. “Populism plays the role of the awkward guest; it is a paradoxical element that functions both as an internal moment of liberal democracy and as that which can disrupt the gentrified domain in which politics is enacted” (Arditi 2005: 91). When the People is thus conjured and appears to be able to enunciate its will directly and without mediation, however, populism threatens to present the state with a political crisis. Populism, Panizza (2005: 9) contends, is “the language of politics when there can be no politics as usual: a mode of identification characteristic of times of unsettlement and de-alignment, involving the radical redrawing of social borders along lines other than those that had previously structured society.” And yet populism never truly disputes the proposition that the state ought to dutifully serve the People and enforce its will, only that the state needs periodically to be rescued from the “special interests” that hold it captive and pervert its mission. In this respect, populism tends to play a restorative role by reinvigorating the popular mandate of the state.

If populism entails a project of politically redrawing the boundaries of existing social divisions, what is still more fundamental is that populism is intrinsically a project of rebordering “the People,” and thereby recomposing “the Nation,” in the larger effort to restore the putative alignment of the state with the popular will. In this regard, all populisms convey an elementary democratic ethos and may thus exude a “progressive,” inclusive, and egalitarian aura. Nonetheless, all populisms, like all nationalisms, are finally “reactionary” inasmuch as they intervene in the political field on the basis of reconstituting “the popular” always on the basis of a presumptive plurality of mutually exclusive, bordered (essentialized) “peoples.” Thus populism in

1 whatever form, overtly right-wing or ostensibly leftist, is inextricable from
 2 the basic restabilization of the existing global sociopolitical order of national-
 3 ist state powers mediating a global regime of capital accumulation. As with
 4 nationalism, there simply is no populism that is articulated on behalf of “the
 5 people” of the earth, for which “the people” is coterminous with the human
 6 race as such. From this perspective, all manifestations of populism serve to
 7 recapture the insurgent energies of emancipatory struggles and entrap the
 8 “common folk” within the borders of the Nation, reinscribing a democratic
 9 political enclosure whereby human life is subordinated to and subjected by
 10 the nationalist metaphysics of state power.

12 **The Autonomy of Migration and the Mobile Constituent Power of Human Life**

14 If populism has widely come to be rendered synonymous with anti-immi-
 15 grant nativism, it is plainly a symptom of the deeper nationalist metaphysics
 16 of a bordered world in which politics, law, justice, and democracy have been
 17 systematically posited primarily and inordinately on the national scale and
 18 for which the presumable rights, entitlements, priorities, and prerogatives of
 19 “the people” tend to be indistinguishable from the claims and pretenses of
 20 nationhood. If, moreover, as I have already suggested, populism is conse-
 21 quently always implicated in a project of reinstating or reinforcing the fron-
 22 tiers of the Nation by rebordering the People, then the human freedom of
 23 movement and the autonomy of migration, operating always on a transna-
 24 tional, quasi-global scale, provide vital critical resources with which to prob-
 25 lematize borders and the state spaces of nationhood with which populism is
 26 inextricably ensnared.

27 As autonomous subjects, with their own aspirations, needs, and
 28 desires, which necessarily exceed and overflow any regime of immigration
 29 and citizenship, migrants, through their mobility projects, enact an elemen-
 30 tary freedom of movement to which borders are intrinsically a response,
 31 however brutal. But despite the sheer brutality as well as the structural vio-
 32 lence of bordering, on a global scale, human beings continue to prevail in
 33 their mobility projects, unceasingly and tirelessly establishing migration as
 34 a central and constitutive fact of our global postcolonial present—not merely
 35 a “symptom” of the protracted and convulsive crises of a world order wracked
 36 by war and genocidal violence, but also a viral fermenting agent that insti-
 37 gates “crises” of sovereignty for state powers. In radical contradiction with
 38 the securitized and militarized border regimes of nation-states, but always
 39 also intricately articulated through the multiple and necessarily semiperme-

able force fields of these border regimes, the autonomy of migration and refugee movements repeatedly presents itself as an obstreperous subjective force. The intractable subjectivity and autonomy of migration, therefore, manifest diverse configurations of a still wider variety of ways that human life, as such, enacts its active (productive) relation to the space of the planet and thereby reasserts the primacy of human life as a mobile constituent power in itself (De Genova 2010a).

The specific call in this special issue to reevaluate the autonomy of migration within the contemporary global conjuncture of multiple interlaced crises commands a reciprocal critical assessment of particular nativist populisms in terms of their historical specificities as political formations of “crisis” (see, e.g., De Genova 2015b, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d; New Keywords Collective 2016). Since 2015, with the proliferation in mass media discourse and public debate of invocations of the so-called migrant or refugee crisis in Europe, the customary politics of protection regarding refugees (Nyers 2003; Scheel, Garelli, and Tazzioli 2015) has increasingly been inverted, supplanted now by the discourse of antiterrorist suspicion. Confronting the autonomy of refugee movements, particularly from Syria, various European countries as well as the United States have increasingly refashioned the figure of the refugee as an always potentially nefarious one, against which “the people” or “the nation” must be protected and against which sovereign state power seeks to inoculate itself (De Genova 2017b, 2017c). While campaigning for the US presidency, Trump repeatedly claimed that there were not adequate procedures in place for properly screening refugees from Syria, and then, once in power, he sought to enact by executive decree a ban on entry by all persons traveling from a list of stipulated Muslim-majority countries. At one rally, Trump forecast: “Bad, bad things are gonna happen. . . . This could be the great Trojan horse of all time.” Likening refugees to a “vicious snake,” he proceeded to read the lyrics of a song about a woman who attends to a half-frozen snake only to then have it bite and kill her, with the retort, “You knew damn well that I was a snake before you took me in” (*Seattle Times* 2016). He likewise promoted the idea that Syrian refugees in particular should be comprehensively registered for surveillance on watch lists: “I want a database for the refugees. . . . We have no idea who these people are. When the Syrian refugees are going to start pouring into this country, we don’t know if they’re ISIS, we don’t know if it’s a Trojan horse” (quoted in Carroll 2015). Thus even in a country that has been largely insulated from any mass influx of refugees from the Middle East, we have witnessed the effective collapse of the dominant ideological dichotomy between the figure

1 of the “good” and “deserving” refugee and the figure of the opportunistic
 2 “illegal” migrant. The transgressive autonomy of migration, now manifest
 3 as an unsettling “autonomy of asylum” (De Genova, Garelli, and Tazzioli, in
 4 this issue) activated by refugee mobilities, has thus provoked the sovereign
 5 power of states into very quickly recoding deserving “victims” as devious
 6 vipers, rebranding people fleeing violent conflict and persecution, previously
 7 owed compassion, pity, and protection, now as an inchoate menace—poten-
 8 tial terrorists, rapists, and criminals—waiting for the opportunity to
 9 ambush, attack, and exploit “us” (De Genova 2017b, 2017c; New Keywords
 10 Collective 2016).

11 The intrinsically reactionary character of populism as a nativistic exer-
 12 cise in rebordering the People is especially evident when the identitarian pol-
 13 itics of national belonging, and the “foreignness” against which the nation
 14 must be staked, turns its vigilance inward. Remarkably, we have witnessed
 15 reactionary statist campaigns against the spectral threat of “migration” even
 16 in contexts where those made to stand in as the “foreign” object of populist
 17 contempt and suspicion are not in fact migrants or refugees. In particular,
 18 nativist-populist convulsions against “illegal immigrants” have increasingly
 19 targeted native-born (racialized “minority”) fellow citizens. In the eastern
 20 borderlands of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, native-born Congolese
 21 citizens who are the descendants of Hutu and Tutsi people resident for gener-
 22 ations on the Congolese side of the border have been derisively labeled
 23 “Rwandans” and targeted for expulsion (Jackson 2006, 2013; Huening 2013).
 24 Similarly, in the Dominican Republic, the native-born descendants of migrant
 25 workers who were recruited generations earlier from neighboring Haiti have
 26 been recast as “Haitians,” legally stripped of their birthright citizenship, and
 27 rendered stateless, denigrated as “illegal immigrants” in the only land where
 28 they have ever lived (Hayes de Kalaf 2015a, 2015b; cf. Kosinski 2009; Paulino
 29 2006). Meanwhile, in Myanmar (Burma), Rohingya Muslim native-born citi-
 30 zens have similarly been legally stripped of their citizenship, castigated as
 31 “illegal immigrants” from Bangladesh, and subjected to vicious pogroms and
 32 confined in virtual concentration camps (Lewa 2009; Pugh 2013). These
 33 examples are but a few of the more extraordinary among a proliferation on a
 34 global scale of new formations of nativism directed not merely at migrant
 35 “foreigners” but rather toward minoritized fellow citizens who may be repur-
 36 posed as virtual or de facto “foreigners”—indeed, often as outright “ene-
 37 mies”—*within* the space of the nation-state (cf. Appadurai 1998a, 1998b,
 38 2000, 2006; Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005; Geschiere 2009, 2013;
 39 Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000; Mamdani 2001; Mbembe 2001).

Thus populist politics have thrived in scenarios where the People— “our” people—must be protected, whereby the insulation and refortification of the borders of the Nation command a veritable rebordering of the People. Resurgent populism, whatever its ostensible egalitarianism and fatuous gestures toward the reassertion of democratic popular sovereignty, is inextricable from the national scale on which modern (bourgeois democratic) state power has been universally predicated and thus can never escape the positioning of a People that is always inherently bordered and stands only to be rebordered. The only genuine counterpower to the sovereignty of “national” states, therefore, will be constituted through the struggles of those people who cease and desist altogether from the pretense of being a People, and thereby repudiate in practice the illusory democratic conceit of holding the state accountable to the popular will as its proper incarnation, defying nationalist frontiers and sustaining an insurgency that exceeds the borders of the nation-state. In this regard, by disrupting and confounding the bordered world order of “national” states and their partitioned “peoples,” even if only in an often diminutive register, the autonomy of migration remains an objectively political and enduringly incorrigible force, haunting that global border regime with one of the premier manifestations of what must finally be recognized as the mobile constituent power of human life itself.

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