

POPULISM'S POWER



RADICAL GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

LAURA GRATTAN

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Democracy

Words and Music by Leonard Cohen

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*For my parents, whose families worked on the railroads
in Kansas and in the auto factories in Detroit*

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Populism's Power

Introduction

Populism and the Paradox of Democracy

On one side, then, we face the problem of peoples who do not aspire to democratic freedom and, on the other, of democracies we do not want—“free” peoples who bring to power theocracies, empires, terror or hate-filled regimes of ethnic cleansing, gated communities, citizenship stratified by ethnicity or immigration status, aggressively neoliberal postnational constellations, or technocracies promising to fix social ills by circumventing democratic processes and institutions.

—WENDY BROWN, *“We Are All Democrats Now”*

Like the American Dream itself, ever present and never fully realized, populism lives too deeply in our fears and expectations to be trivialized or replaced. We should not speak solely within its terms, but without it, we are lost.

—MICHAEL KAZIN, *The Populist Persuasion*

The twenty-first century has seen a resurgence of populist movements across the world. *¡Ya basta!* echoed throughout Latin America at the outset of the century as people joined massive popular uprisings against neoliberal policies. Antiausterity protests and right-wing nationalist uprisings emerged as rival responses to the global financial crisis that shook the Eurozone a decade into the new millennium. Student movements in Chile and Montreal were flashpoints for worldwide student organizing to demand access to affordable higher education. In South Africa, grassroots organizations formed the Poor People’s Alliance to intensify postapartheid struggles for land and housing. During the Arab Spring, streets throughout the Middle East and North Africa rang with voices declaring, “The

people want to topple the regime.” These enactments of people power resonated a few years later in Hong Kong, where mass assemblies wielded a rainbow of umbrellas against state violence in their struggle for democratic representation.

In the United States, a quick snapshot of grassroots populism in the twenty-first century reveals an offbeat cast: Christian fundamentalists, vigilante border patrollers, the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, broad-based community organizers, undocumented DREAMers, grassroots ecopopulists, and many more. Behind a cacophony of voices and styles of expression, populist actors promise to return democracy to its roots in the power of the people. Populist rhetoric and practice pit the people against the establishment in a struggle over the future of democracy. That struggle has been ongoing in American politics since the nation’s revolutionary inception. Centuries later, people have not yet ceased to aspire to popular power when democratic politics strays from its roots. Populism’s grassroots resurgence thus raises questions that are central to American democracy and to this book: Can twenty-first-century populist movements wrest meaningful power from elites and transform hegemonic structures and dynamics that threaten democracy? If populists can return power to the people, what kind of democracy will the people establish? Under what conditions, that is, can grassroots populism democratize power and politics today?

Mainstream media pundits routinely dismiss populist aspirations to power. Since the global financial meltdown hit the United States in 2008, for example, news headlines have charged populists with fomenting anger and instability. “Will Populist Rage Hurt Corporate America?” fretted *BusinessWeek*. A *National Review* columnist reproached those who called for a moratorium on foreclosures: “Populist Rage over Foreclosures Doesn’t Justify a Breakdown in the Rule of Law.”¹ Others depict populist “backlash” as relatively harmless, little more than a passing storm to be weathered. First the ominous forecast: “Populist Outrage Is Back—Ready?” Then the welcome news that “Today’s Populism May Be Gone Tomorrow,” and the nation’s emotional barometer can return to its civil standard until the next high-pressure system hits.² A sign of today’s individualized politics, some observers have even begun to treat populist anger as a mood we can now personalize in our digitally mediated lives. “Got Outrage? More Fodder to Feed Your Inner Populist,” promised one cbs.com exposé on billions of dollars in executive bonuses at bailed-out banks. Not to be outdone, *Newsweek* headlined a review of a new iPhone videogame called “Squash the \$treet”: “Populist Outrage—There’s an App for That.”³ When people do mobilize collectively for longer than a news cycle, analysts start looking for the puppet-master behind populism. “Who Will Be This Depression’s Populist Demagogue?” a Gawker columnist asked once mainstream media finally admitted that the Tea Party wasn’t going away. A couple of years later, CNN reassured a viewing public befuddled

by Occupy Wall Street's apparent disorganization: "Occupy Wall Street Is Going Nowhere without Leadership."⁴

Decades of liberal scholarship have reinforced these views. Historians, political scientists, and scholars of constitutional law have engaged in an ongoing battle to discredit populism. Writing texts with titles like *Liberalism against Populism* and "Populism versus Democracy," liberal scholars charge populists with deifying the voice of the people. According to common liberal accounts, populists stir up faith in the impossible unity of popular will, which can only be enacted by transcending the mediating institutions of representative government—for example, individual rights, minority protections, deliberative procedures, and separation of powers. At their most sympathetic, liberal scholars characterize populism as apolitical and episodic, but acknowledge its periodic expressions of popular unrest as signals that some policy or procedure may be in need of reform. At their most fearful, liberal scholars warn that populism has serious antidemocratic consequences. Populists often foment reactionary backlash against elites and marginalized groups. To achieve their fantasies of unity, moreover, populists rely on antistatist tactics, for example, throwing a wrench in the operation of representative institutions and procedures or acclaiming autocratic leaders who circumvent them altogether. Liberalism's party line on populism thus treats it as an "empty" or "absurd" but potentially dangerous wish: that is, an illusion of popular democracy that, all too often, turns the people against democracy.⁵

Left critical theorists have added to the pessimism about populism. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, repeatedly evokes the "populist illusion" to dismiss the common "methodological voluntarism and optimism which define the populist vision of 'the people' as a site of subversion, or at least, resistance." According to Bourdieu's disciplinary account of social reproduction, people are habituated overwhelmingly to reinforce the status quo in our everyday speech and actions, and even in our acts of resistance.⁶ Bourdieu's dim view of populism would, for example, support a common leftist critique of the 2008 election of Barack Obama: after he won the presidency, the mobilized grassroots base that had rallied around candidate Obama as a figure of "Hope" and "Change" went back to their private lives with the faith that President Obama would act as their political savior. Instead, he has ruled with the "soul of a technocrat," continued many of his predecessors' neoliberal economic policies, and expanded the executive prerogative carved out by the administration of George W. Bush.⁷ If the project of democracy founders today because people living in capitalist, managerial states "do not aspire to democratic freedom," Wendy Brown adds, it is no less endangered by mobilized peoples who bolster "democracies we do not want."⁸ Left theorists may depart from liberalism's party line against populism, then, but they too doubt that populism can be separated from its longtime equation with

“democracies we do not want”: for example, nationalism, racism, masculinism, demagoguery, and imperialism.

In the wake of American populism’s “conservative capture” during the Nixon and Reagan eras, and given its ubiquity as a mainstream buzzword of politicians and pundits, it is understandable that democratic theorists and many activists have been eager to abandon populism to right-wing demagogues and mega-media spin doctors.⁹ Indeed, before Occupy Wall Street captured public attention, populism’s most visible and vociferous energies in the United States had seemed dedicated in recent decades to shoring up the boundaries of the body politic and reinforcing hegemonic forms of capitalist, state, and social power that narrow the horizons of democracy. After over half a decade on the political stage, moreover, the Tea Party remains influential: it celebrates neoliberal economic policies, while narrowing access to citizenship through border policing, voter suppression, and campaigns to scale back reproductive rights. In an era marked by the unprecedented movement of capital, commodities, and labor across borders, finally, it seems difficult to discount Richard Hofstadter’s account of populism as a “paranoid style” of politics endemic to American political culture. Facing the inevitable vagaries of capitalism, Hofstadter argues, populists cling to the security of their cultural status to make up for their insecurity in the economic realm.¹⁰ As capitalist dislocations intensify and nation-states find it harder to remain accountable to their citizens, populist rhetoric will undoubtedly remain a recurring tool to mobilize right-wing, reactionary backlash. At a time when democracy is increasingly antipopulist and successful populisms have largely been antidemocratic, perhaps it is misguided to turn to populism as a resource for radical democratic theory and practice.

I am not ready to draw that conclusion. In this book, I argue that grassroots populisms have a crucial role to play in democratizing power and politics in America. Radical democratic actors, from grassroots revolutionaries to insurgent farmers and laborers to agitators for the New Deal, Civil Rights, and the New Left, have historically drawn on the language and practices of populism. In doing so, they have cultivated people’s rebellious aspirations not just to resist power, but to share in power, and to do so in pluralistic, egalitarian ways across social and geographic borders. These experiments in *democratizing populism* have enacted popular power in ways that open “the people” to contest and redefinition and create spaces for new visions and practices of democracy to emerge. Missing from academic and public discourse on populism, however, is an account of how populist actors enact popular power. Instead, discussions of populism focus on what observers see as the twin processes of resistance and identification, that is, how populist actors mobilize popular identification in opposition to a common enemy.¹¹ Without a systematic analysis of how populist movements develop the political capacities of grassroots actors and experiment with alternative

institutions and practices of popular power, we can predict little about whether and how populism can democratize power and politics today.

The challenges to constituting popular power are steep and endemic. Trends toward de-democratization over the last few decades now threaten the lives and well-being of most people in the United States and on the planet. Central to these trends, the unchecked rise of global corporate and financial capitalism since the late 1970s has resulted in devastating economic inequalities.¹² In the United States, these conditions have been abetted by democratic institutions that appear more invested in capitalism's vitality than in citizens. Indeed, a neoliberal vision of politics has become pervasive since the Reagan era: market principles increasingly shape not only economic policy, but also decision making on myriad issues of public concern.¹³ As neoliberal processes insulate politics from popular control, the resulting picture is grim: decimated social services; overcrowded and abandoned schools; shrinking access to higher education; gentrified cities; bloated and mismanaged prisons; open attacks on unions; slashed benefits and swollen pools of flexible labor; and environmental hazards that threaten the planet but first promise to wreak havoc on those with the fewest resources and least power.

Even as American political institutions harmonize their interests with the imperatives of the proverbial "free market," the global character of capitalist power has contributed to what Wendy Brown calls a "proliferation of walling" around and within nation-states anxious to mask their waning sovereignty.¹⁴ Deregulation has accompanied and enabled vast circulations of capital, labor, resources, weapons, and communications technologies across nation-state borders. In response to recurrent threats (both real and manufactured), the US government *has* been willing to flex its muscle through perpetual war, intensified border securitization, and militarized policing.¹⁵ State power in these areas is reinforced by the latest face of white supremacy: most notably, discourses of criminality and illegality aimed at blacks, Latinos, and immigrants in the United States and discourses of trafficking and terrorism aimed at enemies beyond its borders. Amid celebratory claims that America is fast on its way to becoming a postracial society, scholars have documented a "racialized state of precarity" in the United States. The undersides of today's security state, they show, have manifested with particular violence for those affected by American militarism in the Middle East and global South and by racial profiling, police brutality, mass incarceration, and immigrant detention at home.¹⁶

At a time when people in America face a heightened sense of insecurity, it is more difficult than ever to see political solutions to our problems. The privatization of politics obscures the complex sources of systemic wrongs and leaves political actors with few obvious levers of accountability to redress their grievances. Capitalist institutions and ideologies, moreover, have an unparalleled influence

in shaping American political culture. Today, mainstream media and new social media combine to deliver dominant cultural messages to us anytime, anywhere. Neoliberal common sense—which celebrates the virtues of productivity, adaptability, competition, and freedom of choice—is thus deeply embedded in everyday life. It invests us in individualistic, passive modes of citizenship and reinforces socioeconomic divisions that forestall collective identification and action.¹⁷ Today's individuals are burdened with the impossible fantasy of taking responsibility for bettering our own lives in the midst of conditions that, with significant variance, profoundly disempower most people. When that fails, it has proven easier to blame others or to grow cynical about the possibilities of politics than to question the free-market, consumer ideals that have framed the limits of our personal and political aspirations.¹⁸ What we face today, then, is not only a grim forecast for our future, but also diminished democratic aspirations for changing it.

These de-democratizing trends are not inevitable. Dismissals of populism, however, reinforce the gnawing sense that they are. When liberal and left scholars roll out their litany of charges against populism, it often sounds as if they are really cautioning us to chasten our hopes and desires for democracy. Suspicious of populism's unruliness, its liberal critics insist that the institutions and procedures of constitutional government are sufficient to represent the will of the people—or they would be if we could implement this or that liberal scheme to perfect liberal democracy.¹⁹ Such dismissals of populism have discursive power: they reinforce liberalism as the end of democracy. Left critical theorists have diagnosed the missteps in liberal theories of democracy. Liberal theorists assume that institutional proceduralism can rationalize contemporary forms of power that—in reality—not only defy, but also shape, liberal governments. Liberals also rely on the ideal of a rational citizenry, or at least one that sublimates collective energies to individual strivings for commodious living.²⁰ If these assumptions are erroneous, it leaves liberal theory ill-equipped to respond adequately to the conjoined threats of neoliberal dynamics that routinely disrupt people's everyday lives and reactionary populisms that recur periodically in response.

Left critical theorists, however, pen their own cautionary tales about the allure of democratic possibility. They provoke democratic theorists to wrestle with difficult questions about the viability of democracy as an emancipatory ideal in the twenty-first century. As Wendy Brown observes, "Democracy has historically unparalleled global popularity today yet has never been more conceptually foot-loose and substantively hollow."²¹ Radical democrats who contest (neo)liberal perversions of democracy, adds Jodi Dean, must also contend with capitalist cultural dynamics that have captured the Left's rhetoric of pluralism, voice, expression, creativity, and transformation. When scholars and activists respond to the failures of democracy by calling for more democracy, Dean concludes, they mount scant resistance to structural divisions that preserve democracy for elites.

In the very same move, radical democrats sustain a flexible symbol of democracy “that can be filled in, substantialized, by fundamentalisms, nationalisms, populisms, and conservatism diametrically opposed to social justice and economic equality.”²²

One senses a collective despair in the writings of radical democratic scholars, who have spent decades analyzing de-democratizing trends that have largely worsened. “What could be more of a fantasy,” asks Wendy Brown, “than the notion of subordinating global capitalist economy, and its shaping of social, political, cultural, and ecological life, to democratic political rule, or for that matter, to any political rule?”²³ In a similar vein, Sheldon Wolin has come to conceptualize democracy as “fugitive.” Contrary to popular opinion, he writes, “Contemporary democracy is not hegemonic but beleaguered and permanently in opposition to structures it cannot command.” Wolin insists that democracy is not a characteristic of today’s managerial, capitalist megastates, which evade modern limits on state power to seek a near total control over social life. It is, rather, an “ephemeral phenomenon” enacted by “those who have no means of redress other than to risk collectivizing their small bits of power.”²⁴ He locates democracy’s fugitive energies in episodic moments in which people come together to address common problems: primarily in local contexts, such as schools, community health centers, and community policing, but also in broader social movements, such as nineteenth-century Populism, the Civil Rights movement, and environmentalism.²⁵ If Wolin rescues democracy from hierarchical and uniform logics of rule, he concludes grimly that “what is truly at stake politically”—that is, the “heterogeneity, diversity, and multiple selves” that constitute popular power—are “no match” for contemporary modes of power.²⁶

My own ambivalence about democracy is what returns me to populism. My engagements with populist culture and politics do not, in the final analysis, lead me to overcome that ambivalence. Instead, akin to Wolin, I find in populism resources that sustain a sharper disposition toward democratic hope amid conditions that daily threaten to reinforce despair. In this respect, I am at once more pessimistic and more optimistic than Wolin. I am more troubled than he is about the internal limits on every enactment of popular power. No democratic moment—including the ones Wolin identifies as exemplary of fugitive democracy—has succeeded in generating popular power without retaining investments in social hierarchies that reinforce institutionalized power and powerlessness. Rather than rescue democracy from logics of ruling and being ruled, then, I ask what forms democracy’s fugitive energies must take. That is, what dispositions, practices, institutions, and discourses might cultivate pluralistic, egalitarian forms of popular power? In their struggles to enact popular power, moreover, what strategies should political actors adopt vis-à-vis institutions of capitalism and the state: when should democratic actors engage and disengage

established institutions, and which institutions should they reinforce, disrupt, or reconstitute? In asking this last set of questions, I am more hopeful than Wolin that everyday actors can build on democracy's fugitive energies to democratize broader structures of power.

Democracy has long been a powerful fantasy guiding American politics. It has animated the desires and visions of white supremacists and black radicals, patriarchs and feminists, capitalists and socialists, nativists and immigrants. Cultivating the fantasy of democracy remains vital given conditions that attenuate our aspirations to see—let alone participate in—politics as a popular endeavor. By reclaiming populism as a resource for radical democracy, I aim to counter both the cynicism wrought by external challenges to democracy and the paralysis that takes hold of many on the left when they realize that every democratic act carries its own foreclosures.

DEFINITIONS AND PARADOXES

Populism has long been viewed as a barometer of democracy's health and future prospects. And yet it has been notoriously difficult to define. Few political actors call themselves populists, and there is no canon of populist writing by the hands of reformers or revolutionaries. It has instead been the work of scholars to spill ink over populism. They agree that populism is a recurring feature of modern politics, one that emerges in disparate geopolitical contexts, gives voice to competing ideological visions, and manifests in a variety of organizational forms. The earliest uses of the term are associated with agrarian radicalism in the late nineteenth century, most notably, Russian *narodnichestvo*, which celebrated the peasantry as the engine of socialist revolution, and the Populist movement in the United States, a mass insurgency of farmers and workers that sought alternatives to monopoly capitalism. The "canon" of populist case studies include the authoritarian populism of Latin America, embodied in the charismatic leadership of Argentina's Juan Perón; the rise of right-wing parties across Europe, exemplified by Jörg Haider's Freedom Party of Austria; popular resistance to apartheid in South Africa, mobilized by the coalitional politics of the United Democratic Front; the antigovernment rhetoric of the American Right, spurred by the white, working-class anxieties of George Wallace and the neoliberal ideology of the Reagan Revolution; and various grassroots social movements, ranging from the antisectional Christian Right to the multicultural New Left.

This range of precedents, however, has left scholars unable to reach any consensus on what delimits populism as a theoretical construct. They define populism, variably, as a flexible style of rhetoric, a strategy of electoral mobilization, a distinctive form of contentious politics, or more ineffably, as a political syndrome,

a cultural ethos, or even a zeitgeist.²⁷ Populism's ideological flexibility and malleable form have driven many scholars to abstraction in search of unifying characteristics that define populism across all cases.²⁸ Some have recently converged around the claim that populism is a "thin-centered ideology," valorizing the people as a unified sovereign body in opposition to an identifiable, corrupt elite.²⁹ Or perhaps populism's people can be no more than an "empty signifier," as Ernesto Laclau has long insisted, resting populist politics not on a substantial popular will, but on the groundless ground of indeterminate demands.³⁰

Populism may defy firm theoretical grasp. But it would be unthinkable without the widely held belief in popular sovereignty, the notion that the people are the fundamental source of authority in modern democratic politics.³¹ Rather than raising the banner of populism, so-called populist actors speak the language of popular sovereignty—"Power to the people!" "The people have spoken." "Whose democracy? Our democracy!"—and often claim to be true democrats. Popular sovereignty is an endangered ideal today: it is assailed on one side by neoliberal rationalities that encourage passive citizenship and on the other by critics who worry that, in confusing popular power with sovereign power, modern democracy implicates exclusionary peoples in projects of mastery.³² If popular sovereignty often veers toward one of these two poles, modern democracy's legitimating logic is nonetheless riddled with paradox. Populist moments emerge from and reveal an irresolvable tension at the heart of democracy: the fact that the people is indeterminate, that is, never at one with itself. Jason Frank characterizes this familiar paradox of democratic peoplehood by contending that the people are always "at once a constituent and a constituted power."³³ They are both constituted by an existing order—its laws, institutions, and discourses—and capable of emerging from the margins of recognized speech and action to withdraw their authority from that order or to authorize new rules of the game.

This democratic paradox, Bonnie Honig adds, is not contained to narratives of founding or times of extraordinary crisis in a body politic; it is the ordinary condition of democratic politics.³⁴ The daily activities of collective life—granting certificates of marriage and citizenship; making laws and policies regarding education, policing, reproductive health, or environmental protection; adjudicating issues from taxation to civil rights—are political sites that "(re)shape a multitude into a people, daily." The decisions made in these arenas routinely "recapture" or "reinterpellate" citizens into the "laws, norms, and expectations of [a] regime." They are also potential sites of contestation at which new democratic peoples and forms can emerge. What Honig calls the "vicious circularity" of the democratic paradox reminds us that we can never fully disentangle law from violence, or creativity from destruction.³⁵ In other words, she insists on what Danielle Allen calls "imperfect democracy": every constituent moment, every democratic act has its

“dissonant remainders,” the “byproducts of political loss” that trouble the conceit of unity.³⁶

Emerging from the paradox of popular sovereignty, populist moments raise two crucial questions for any theory and practice of democracy: Who are the people? And how should the people enact their power in politics?³⁷ The first question has to do with collective identity, that is, the boundaries establishing who belongs and who does not belong to a democratic polity, and the practices of social recognition and disavowal that contest the terms of inclusion and exclusion. Populism is widely characterized in both academic and public discourse by its symbolic and affectively charged practices of identification, which arouse the people on behalf of a common vision of collective identity and political life and either unsettle or shore up the borders of politics and democracy. It is less common to view populism in terms of its second, equally vital question: how do the people embody the ideal of popular sovereignty, that is, how do they enact their power collectively through institutions and practices of democratic self-governance? Modern democratic theory and practice have historically placed limits on the people’s power, relying on constitutional norms and procedures to rationalize the unruly, conflicting interests of a multitude of particular individuals and to mediate between the people and government. It is against this backdrop that populist movements have emerged, time and again, not only to expose elite abuses of power, and often, institutionally embedded forms of social and political hierarchy, but also to experiment with alternative institutions and practices of popular power: from electoral strategies of referendums and recall, to cooperative economic and political institutions, to broad-based, coalitional forms of community organizing and social movement politics. Populist moments thus call us repeatedly to the work of interrogating which institutions and practices constrain the people’s power and which shape people’s political aspirations in ways that enable them to play a greater role in steering and, at times, transforming democratic politics.

I do not equate popular power with democracy. What I do argue is that America’s grassroots populist tradition harbors a persistent democratizing aspiration. All populisms animate the ideal of popular sovereignty by mobilizing the aspirations of ordinary people to exercise power over their everyday lives and their collective fate. If elites and grassroots actors alike have used populist rhetoric and practices to regulate people’s aspirations to power—for example, by turning them toward reactionary or assimilationist ends that fail to disrupt the status quo—I develop a theory of *aspirational democratic populism* in this book. Aspirational democratic populisms cultivate people’s rebellious aspirations not only to share in power, but to do so in pluralistic, egalitarian ways across established horizons that restrict democracy. The concept of aspirational democratic populism allows me to emphasize three claims that are central to my arguments

about populism and democracy. First, by aspirational populism, I indicate that populist politics has to do with the aspirations of actual people. In other words, populism—unlike, say, liberal proceduralism or technocracy—is openly premised on its ability to reach ordinary people. By studying how populist movements engage people in their everyday lives, I evaluate how populism not only animates but, in many cases, durably shapes people's aspirations to power. Second, by calling democracy aspirational, I mean to insist that democracy is not defined by the existing institutions and procedures of liberal, capitalist governance. If hegemonic powers have historically shaped visions of democracy, so have popular efforts to imagine and enact better forms of democracy beyond the status quo. Given that popular enactments of democracy reinforce many forms of power and powerlessness, democratization involves ongoing efforts to cultivate aspirations to popular power in emerging social groups. Finally, the central claim of this book is that populist politics can play a crucial role in democratizing power and politics today. For this to happen, scholars and activists will need to negotiate populism's dangers and distinguish which kinds of populist rhetoric and practice can democratize people's aspirations to enact popular power.

AMERICA'S POPULIST IMAGINARY

To say, with Michael Kazin, that populism “lives deeply in our fears and expectations” is to acknowledge America's ambivalence about populist rhetoric and practice—which arouse “the people” on behalf of projects that alternately create openings in or foreclose the horizons of democracy. Yet, Kazin is right in two senses that we—inheritors of America's contested populist tradition, as well as democratic theorists and actors in other contexts—are lost without ongoing efforts to evaluate populism's resources for democratization. First, populism's relationship to the paradox of popular sovereignty carries a political imperative. Democracy today faces severe threats of foreclosure, in part, because nominally democratic peoples, including many populisms, do reinforce the de-democratizing modes of power that constitute them. But in light of this ever-present danger, the inherent instability of the people enables, indeed demands, persistent efforts to narrate and enact more rebellious visions of populism, again and again, as part of radical democratic struggles to reconstitute the terms of collective identification and democratic politics.

In the United States, populism has been at the heart of iterated efforts to reconstitute the people and democracy from the Revolutionary period through today. If ruling classes and reactionaries have relied on populist rhetoric to shore up the nation's white, middle-class, masculine center, populism's history is also the story of radical democratic struggles to democratize power and politics. This is a

second reason American democracy, in particular, cannot abandon populism. The remainders of populism's more rebellious moments live in the present, inspiring, even as they are reworked by, democratic theorists and activists. We see this legacy in stubborn demands—for example, by Occupy Wall Street and the New Bottom Line coalition—to democratize wealth as part of efforts to democratize power and politics. We see it in efforts to preserve and innovate long-standing traditions of worker cooperatives and public work amid the relentless privatization of work and politics. We see it in the broad-based community organizing of groups such as the Industrial Areas Foundation and PICO National Network. In *America beyond Capitalism*, Gar Alperovitz calls these efforts examples of “twenty-first century populism,” likening their visions of “pluralist commonwealth” to the cooperative commonwealth of the nineteenth-century Populist movement.³⁸ Populism's unwieldy past is thus embodied in the present, in some instances narrowing the horizons of democracy, but in many others acting as a reminder that democracy is not the proprietary right of any established social order, nor is it synonymous with any form or theory of political economy or government.

What I refer to in this book as America's *populist imaginary* has historically been a prominent countercurrent to the liberal, capitalist social imaginary that has been dominant in the United States. The concept of social imaginaries, as Charles Taylor describes it, points to the shared “ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”³⁹ Social imaginaries are not simply ideas. They are produced by and inhabit an array of technologies, institutions, and everyday practices; broad discourses and local idioms; high culture and low culture; media, music, sports, religion, and politics; and sundry emerging counterpublics. America's liberal, capitalist social imaginary, for example, contains ubiquitous norms, such as individual rights, contractual relationships, and social mobility, that underlie our daily actions and aspirations in areas as varied as marriage, consumption, work, education, welfare policy, and representative government. America's populist imaginary, I will argue, harbors a more robust notion of popular sovereignty, one that has historically been embodied in a motley tradition of social movements that have cultivated rhetorics and practices of enacting popular power. This alternative imaginary also resonates with people in their daily lives, for example, through voluntary cooperative efforts in neighborhoods and communities, religious practices that bear witness to radical equality, and political spin pitting the people against elites. If populist moments happen only periodically—and, often, episodically—America's populist imaginary is available to be picked up and reworked by disparate populist actors who hope to engage people in political efforts to contest the terms of collective identification and democracy.

I situate this study of populism in the United States, in part, because American scholars and activists have historically given voice to a unique tradition of radical democratic populism. Such storied traditions are missing in other national and regional contexts. Scholars of European populism, for example, primarily apply the term populism to right-wing nationalist social movements and political parties, while scholars of Latin American populism emphasize Perronist and socialist leaders who ride popular acclamation to authoritarian control.⁴⁰ In the United States, by contrast, the proper noun *Populism* refers to the People's Party of the late nineteenth century, a many-sided movement that, at its most rebellious, sought egalitarian alternatives to the rise of corporate capitalism and participatory spaces in a centralizing state. A small but persistent group of scholars have argued, moreover, that grassroots democratic populisms have helped radicalize American democracy from the revolutionary era to today.⁴¹ Given my focus on the culturally specific context of America's populist imaginary, this is a book in American political thought. If critics of populism have largely shaped scholarly and public discourse on populism in America, I find common cause with scholars who locate in populism key resources for democratic politics.

Partly, however, contemporary US culture and politics exemplify the challenges of enacting popular power in nation-states that celebrate openness while pursuing strategies of governance that foreclose the people and democracy. Many of today's political buzzwords herald liberal democracy's success in surmounting horizons of law, territory, and imagination that have restricted democracy. Obama's election, in the eyes of many, proved that the United States is (or is fast becoming) a postracial society, and corporations now celebrate multiculturalism along with social mobility and free trade. Europe, meanwhile, boasts a common currency, cosmopolitan citizenship, and the ideal of postnational sovereignty in the European Union. As I have argued, however, the United States paces other states in facilitating de-democratizing trends, such as obscene concentrations of wealth, innovative forms of postracial racism, and militarization in domestic policing, border securitization, and international relations. Following suit, Eurozone policies favor technocracy and austerity over democratic participation and social egalitarianism. Many European states, moreover, have combined European integration with campaigns to tighten national borders to immigrants who embody the harm done by Europe's ongoing postcolonial legacies. In this larger context, this book is part of broader discussions in democratic theory and practice. I do not consider America the center of efforts to democratize populism; rather, I evaluate the perils and prospects of aspirational democratic populism in America as part of the scholarly response to this century's emergence of people's movements across the world.⁴²

TOWARD A POPULIST POLITICAL THEORY

This book participates in a history of contested efforts to narrate populism, by reflecting on debates in contemporary democratic theories of populism and on the history and resurgence of populist politics in the United States. In evaluating the conditions under which aspirational democratic populisms might flourish today, my approach is both restorative and imaginative. Current conceptions of populism developed historically in tandem with the cultural and political events that shaped the dominant political order in America and with populisms that have both reinforced and contested the victor's version of the people and democracy. Therefore, I develop theoretical insights through engagements with democratic theory, popular culture, and historical and contemporary politics. I engage in a populist practice of political theory, by constructing a dialogue between the array of actors—past and present, academic and activist, elite and grassroots—that have contested the borders of populism and democracy in America.

My focus on cultural contexts and everyday practice differs from most liberal studies of populism. Liberal scholars typically focus on the narrow relationship between the people and government, hewing closely to liberalism's concerns with perfecting the institutional norms and procedures that enable individuals and minorities to flourish within the rule of law. I am interested in the broader processes of political culture that shape political subjects, and my normative and political concerns lead me to identify the rhetoric, practices, and institutions that cultivate people's aspirations to engage in collective action to change the rules of the game. In relation to liberal and left studies that do emphasize populist rhetoric or populist emotion, I add a focus on the everyday populist practices and institutional experiments that are crucial to the formation of subjects and political actors. More generally, populist political theory offers an alternative to conventional approaches to democratic theory. By broadening the spaces, practices, and actors relevant to producing democratic critique and vision, I emphasize the ways in which political practice can and should energize political theory. Cynicism least often takes hold, I want to suggest, and radical imagination most often emerges among those—scholars and activists alike—who engage in the political work of building alternative democratic futures.

This book imagines alternative futures for populism and democracy. I lay the groundwork in chapter 1 by evaluating prominent academic discourses on populism and developing my theory of aspirational democratic populism. Here, I take up liberal scholarship on populism in depth. Liberal dismissals of populism are based on a common assumption: they equate populism with theorists of democracy, notably Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Carl Schmitt, who believe popular sovereignty demands immediate identification between the people and law. Liberals thus accuse populists of erasing the difference and contestation that are central to

politics and democracy. Too often, however, these scholars respond to populism by affirming liberal institutions and procedures that themselves limit the kinds of conflict that are proper to democracy. In doing so, they tame the paradox of popular sovereignty. By contrast, radical democratic scholars have reclaimed populism's rebellious excess to return the paradox of popular sovereignty to the center of politics and democracy. The most influential among these theorists is Ernesto Laclau, for whom populism's oppositional identification and action can rupture hegemonic orders and open spaces to reconstitute the rules of the game. If Laclau turns liberal fears into democracy's possibility, he too places collective identification at the center of populism. To situate my argument that populism is also crucially about constituting popular power, I highlight an oft-overlooked strain of American scholars, including Lawrence Goodwyn, Harry Boyte, and Elizabeth Sanders. These scholars recover an alternative tradition of radical democratic populism rooted in everyday politics and institutional experimentation. Cultivating rebellious aspirations, I argue, requires efforts to reunite the tactics that have come to divide radical democratic theory and practice: on the one hand, mobilizing the people against power; on the other, reconstituting popular power in everyday life. This requires engaging people in ongoing, unruly acts of constituting horizontal relations of power. Given the paradox of democracy—and the recognition that every constituent moment has remainders—the people must also engage in ongoing contests over the horizons of collective identity and democracy. This active concept of *horizontality* recognizes that popular power must be constituted both in our everyday experiences and at the structural borders that restrict political vision and action.

In chapter 2, I revisit populism's namesake in America, the nineteenth-century Populist revolt of farmers and laborers against the rise of corporate capitalism. Scholarly interpretations of that movement, including celebrated works by Richard Hofstadter and Lawrence Goodwyn, played a major role in shaping the discourses of populism's critics and admirers today. As I have suggested, liberal critics of Populism influenced what Walter Benjamin refers to as the victor's version of history. I return to Populism, then, to recover its rebellious aspirations to power. Populists coordinated mass resistance with everyday practices of generating grassroots power. The People's Party was the mouthpiece of Populist invective, mobilizing the outrage against the corporate revolution in America. The centralizing voice of the People's Party would have been disembodied and lifeless, however, without deep relations and looser affinities with decentered spaces of everyday practice. For decades prior to the People's Party, the movement relied on the energies of white farmers, black farmers, immigrant laborers, Marxist and Christian socialists, armies of the unemployed, suffragettes, temperance crusaders, and various middle-class reformers. These grassroots actors organized institutions and practices of political education, cooperative economy, and political

mobilization that served as everyday incubators of Populist identification and power. Time and again, Populists confronted a central question that impacted the rebelliousness of their aspirations: could efforts to arouse collective identification and constitute horizontal popular power remain open to contests over the horizons of the people and democracy *within* Populism? Where Populism's everyday spaces thrived and crossed social divides, the movement succeeded in organizing people's aspirations to enact egalitarian, pluralistic forms of popular power. Where they did not, Populism failed to sustain its coalitional base, and its grassroots power reinforced hierarchies of white supremacy, nativism, and patriarchy.

In chapter 3, I take a "commercial break" from analyzing populist social movements and turn to ubiquitous cultural processes, such as advertising and music, that shape visions of the people and democracy. My premise is that populist movements that aim to contest the identity of the people and to reconstitute popular power do so not only in the narrow field of liberal institutions and procedures, but in a larger political culture that shapes people's ideas and aspirations related to democracy. Whereas scholars of populism have avoided the relationship between popular culture and populist politics, I argue that populism's ubiquity in popular culture is difficult to bypass when evaluating a style of politics that arouses collective identification and mobilizes aspirations to power. I turn to two cultural texts that elucidate competing strands of American populism that coexisted in the nineteenth-century Populist movement but have since defined themselves in opposition to each other: Chevrolet's ad "Our Country, Our Truck," which celebrates "the American people" rebuilding their nation amid crisis; and Leonard Cohen's song "Democracy," which envisions grassroots actors reviving democracy from the ruins of abandoned Chevrolet factories. Chevy's ad exemplifies what I call *regulated populism*. Invoking its target audience as a common people, the ad fuels reactionary aspirations to shore up familiar borders, such as nationalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy. At the same time, the ad's celebration of multiculturalism fosters unrealizable aspirations toward the ideal of limitless freedom promised by neoliberalism. By contrast, Cohen's song offers a vision and practice of *aspirational democratic populism* attuned to the paradoxes of democracy. The content and style of the song call listeners to imagine themselves in relation to a disparate array of actors who have enacted the promise "Democracy is coming to the U.S.A." That promise, never fully realizable, recognizes the paradox that new actors will always emerge to contest the structural hierarchies that limit democracy's horizons and to enact new forms of horizontal popular power. Drawing on my discussions of Chevy and Cohen, I develop an account of America's populist imaginary. The result of contests between regulated and aspirational democratic populisms,