

## CALL FOR PAPERS

# Performance and Populism

## Mobilization and Popular Power on the Left

The University of Warwick and the University of California-Berkeley are organizing an interdisciplinary conference, *Performance and Populism*, which will take place online, November 3-5, 2021. The conference examines mobilization and political praxis on the left through both civic performances (protests, civil movements, political speeches...) and artistic performances (theatre, dance, music... ) in order to strengthen interdisciplinary approaches among scholars and activists engaged in building popular power for anti-racist, egalitarian, and pluralistic societies.

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*Performance and Populism* responds to the global escalation of neoliberalism, the crisis of democratic institutions, and the rise in demands for popular sovereignty at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This period is defined by the persistence of racialized violence, extraction economies, and the narrowing of democratic rights; an emphasis in security and law enforcements to ensure private property and the accumulation of capital. At the same time, we are witnessing an upsurge of people reclaiming power over institutions placed in the hands of the banking and business elites that dominate public services, communication systems, manufacturing industries, centres of knowledge production, and other systems of geo-political, social, and cultural life. It is, then, of no surprise that precisely the failure of institutions to defend various demands of the people triggers the rise of populism on both sides of the political spectrum. Some examples of populist movements and political parties with populist elements from the left included *Movimiento al Socialismo in Bolivia*, *Podemos in Spain*, *La France insoumise in France*; whereas *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs in Austria*, *Alternative für Deutschland in Germany*, and the *Bharatiya Janata Party in India* were their political right counterparts.

Populism has been widely discussed within the discipline of political science. Political thinkers have conceived of populism in various ways: as strategy of constructing a frontier (Mouffe

2018), as ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), as moralistic imagination (Müller 2016), as style (Moffit 2016), as figure (Rancière 2013), as discourse (Hawkins 2009), as political logic (Laclau 2005), and as strategy (Weyland 2001). Populism, for many scholars, involves a mechanism or “moment” that divides society into two camps: the people and the elite. In some cases, research on populism provides detailed analysis about how collective identity is constructed under the term ‘the people.’ Yet, few studies move beyond a ‘management’ perspective ultimately designed to explain the rise of leaders and civil movements. Populism thus often becomes synonymous with illiberalism, authoritarianism, or demagoguery that discredits progressive forms of popular power on the political left. Without a culturally specific analysis that accounts for meaning making across space, time, and embodiment, populism as a key term is too often limited to faulty assumptions. Combining a performance studies approach with that of political culture, art, and praxis allows us to shift the conversation from populism to more specific forms of collectivism, mobilization, and popular power. Turning to the notion of popular power repositions the objectives of broad-based movements and invites analysis of representational practices and modes of collectivity that have been historically rendered outside the category of the political particularly within the neoliberal imaginary.

Performance scholar Janelle Reinelt wrote that ‘the absence of “people” or the inability to imagine one [a people] holds back the development of effective political strategies’ (2014, 37). To broaden the debate on constructing, imagining and embodying ‘the people’ to mobilize popular power, this conference takes its lead from Performance Studies. The interdisciplinary approach of Performance Studies which combines social theory and performance practice presents a methodological and analytical challenge to populism. Accordingly, the papers we are interested in recognize the movement across fields of performance (the ‘is’ and the ‘as’) to strengthen intersections of performance studies with critical race theory, decolonial studies, political philosophy, history, cultural studies, anthropology, art science, or economics.

*Performance and Populism* puts focus on the construction of ‘the people’ and popular power on the political left. This point seems to be particularly important to address in the contemporary political conjuncture. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019/20, the ensuing discourses on tighter borders coupled with xenophobic, anti-immigration and nationalistic sentiments threaten to strengthen right-wing populist parties, and accelerate the institutionalisation of extreme right-wing politics and authoritarian regimes. In the face of challenges to fundamental human rights, the right to heal, to organize, to participate in a

cultural life and even to enjoy the arts becomes important for local and transnational alliance on the political left. Under such circumstances, the need to empower the left with the ideas of economic transformation, political innovation, and social, geographical, and cultural connectivity, becomes even more urgent.

The multifaceted, interdisciplinary, and partisan approach to the main topic of this conference intends to raise innovative research questions about democratic identities, the formation and critique of collective identification, and the renegotiation of the relationship between the people and institutions. We seek papers that focus on forms of collectivity that are constructed, performed, or staged, as well as performances that mobilise social imaginary and instigate people to envisage new sensibilities for temporal, spatial, and embodied forms of popular power.

We invite contributions from multiple geographical regions and continents and with different interdisciplinary backgrounds. Themes could include, but are not limited to issues relating to popular practices of the left:

#### The People

- Performances of the people against the elites across the world: from protests, grassroots, and civil movements, to political parties;
- Mobilizing the people through civic and/or artistic performances;
- Popular power at the intersection of politics and aesthetics;
- Critiques of collective formation;
- The people and institutions.

#### Identity and identification

- Individual activism, shared ethico-political values, and performances of collective decision-making;
- How notions of identity, community, and collectivity are imagined, formed and circulated in artistic performances;
- Identification at the intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, ecology...;
- Popular power and anti-racism.

### Public Spaces and temporality

- Populist moments and public spaces: encounter, tension and heterogeneity;
- Imagining public sites of performing collectively through artistic practices;
- Popular performance, public spaces and the time of pandemic;
- Popular power and ecology;
- Critiques of colonial-modern formations of the public.

### Affects

- Civic performances: the people, the leadership and affects;
- Artistic performances: the audience, the artists, and affects;
- Performance, affects, affections and affective memories;
- The relationship between affective bonds and political bonds.

### Representation

- Performing popular forms of collectivity through language, practices, and symbolic frameworks across various sites of performing;
- The media, public policy and institutions;
- Conceptions and practices of popular sovereignty, including sovereignties not primarily concerned with the independent nation-state;
- Cultural organizing and other popular forms of representation.

### Theoretical stances

- Studying popular forms of collectivity at the intersection of theory and practice;
- Performing the people: politico-philosophical perspectives;
- Political praxis and knowledge production: challenging epistemic legacies of white supremacy, colonialism, capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and liberal democracy.

### Conference convenors:

Goran Petrović Lotina (University of Warwick; Sciences Po Paris)

Angela Chazarra Marino (University of California-Berkeley).

The conference convenors are planning an edited volume on the same topic.

The conference will take place online.

Please send a 300-word abstract and a short bio by the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2021 to:

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and

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Notification of selection will be no later than the 21<sup>st</sup> July 2021.

The conference *Performance and Populism* is organized with the support of the Warwick's Institute of Advanced Study, the School of Creative Arts, Performance and Visual Cultures and the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies of the University of Warwick together with the Warwick Politics and Performance Network and the Department of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

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Organisational committee:

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Steering committee:

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