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‘POPULAR CULTURE’ IN A CRITIQUE OF THE NEW POLITICAL REASON

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Since the US presidential campaign of 2004, references to a new political ‘populism’ abound. Sometimes the politics of populism has been waged over the claim, by the Left and the Right, to populism. Although there is a long history of political movements representing themselves as populist, the struggle over the claim to populism has certain recent inflections, and matters differently than in the past, and in the USA differently than in other parts of the world. One thing that distinguishes the recent political populism in the USA is its articulation to and through a ‘media revolution’. My intervention in a collection of essays interested in rethinking ‘media convergence’ involves rethinking certain assumptions about the relation between the ‘media revolution’ associated with ‘new media’ and a new ‘convergence culture’ and the emergence of (the claims to) a new political populism in the USA. In so doing, the project also engages the writings of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Antonio Gramsci, Ernesto Laclau, Paolo Virno and Michel Foucault in order to rethink the relation between ‘the popular’, ‘populism’ and ‘population’.

**Keywords** popular; populism; population; multitude; biopower; media revolution

**Are the new political populism and its media ‘Revolution’ the new fan-fare for the Common Man?**

Since the US presidential campaign of 2004, references to a new political ‘populism’ abound. Sometimes the politics of populism has been waged over the claim, by the Left and the Right, to populism. Although there is a long history of political movements representing themselves as populist, the struggle over the claim to populism has certain recent inflections, and matters differently than in the past, and in the USA differently than in other parts of the world. One thing that distinguishes the recent political populism in the USA is its articulation to and through a ‘media revolution’. My intervention in a collection of essays interested in rethinking ‘media convergence’ involves rethinking certain assumptions about the relation between the ‘media...
revolution’ associated with ‘new media’ and a new ‘convergence culture’ and the emergence of (the claims to) a new political populism in the USA.

Writing in the aftermath of the 2004 presidential election, Henry Jenkins concluded his account of a new ‘convergence culture’ by reflecting on ‘the new relation between politics and popular culture’, and ‘a shift in the public’s role in the political process’ (Jenkins 2006, p. 208). Jenkins imagines ‘grassroots fan communities’ as both the engine and model of new forms of political engagement and agency. He notes that ‘nobody in these popular culture-inflected campaigns [of ‘fan communities’] is talking about a revolution, digital or otherwise’, but that ‘fan community’ represents an ability ‘to mobilize collective intelligence’ and signals a shift away from ‘individualized’ to ‘collectivized’ citizenship (p. 208). This explanation advances a theme in Convergence Culture, that ‘old media’ such as TV once comprised an institutional power base which cultivated a ‘passive’ viewer/consumer and offered few possibilities of contestation, and that the ‘convergence’ between TV and web-based media called forth an expressive, creative and participatory subject who made possible a new ‘grassroots’ and collectivized citizen-subject – the interactive media subject as political activist – and that this new politics of popular/convergence culture fostered nothing short of a more ‘democratic’ political process. For Jenkins, vivid examples of this transformation was the strategies of the Democratic Party in the 2004 US presidential campaign, when candidates (particularly Howard Dean’s campaign-manager, Joe Trippi) exploited web-based media and the fledgling technology of ‘social networking’ to mobilize constituents and raise campaign funds quickly and effectively in small increments. Jenkins observes that ‘the Internet made Dean’s candidacy; television unmade it’ (p. 210) and that Trippi’s subsequent book, The Revolution Will Not be Televised (2004), corroborates his own point that a ‘new political culture – just like the new popular culture – reflects the pull and tug of these two media systems’, with TV pushing itself into the lives and consciousness of its public, and interactive viewers pulling information from web-based media (Jenkins, p. 211).

Before examining further the view that a new ‘convergence culture’ enhanced, or engendered a more authentic, democratic politics and citizenship than in the era of broadcasting, it is worth bringing into sharper focus the historical context of that view. A rationale that equated a new agency of media consumers (as ‘creatives’ and ‘prosumers’) and a new ‘participatory media culture’ with an enhanced or more authentic democracy gained considerable traction in the USA not only amidst the emergence of Facebook, YouTube and blogging but also amidst the startlingly rapid resurgence of the Democratic Party, which in the 2006 election captured both houses of the Congress, the majority of state governorships, and the majority of state legislatures from Republicans. For Jenkins, the new relation between citizens and media was a basis for optimism, and the political potentiality of the new participatory media culture was lost on ‘critical pessimists’ (he mentions Noam Chomsky & Robert
McChesney) who ‘focus primarily on the obstacles to achieving a more democratic society’ (p. 247). The rapid traction and expansion of Facebook and YouTube, and their increased role after 2006 in the successful presidential campaign of Barack Obama and the continuing resurgence of Democratic candidates for congressional offices, collectively bolstered the reasonableness of the view that a media revolution (the participatory culture of a new convergence culture) had produced a more authentically democratic polity and comity. In that this revolution coincided with the apparent overturning of neo-conservative consolidations of political control by a ‘politics of Hope’ and by political ‘change you can believe in’ even made messages such as Jenkins’ a reason for optimism.

It is no small coincidence that the period between 2006 and 2008 also became the context for the articulation of a resurgent Democratic Party to a political populism. The 2004 Democratic presidential candidate, John Kerry, whose wife was the heir to the Heinz ketchup fortune, often was caricatured and derided as a ‘patrician’. However, by 2007, his running mate in the 2004 campaign, John Edwards, acquired an identity as a ‘populist’, as was evident in a feature story in *Time Magazine* entitled, ‘John Edwards Fires Up His Populism’ (19 July 2007). When Edwards dropped out of the Democratic primary in early 2008, Hilary Clinton and Obama were frequently described as vying for the mantle of populist candidate. And by the summer of 2008, Obama was regularly described by most of the major newspapers and magazines in the USA, as well as by numerous bloggers, as the populist candidate (*Business Week*, 21 August 2008). Obama’s populism continued to be at issue. During the first year of the Obama administration his populism figured prominently in representations of his response to the financial crisis and the effort to reinvent healthcare provision.

But of course this is the juncture where the recent history of political populism in the USA gets particularly messy and contentious. The last-minute decision by the Republican presidential candidate, John McCain, to run with a little-known ex-governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin (rather than Mitt Romney, a stalwart in the Republican Party who had acquired an identity as a patrician), turned the 2008 election into a competition and performance stage about each party’s claim to a political populism. Selecting Palin as the Republican vice-presidential candidate acknowledged the growing description of ‘independent’ and staunchly libertarian candidate, Ron Paul, as a populist alternative to McCain for the Right. By late 2007, Paul’s shadow-Republican campaign became aligned with the Tea Party which had begun staging small, local rallies that cast Paul’s libertarianism as a counter-position to the Bush administration’s efforts to manage the financial crisis. By the first months of the Obama presidency, the Tea Party represented itself as a *national* populist movement, continuing its opposition to federal strategies for managing the financial crisis and then (more vociferously) the Democratic Party’s initiatives to legislate national healthcare reform, which it derided as ‘Obama-care’. Following the
death of Ted Kennedy, one of the most recognized proponents of a national programme for guaranteeing healthcare to all US citizens, the Tea Party endorsed Massachusetts State Senator Scott Brown, and with the mobilizing efforts of the Tea Party, Brown’s famous campaign tour of the state in an old pickup truck and engaging citizens at ‘town-hall meetings’, alongside his claim that he was not claiming Kennedy’s Senate seat but ‘the people’s seat’, helped Brown to win the special election for the Senate seat held for nearly 40 years by Kennedy. Weeks after Brown’s election as US senator, and pointing to his victory as a sign of their success at mobilizing support of a national candidate, the Tea Party staged its first national convention in February 2010.

Although charting the Right’s recent claim to a political populism lies well beyond the scope of this essay, several implications of this recent history are worth mentioning in order to consider its relation to the discourse about media revolution and convergence culture. One implication is its libertarian valorization of individual rights and freedoms and of local sovereignty over national administrative institutions. One of the earliest and largest local Tea Party rallies was the ‘Don’t- Mess-with-Texas Tea Party Rally’ staged at the foot of the Texas capitol building on 15 April 2009 and featuring Texas Governor Rick Perry who famously forecast the possibility of Texas’ seceding from the USA, in front of attendees wearing T-shirts emblazoned with a drawing of the state flag and the rallying cry, ‘Yes We Can! – Secede’. The widely reported Texas event (with Perry appearing the next week on the cover of Newsweek, aside the title, ‘What Perry’s Creed Tells us About America’) followed revelations of Palin’s longtime membership in the Alaska Independence Party, and intersected with Arizona’s challenges to federal immigration law and with a growing chorus of activists questioning the validity of President Obama’s birth certificate and citizenship. To describe these efforts (as the proponents often have done) as ‘grassroots’ movements, linked their populism not only to a political reasoning from the Bush years that ‘smaller government is good government’ and that individual liberties and ‘states’ rights’ are civic virtues, but also to a nativism — an essentialist bond to territory and ‘homeland’ as the supposedly immutable place where (grass-)roots take hold. As recent instances of political populism and grassroots activism, the mobilizations in Texas, Arizona, Alaska, other states and cities have local variations and histories, and make a Tea Party at best a new confederacy that neither is located in the Old South nor lacks a governmental centre (other than its collective opposition to centralization and ‘big government’).

In the wake of contestation over national healthcare legislation in 2010, Right-wing grassroots and specifically Tea Party events and activism increasingly were described (exposed) as ‘astroturf’, i.e. as an inauthentic or ‘genetically modified’ grassroots. (For more on the term ‘genetically modified grassroots’ see Jack Bratich’s essay in this issue.) For instance, FreedomWorks, whose banner extols ‘Lower Taxes, Less Government, More Freedom’, has operated as more than simply ‘a proud supporter’ of the
Tea Party, a claim printed on the T-shirts that FreedomWorks financed and distributed for Tea Party events. According to relatively recent ‘progressive’ blogging venues such as Think Progress (the media arm of the Center for American Progress Action Fund) and a special report on MSNBC’s relatively recent ‘The Rachel Maddow Show’ (August 2009), FreedomWorks provided substantial financial and logistical assistance for Tea Party events, circulating ‘shout outs’ for attendees of ‘town-hall meetings’ that were staged by congressional representatives to discuss healthcare reform. Following these exposes, FreedomWorks became one of the most recognized (and for the Left, infamous) examples of recently formed entities that channeled funds from the insurance and medical industries to support the organization of activism, networks and events that opposed State administration of national healthcare programmes and that promoted themselves as ‘grassroots’ and ‘populist’. Recognizing that FreedomWorks manufactures astroturf, or that the Tea Party is a genetically modified grassroots, underscores that current political populisms are mediated, but recognizing this mediation is only a preliminary step towards mapping the historically specific technologies and networks of organization, funding and management through which the current political populism is activated, acted on and made rational.

Understanding the mediation of current political populisms in part involves examining their formation and operation within the current context of media/convergence. For instance, FreedomWorks operates a website that prominently features its ‘FreedomWorks Connector’, which asks the site’s visitors, ‘Are you a connector?’ The Connector operates as a networking apparatus that is not unlike Facebook and Twitter to link with ‘local activists’, but it also provides links for expanding the Connector’s network into social networking venues such as Facebook. The site also provides links to legislators. It also operates as blogging/news platform that prompts discussion and activities through these networks of connection and mobilization.

FreedomWorks’ uptake within the networks for activating and acting on a political populism also is predicated on other, convergent media venues. For instance Glenn Beck, an author, video producer/distributor, touring speaker, blogger and the host of ‘The Glenn Beck Show’ on Fox News since 2009 and of a similarly titled programme that his company produces and syndicates on radio, has been just as involved in activating and acting through the Tea Party’s and FreedomWorks’ membership, events and networks. His website, which has operated as a meeting place for and extension of his media venues and networks, promotes Beck’s products through the parlance of convergence – as ‘The Fusion of Entertainment and Enlightenment’. What the FreedomWorks website refers to as ‘grassroots activists’ may also be Beck’s most invested viewers, listeners and customers (i.e. his fans). In March 2009, Beck sponsored a ‘9/12 Project’ to ‘bring us all back in the place that we were on September 12, 2001’. Like the FreedomWorks Connector, Beck’s intersecting media enterprises/venues for this project facilitated ‘Glenn Beck Meetup Groups’ – a
web page which called upon his ‘fans to self-organize “Flash Mobs of Kindness”’. In September 2009, Beck’s media partnered with FreedomWorks, the Tea Party and various other political action networks to stage a ‘Taxpayer March on Washington’, also known as ‘The 9/12 Tea Party’. And on 27 August 2010, FreedomWorks produced the ‘Take America Back Convention’ in Washington, DC, followed the next day by a ‘Restore America’ rally at the Lincoln Memorial whose featured speaker/motivator was Beck. In the run-up to the latter events, Beck’s website promoted them by proclaiming that ‘FreedomWorks Needs You’ and by making a ‘special offer for Glenn Beck listeners...[a chance to] become a member and get your FREE ‘Rules for Patriots Handbook’. Other action committees, such as the secessionist group Free State Project (whose motto is ‘Liberty in Our Lifetime’), attached themselves to the event, cross-linking with the FreedomWorks Connector.

At every step, ‘membership’ was performed through links on the organizational web-tools that asked for personal information, donations and sometimes opinions by ‘clicking here’. Collectively, or as a nexus of interactive networks of membership, they offer a glimpse of the technology of participation through which democracy is performed for a particular and technically specific population (rather than a general state of democracy that has been restored through a media revolution). The invocation and re-enactment of primal scenes and origin stories of the birth of the USA (reenacting the Boston Tea Party or reprinting the US Constitution) involved certifying full membership/citizenship as grassroots political populism — the ‘revolutionary’ claims of a return to a primal political populism certified/ratified as private membership through media network.

It is impossible to separate the nexus of networks used to organize these gatherings and to exercise membership/citizenship from the Fox News Network — a TV network whose narrowcasting of ‘news’, lesson-giving, and opinion has depended (as with other recent TV programmes and networks) on strategies for extending its programming ‘beyond the box’ and acting on ‘expressive’, active, interactive and indeed activist consumer-citizens. However, it would be an overstatement to cast the Fox News Network as the single or primary engine for ‘controlling’ these grassroots events and membership, even though The Fox News Network does produce ‘The Glenn Beck Show’ alongside former Judge Andrew Napolitano’s ‘Freedom Watch’ (with web-links to his blogs about ‘The History of Liberty’ and ‘The Constitution & Freedom’, and to related programmes/lessons for ‘staying free’) and alongside programmes by potential Republican presidential candidates Mike Huckabee and Sarah Palin. Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation also was revealed to have contributed many millions of dollars in to Republican candidates. The Fox News programmes and web-links did promote membership and involvement in the Restoring America Convention, and in early 2011 ‘Freedom Watch’s’ on-going campaign to ‘restore America’
began pointing viewers toward these networks for ‘kick-starting the 2012 Revolution’. Like the wide and varied offerings of instructional programmes that comprise TV in the ‘post-network’, Reality TV era, Fox News is an engine for lifestyle ‘programs’ or regimens of self-help and enterprising citizenship (Ouellette and Hay 2008), but more than other forms of TV makeover- and lifestyle-instruction, the lesson-giving and regimen in shows such as ‘The Glenn Beck Show’ or ‘Freedom Watch’ cast the programme/regimen for personal responsibility, doing-it yourself and self-improvement as a path not just to an active and healthy lifestyle but to activism.

Although Fox News has played a prominent role as an engine for an activist ‘program’ and for engineering the nodes and trajectories (i.e. the networks) for managing and rationalizing how freedom is advanced through a grassroots and a populism, it would be a mistake to suggest that Fox News controls or master-minds these networks of activism. Just as importantly, it would be an overstatement to attribute the events mentioned above to a ‘grassroots’ of blogging and web-based interventions and to cast the grassroots as ‘resisting’ the strategies of a large media corporation/institution. The media consumer-citizen as grassroots does not simply ‘democratize’ the ‘un-democratic’ effects of old, broadcast institutions. When Minnesota Congresswoman, Michele Bachmann, in her speech about ‘restoring America’ to the August 2010 conventioners, exclaimed that ‘this is what freedom looks like’, she decidedly was not referring to a liberation from giant media corporations but to tactically enacting a grassroots populism (to the musical accompaniment of Aaron Copland’s ‘Fanfare for the Common Man’) at the place where various media networks converge with the performance stage for re-enacting political protests such as the 1773 Boston Tea Party, and the 1963 Civil Rights March. A political demonstration staged in Washington, DC involved demonstrating the vitality of their media network to mobilize as a populism that rejects the ‘big government’ located at that intersection.

One significant postscript to these recent examples of a political populism that materialized through convergent networks of membership and organization were the rallies staged by John Stewart and Stephen Colbert in late October 2010, a few days before the national election. Stewart and Colbert are the well-known hosts of successively scheduled programmes on the Comedy Central network. Both of their programmes blend commentary on current affairs with comedy made from the conventions for representing current affairs; so they often operate as ‘news’ about the ‘news’ and what counts as popular knowledge. Colbert, a former ‘reporter’ on Stewart’s ‘The Daily Show’, designed ‘The Colbert Report’ as a mimicry of Fox News’ most-watched political commentary programme, ‘The O’Reilly Factor’. Colbert refers to his audience and fans as the Colbert Nation, explicitly coordinating media consumption, web-managed membership, citizenship in/through a national broadcast space and activism. In 2008, he announced that he was being pressured by ‘his nation’ to run for president of the USA, but he dropped out
of the race after declining to pay the Republican Party a $35,000 fee required to compete in the South Carolina primary and, later, after the Democratic Party refused to add his name to the state’s presidential primary when he switched parties. In the weeks before the Restore America Convention and Honor America Rally, Stewart announced plans to organize a ‘Rally to Restore Sanity’ also at the Lincoln Memorial, and one day before Halloween, though Stewart (mimicking Beck’s assertion that he was unaware of the coincidence between the Honor America Rally and the 1963 March on Washington) claimed that he was unaware that an Honor America rally had been planned for the same location. Soon thereafter, Colbert announced to ‘his nation’ that he would be staging a rally that would shadow Stewart’s counter-rally to the ‘Restore America’ and ‘Honor America’ events, calling it ‘A March to Keep Fear Alive’ — a reference as much to the march’s proximity to Halloween as to a politics of fear driving the activism and populism that had recently gathered under the banner of Freedom and Liberty.

The successive rallies organized in August and October 2010 were unprecedented in the USA as instances of TV networks and programming that actively engineered and sponsored massive attendance for ‘demonstrations’ at a single location. ABC and NBC News estimated that the ‘Honor America’ rally attracted just under 100,000, while Sarah Palin’s Facebook page and Glenn Beck’s shows contended that the number was between 300,000 and 600,000. NBC news estimated that the Stewart and Colbert rallies attracted around 300,000, while a Comedy Central reporter (intervening in the public debates about the reliability of various estimates and about which event was larger) asserted that the figure was closer to 250,000 but that 400,000,000 watched the live stream on their personal computers.

In certain respects, the demonstrations sponsored by Stewart’s and Colbert’s programmes were examples of the kinds of spoofing that Jenkins holds out as a political response in his account of ‘photo-shopping for democracy’. However, it also is worth noting that the ‘Honor America’ rally involved forms of spoofing (slogans such as ‘Yes We Can – Secede’ or photo-shopped images of Obama as the Joker with the caption ‘Socialism’). Both networks of mobilization represent themselves as shepherding a ‘grassroots’. Both TV networks (Fox News and Comedy Central) organize viewers/fans as implied resistance to their own versions of the old and broken institutions of journalism. Both may operate through the same general apparatuses of grassroots activism and political populism, but their networks (as I explain more in the next section) also work as apparatuses of separation and differentiation — i.e. of managing and mobilizing specific populisms.

The examples above affirm that it would be too simplistic to generalize blogging, photo-shopping and social networking (media revolution) as the condition for an enhanced democracy, a grassroots politics or (in Joe Trippi’s terms) the ‘overthrow of everything’. To do so would be to buy into the same binaristic logic of a FreedomWorks, which represents ‘freedom’ as the
opposite of (suppressed or silenced by) the controlling institutions of ‘big government’, and which represents a ‘grassroots’ as the only viable and freely expressive path to overthrowing ‘government’, even as it exercises freedom and ‘bottom-up’ interventions through the technologies, organizational rationalities and (typically ‘big’, corporate) institutions of TV and other media. Also, rather than assuming that what has occurred since the mid-2000s is generally an example of a (‘convergence’) culture that is more democratic than in the prior decades of ‘old’, broadcast media, it would be more useful politically to ask first how something called ‘democracy’ always has been produced through historically and geographically specific convergence, of which media technologies and networks are implicated only partially, and then to figure out how ‘democracy’ works and is put to work now.

The analysis that I am suggesting is not simply a ‘critique’, the revelation of a truth or secret that lies behind a ‘grassroots that is really only ‘astroturf’, and it is not primarily about debunking a neo-Romantic view of fan communities as the political grassroots and populism that have sprung up in a new, more democratic culture of convergence. Instead this essay outlines a preliminary step towards a kind of analysis of the present that involves mapping the converging and competing networks of government that target (monitor and administer to) particular populations, and charting the instabilities and problems around which technologies and rationalities of government and freedoms materialize as political populism. The analysis that I am proposing is, in this way, about how ‘convergence’ currently has become integral to and floats on a new regime of political populism, which itself builds on, and away from, older forms of populism. And it is about how analyzing convergence is always situated in, and therefore must be reflexive about, the changing intersections between democracy, media and popular culture, and how these intersections become productive of the technologies, rationalities and arrangements of liberal government and its virtue of individual sovereignty and freedom. The current political populisms are predicated on the contradictions and governmental problematicizations of what Nikolas Rose has referred to as the new ‘powers of freedom’ (Rose 1999) and of what Laurie Ouellette and I (following some of Rose’s thoughts) have described as the new relation between ‘reinventing government’ and reinventing media. Analyzing this current situation and governmental arrangement/rationality is not driven by a pessimism that stands in contrast to an optimism (a reference to Jenkins’ rebuke of pessimistic media and cultural critics who ‘stand in the way of democracy’) but by a sense that it is time to sharpen our sense of the historically over-determined conditions on which democracy and media convergence are enacted and acted on through the powers of freedom.

Deconstructing this popular?

No term was more at the centre of conceptualizations of power and politics in ‘critical’ theories of communication during the mid- and late-twentieth
century than ‘popular culture’. The term figured into the work of Leftist intellectuals such as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart who were shaping a Cultural Studies in Britain before the 1970s, but after the 1960s the term became pivotal in explanations about the object of Cultural Studies, particularly among theorists who invoked the newly translated writing of Antonio Gramsci to argue that popular culture is the terrain on and over which hegemonic struggle occurs — an argument famously elaborated in Hall’s ‘Notes on Deconstructing the Popular’ (1981)/1998). It is worth considering, therefore, whether there still are lessons to be learned from that body of writing and its context in understanding the current political populisms.

As noted in the Introduction to this special issue, the writing by Williams, Hoggart and Hall about popular culture developed over the 1960s as part of debates about reforming ‘cultural education’ in the UK, particularly through the importation of media and other ‘popular’ forms into disciplines that traditionally had excluded them. By the 1970s, some of their efforts to rethink the study of contemporary culture dovetailed with their (not always consonant) efforts to rethink Marxist theory, criticism and historiography. One of the wonderful and still relevant dimensions of Williams’ writing about ‘popular culture’ is his historicization of the term’s place within the ‘keywords’ that comprised the study of culture and society (as interrelated considerations) by the 1970s (Williams 1976/1983). As in his well-known genealogies of how the term ‘culture’ had changed since the nineteenth century (even as the residue of the early Modern meanings of culture persisted), his genealogy of the word ‘popular’ underscored both its emergent and residual connotations and usages in the mid-twentieth century: ‘Popular culture was not identified by the people but by others, and it still carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work (cf. popular literature, popular press as distinguished from quality press); and work deliberately setting out to win favour (popular journalism as distinguished from democratic journalism, or popular entertainment); as well as the more modern sense of well-liked by many people, with which of course, in many cases, the earlier senses overlap’ (Williams 1976/1983). Though Williams does not create an individual entry in Keywords for ‘populism’, he provides a short entry about the word’s significance in relation to the ‘popular’. Political ‘populism’, he notes, embodies all of the various historical threads and connotations of the ‘popular’, though the persistent intrication of the two terms has been part of the Left’s and the Right’s claim to both terms. In this sense, claiming the ‘popular’ and a ‘populism’ has been a point of political struggle.

Hall’s ‘Notes on Deconstructing the Popular’ follows many of Williams’ points while pushing this latter one. Like Williams, Hall emphasizes the importance of periodizing popular culture, but his interest in periodization turns more sharply than in Williams’ Keywords on how studying the history of the term helps in understanding the present political context. To what extent, he asks, has Britain in the early 1980s lost the linkage from before World War
Two between the ‘popular’ and relations of social class? To what extent does the changing or persistent relation of the people to the ‘concentration and expansion of the new cultural apparatus’ provide a condition for recent political claims to the popular in Britain (on the eve of Thatcherism)? For Hall, the political stakes of recognizing and studying the uptake of ‘popular culture’ by the early 1980s was complicated by popular culture’s two, conflicting ‘poles’—containment and resistance—that had become a critical problematic across contemporary Cultural Studies, which kept shifting between emphasizing popular culture’s ‘pure autonomy’ and ‘total encapsulation’ (Hall, p. 447).

For Hall in particular, popular culture, and its production/representation of (what Williams termed) a ‘selective tradition’, had become a national ‘battlefield’ (p. 451) – a terrain that Thatcherism was claiming and winning. These political stakes lead Hall to his famously (and uncharacteristically) cantankerous conclusion that ‘if we are not constituted against a power bloc, then we are constituted into its opposite...an effective populist force saying ‘Yes’ to power and that ‘this is why popular culture matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it’ (p. 451). Contextualizing ‘popular culture’ became a way of recognizing not only that popular culture lacked a fixed content and that ‘the popular’ lacked a fixed subject, but that therefore history (the persistence of the past in the present, and the culture of selectively representing the past in the present) is a struggle over the claim to its content and subjects.

Williams’ and Hall’s influence in British Cultural Studies as a laboratory for rethinking and recasting the old terms and poles of British politics was particularly indebted to the contemporaneous translation of and intense attention to the writings of the Italian activist, journalist and thinker, Antonio Gramsci (2000). For Williams and Hall, Gramsci’s preoccupation with rethinking Marxism in the context of early twentieth-century Italy provided a compelling precedent for their own context. Gramsci grappled with how ‘popular culture’, as a Modern idea, was born out of older ideas in Italy about the ‘folk’, with how the term had been articulated in Italy to a still fragile and messy model of nationhood, and with how it had become a point of political and philosophical/ideological struggle in Italy between the fledgling Communist and Fascist movements’ claims to it (a struggle that, in light of Gramsci’s imprisonment, appeared to have been won, however temporarily, by the Fascists). Perhaps most influential on Williams’ and Hall’s writing about popular culture and the ‘national-popular’ was Gramsci’s view of the intellectual/activist’s situated-ness in and responsiveness to historical conjunctures of forces, the multiple forces which were (re-)shaping popular culture, seeking to claim the historical content and subjects of popular culture, and of which the historical materials of popular culture were themselves part, as they (re-)shaped the terrain of political struggle. Hall in particular frequently cited Gramsci’s thoughts about the role of popular culture (particularly schools, literature and journalism) in ‘hegemonic formation’ – a term that
both of them adopted in order to historicize, periodize, contextualize the complexity and contingency of power blocs. Following Gramsci, ‘Deconstructing the Popular’ thus proposed that popular culture is a structured but unfinished space (a *potentiality*) between the dominant and the dominated.

Although Gramsci’s references to journalism and popular novels were scant, Hall’s and British Cultural Studies’ attachment to a Gramscian view of popular culture as a terrain of political struggle and hegemonic formation contributed during the 1980s and 1990s to a robust body of research about media. Summarizing the breadth of arguments and the trajectories of media study that advanced under the banner of Cultural Studies during the 1980s and 1990s lies well beyond the scope and aims of this essay; the Introduction to this special issue recounts some of them. However, it helps to make several quick points. One is that British Cultural Studies was decidedly less interested in studying media per se, or even a ‘media culture’, than in demonstrating how media operated ‘conjuncturally’, as part of hegemonic formations. Also, one of the most influential lessons from British Cultural Studies was not British Cultural Studies’ (Hall et al., 1978) *conjuncturalist* analysis (e.g. *Policing the Crisis*’s study of the role of print and TV news in shaping an ideology of criminality as part of a historically specific hegemonic crisis) but its rationales and studies of popular media as sites where media subjects negotiated, opposed and/or resisted dominant ideologies (the most influential template for which was perhaps Hall’s [1980a] ‘Encoding/Decoding’). Particularly in the USA, Cultural Studies often became a project that was about studying media as meaning-making – examining the complex textuality and polysemy of media texts, or audience’s complex relation to those texts – rather than questions about media institutions. The question of ‘media power’ and ‘media control’ often became a question of the complexity of media texts and the activity of media audiences. Particularly, a line of research about media ‘fan cultures’ and about the multi-form uses and interpretations of media texts by audiences ignored a significant feature of its own historical conjuncture, one wherein the increasingly *individualized* engagements with media were becoming instrumental to the ‘mass customized’ economies and lifestyle programming of TV and media culture. Also, whereas Hall described work at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies as shaping an ‘organic intellectual’ for a different time and place than Gramsci’s (Hall 1980b), the study of media audiences and fans as cultural formations sometimes tended (as Morris noted in 1990) towards an assumption and/or valorization of ‘the popular’ as ‘the people’ or ‘common man’ – thus implying that Cultural Studies as media studies promoted a political populism.

The next section considers several other implications of the legacy of media studies as Cultural Studies, but I conclude this section by suggesting a few ways that Gramsci’s writing about Italy in early twentieth century, and neo-Gramscian interventions about Britain in the mid- to late-twentieth century, still are useful to think about and rethink the recent political populism
in the USA, and its relation to a so-called ‘convergence culture’. First, to what extent has the articulation of ‘convergence’ and ‘culture’ replaced the need to understand contemporary culture’s relation to ‘the popular’ or a ‘national-popular’? There are indeed important differences between the present context of ‘media convergence’ and the contexts of cultural production and communication when Gramsci or Hall wrote. However, pronouncements about convergence culture arrive either as an exclamation about having superseded Cultural Studies’ old preoccupation with ‘the popular’ or as a casual and cavalier pronouncement that all of that has been settled intellectually and therefore that now it is possible to talk about ‘convergence culture’ with a confidence that everyone knows what one means when it is described as popular culture (i.e. that popular culture’s content and subjects are so fixed as not to require a new assessment). If anything, this essay’s first section demonstrates what is challenging, unsettled, contradictory and decidedly messy about generalizing convergence culture as a new stage of ‘the popular’ and political populism.

Second, the first decade of the twenty-first century became a stage for competing claims about the popular. And by mid-2011, at the time of writing this essay, nothing has been settled. Rather, populism – however genetically modified and subsidized its grassroots – has become the banner for high-intensity mobilization by both the Left and the Right. In early 2011, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker’s, and fellow Republicans’, claim that their election provided a populist mandate for their ramroding legislation denying public employees their long-held right to unionize spurred a rapid mobilization through web networks (stretching well beyond Wisconsin) of financial and organizational support for Democratic legislators who fled the state, and protestors who descended on the capitol to thwart votes on the legislation. The latter effort was matched by web-networks of financial and organizational support, stretching well beyond Wisconsin, for the Republican legislation. MSNBC and Fox News regularly and intensely gave top billing to the controversy for weeks, often describing each side as grassroots responses that were galvanizing a broader spreading (a broad-casting) of grassroots. The events became one of the most recent indications of a struggle over the popular and of new networks that are articulating the national and the popular in historically unprecedented ways.

Third, as much as the new political populism has been mediated through emerging networks and the reinvention of ‘old’ technologies such as TV news, there also are ample examples of how this mediation involves a ‘culture of the selective tradition’. The Tea Party’s invocation of the Boston Tea Party and the 1963 March on Washington, the Tea Party’s and related groups’ claim to ‘sacred land’ four blocks from the former World Trade Center where an Islamic recreational centre was planned to be built, and the myth of a pre-nation of unattached, sovereign states (the secessionist reinstitution of a Republic of Texas as the ‘state of independence’ par excellence) all are
examples of a populism predicated on the production of cultural grass-roots — of an organic historical relation to a native place/territory that must be defended and secured. The nativism’s articulation to a libertarian, federalist, and even secessionist politics makes its populism less oriented toward the “national-popular” than to a pre-national-popular state.

Fourth, Hall’s view of the study of popular culture as being caught between an account of ‘pure autonomy’ (an unmediated grassroots and ‘user-generated content’) or ‘total encapsulation’ (astroturf and ‘generated users of content’) continues to pervade the intellectual and political ‘battlefield’ over the claim to populism — particularly in considering the new populist subjects as interactive activists, and in considering the mediation of populism through the convergent communications networks that encourage or require forms of consumer expressivity, enterprise and active involvement. The discourse about a new convergence culture, while positing that there is a new regime for mediating the popular and populism, has not been as energetic in attending to what is complicated, politically at stake or struggled over about these latter terms in the ‘new media’ regime. Alongside Jenkins’ descriptions of media blogging and photo-shopping as grassroots media and as instances where ‘popular culture’ becomes a staging ground for a more democratic politics than in the past, John Hartley has described Reality TV and its related interactive media as the new ‘plebiscite’ (Hartley 2007). For Hartley, series such as American Idol, the European song contest or China’s Super Girl operate as ‘democratainment’, trading on the pleasures of participation. However, Hartley is agnostic about whether this trend should be welcomed, concluding only that ‘the plebiscite’ has now ‘come into its own... [as] a response by traditional broadcasters to the challenge of consumer activism and passionate choice, and a potential way forward for the reform of “consumer democracy” in the creative industries — Do you like the idea? Vote now!’ (p. 159). The examples of political populism that I have outlined in the first section could be thought about as forms of consumer empowerment through the media technologies and networks of participation, but ‘consumer empowerment’ is the beginning of an analysis of the historical contradictions and determinations of that empowerment as political virtue and economic valuing, and not simply an unconflicted general condition of media convergence that has moved us from passive to active, passionate viewers (see for instance, Andrejevic 2009, or Ouellette and Hay 2008). Similarly, Burgess and Green (2009) describe YouTube’s ‘participatory on-line video culture’ as having mostly generated ‘public and civic value’ (an improved ‘cultural citizenship’ over the past), as an engine driven by and responsive primarily to ‘collective agency’. Again, it is one thing to imply that venues for ‘user-generated content’ such as YouTube should be analyzed as technologies of citizenship, but simply to cast YouTube (or ‘social networking’) merely as the shining example of ‘community’-driven, ‘self-forming’ media production and ‘user-led innovation’ that is anathema (resistant?) to ‘top-down management’ fails to be very reflective about its own
complicity in the political claims to populism. To what extent have these accounts become one other way of scoring the new ‘fan-fare’ for the Common Man?

It is significant that this body of writing about (and even welcoming) convergence culture perpetuates a kind of media study as cultural study that aspires to or assumes itself to be a populist project, even as ‘the popular’ is taken for granted by these authors as a self-evident term or is replaced by ‘convergence culture’ as a purer form of popular culture — one that transcends the historical and geographic conjunctures in which it has been such a slippery and fraught terrain/term in the past. My essay gestures, all too schematically, to the importance of taking seriously how analyses of a current or ‘new’ convergence culture, as a new mediascape, need recognize and contribute (even through the changing media of academic publishing) to understandings about a current politics of populism. So as I draw the reader into the next section, I ask to what extent the current accounts of convergence culture as a new incubator or fertile field for grassroots democracy are still launched from (or stuck in) questions about media culture as popular culture that developed and became widely accepted during the 1980s and 1990s? Is there anything about the current political populism that requires a different way of thinking about the relation between media and culture, as a ‘convergence culture’? What did those questions foreclose, as lines of analysis about the changing relation between the subjects of popular culture and politics?

Omnès et singulatim—rethinking ‘the Popular’ in a critique of political reason

In a recent Gramscian-inspired account of populism, Ernesto Laclau makes an important point about the relation of populist reason and political reason (Laclau 2005, 2006). For Laclau, the basis for a politics of populist reason has been that ‘the universality of the populus’ is always mediated and represented (‘contaminated’) by ‘the peculiarity of the people’ as a historical actor. From this insight, Laclau deconstructs (and to a lesser extent, historicizes) the claim of universality by historical actors who act as and represent themselves as a totality — the people. Populism’s partiality, he notes, ‘has lost its partitive meaning and become one of the names of the totality’ (Laclau 2005, pp. 224–225). Populism, therefore, is an endless tension in which ‘each term [the historically partial/partitive and the totality] at once absorbs and expels the other’ (2005, p. 225). Seeing populist reason as political reason thus involves revealing the logic that constructs the partiality of the totality, and the totality represented by the partial.

Although, as suggested in the last section, it is important to recognize the historical production and contestation over the recent political populism, this
populism’s ‘political’ uptake and ‘reason’ are not simply rhetorical, representational or ideological. ‘Populism’ may be, as Laclau argues, a ‘floating signifier’ and a ‘discursive construction of emptiness’ that is continually filled with meaning, invested in, identified with and rhetorically claimed, but the question (as Gramsci and Hall’s work affirms, as much as they too were prone to describing a politics of and over popular culture in those terms) is always how this is put in motion and made to matter through historical conjunctures. So even though Laclau’s perspective on populist reason is consonant with and one that he holds out as ‘conjuncturalist’, his is more an intervention in political philosophy than an effort to locate and analyze that reason in specific conjunctures and through the historically specific contingencies of its articulation. Even though he acknowledges the long history of a grassroots populism in the USA, he mostly explains this history as the endless deferral of populism as an empty, floating signifier, rather than in terms of historically specific and perhaps competing rationalities. And if the production of populist reason occurs through historical actors, then it is important to understand their agency not simply as rhetorical.

As a way of turning the discussion of populism and political reason onto the current context and its mediascape, I want to make a quick detour through the distinction that Paolo Virno makes between the ‘people’ and the ‘multitude’, a thesis by Virno that is interested in historicizing ‘the popular’ but, by so doing, in reconsidering its usefulness by the late-twentieth century. Virno’s argument is based on a genealogy of the term ‘popular’, and its historical correlation to the term ‘multitude’, in the modern world. Citing the terms’ use in Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza, he points out that the ‘multitude’ precedes the ‘body politic’, is a plurality that never merges into the One, and thus is antithetical to formations such as the nation-state and the People: ‘If there are people there is no multitude; if there is a multitude there are no people’ (p. 23). Just as importantly, the People has a Modern history through which it becomes a codified concept, the multitude does not – even though the multitude persists, shadowing the People as a potentiality and as an on-going problematic (p. 43). As a response to the multitude as problematic, the concept of ‘the people’ therefore has since the seventeenth century ‘formed around strategies developed to foil danger and obtain protection’.

Virno suggests that one reason to think about the historical correlation between these two terms’ deployment is to recognize how, beginning in the late-twentieth century, the multitude becomes the prevalent mode of being. He states, ‘unity (the State, the sovereign) is no longer something towards which things converge, as in the case of the people; rather, it is taken for granted, as a background or a necessary precondition... [This] allows for the political-social existence of the many seen as being many’ (p. 25). If this is the case, then should we understand the ‘national-popular’ in Gramsci’s and Hall’s sense as projects that are over — that pertained to 1920s–1930s Italy or 1970s–1980s Britain?
This is an intriguing and useful question for my own analysis of the relation between current political populisms and their media, though in ways not, or only obliquely, suggested by Virno. First, it is helpful to think about the period of radio and television broadcasting from the 1920s through the 1970s as oriented towards what Virno describes as ‘the popular’ and its articulation to ‘the national’. While there have been important local variations of ‘public broadcasting’ around the world, and although broadcasting developed in the USA through mostly privatized institutions, broadcasting developed as a model of centralized production and nationally coordinated distribution networks that supported the nation as a connected territory of communication and culture (a one-ness) that could be described as ‘popular’. This was the model of popular communication and culture beginning to develop in Italy under Fascism when Gramsci wrote, and (albeit in different ways) it was still the model of communication and culture in Britain when Cultural Studies there, as in Policing the Crisis or Brunsdon and Morley’s Nationwide project (1978/1980), examined television as national-popular communication and culture. When Frank Capra’s Mr. Smith Goes to Washington represents in 1939 a crisis posed by a wicked mogul’s effort to stifle a grassroots response (by Boy Rangers no less!) to his political and communication ‘machine’, the film depicts the national broadcasting networks as the trusted truth-tellers and servants of the People’s interests. Mr. Smith even attests to a synergistic convergence between Hollywood film production/distribution and the fledgling national broadcast companies as institutions for maintaining (as a civic virtue) the ‘national-popular’.

Against this history, the ascent of cable and satellite distribution, whose programming was oriented around lifestyle programming, niche-marketing and ‘narrow-casting’ and whose cross-media synergies were made possible (in and outside the USA) by policies that deregulated the old broadcast model, certainly contributed to a falling away of a model of communication and culture oriented primarily or exclusively to the national-popular. And it is not difficult to discern traits of what Virno describes as ‘the multitude’ in that new model of communication – a model that no longer strives to represent the People but the multitude (and through the mantra of ‘free choice’). That said, it also is noteworthy that the recent regime of ‘convergent’ and ‘interactive’ media has intensified the ‘individualization of the universal’ that Virno ascribes to the historical coming of the multitude as a model/regime for representing and organizing productive life. These developments lead me to ask whether, following Virno, the term ‘popular’ as a description of the current ‘convergence culture’ is useful or misleading. In many respects, the current economy and culture of convergence pose various problems for (problematize) ‘the popular’ – and its correlation with ‘the national’. I would add that if the multitude has been something that shadowed the People through the late nineteenth and first two-thirds of the twentieth century, then one could argue that the Popular is what now shadows (threatens and endangers) the civic
A second and related ramification of Virno’s (2004) genealogy of a ‘grammar of the multitude’ that bears directly on the perspective about political populism and media convergence that this essay proposes is its brief but important reference to Michel Foucault’s writing about bio-power and biopolitics. It is not surprising that Virno would acknowledge how the multitude, as an increasingly prevalent mode of productive being and a productive life force, could be understood through Foucault’s discussion (late in his life) about bio-power. From Virno’s passing reference to Foucault and ‘biopower’, it is difficult to discern which of Foucault’s inflection of the term he has in mind. As Collier (2009) has noted, Foucault’s use of the term changed somewhat between ‘Society Must Be Defended’ (1976/2003) and The Birth of Biopolitics (1979/2010), as Foucault shifted emphasis from the power over the body and bodies, and a related concern to ‘man’/‘human’ as a ‘species’, to the early nineteenth liberal governmental project of population management. It is significant that Virno invokes Foucault simply to sweep Foucault’s argument about bio-power into his (Virno’s) emphasis on labour-power, while explaining contemporary labor-power as a ‘post-Fordist’ mode of productive life that is suited more for the multitude than for the People. For Virno, unlike Foucault, the genealogy of the People and the multitude is a way of bringing Marxist thought to bear on a new mode of productive being, and in so doing reinventing Marxist historiography.

Although I do want to let Virno’s historical/dialectical view of the People and the multitude percolate into my observations about the contradictions on which the current political populism and its media act, I want to conclude by pushing more emphatically than did Virno a few implications of a Foucaultian study/history of bio-power, its governmental technologies and their relation to what Foucault termed ‘neoliberalism’ (1979/2010). This manoeuvre involves acknowledging the interventions made about Cultural Studies through Foucault’s thought – particularly his late writing and lectures. Here, I have in mind particularly the arguments made by Tony Bennett about cultural administration and the ‘government’ of culture (Bennett 1998), and by Toby Miller whose accounts of cultural policy have led fruitfully to new understandings about citizenship (Miller 1993), as well as Laurie Ouellette’s history of USA public broadcasting’s cultural programming and citizenship (Ouellette 2002), Jeremy Packer’s history of ‘road safety’ and its media (Packer 2008) and Jack Bratich’s study of a contemporary politics waged over the difference between ‘authoritative’ and ‘conspiratorial’ knowledge/theory.

The title of this essay is a reference to Foucault’s lecture from 1979, ‘Omnes et singulatim: Toward a Critique of Political Reason’, whose history of liberalism’s birth out of pre-modern, Christian forms of ‘pastoral power’ (the relation of the shepherd to the flock) emphasized the double movement of ‘government’ in the Modern world – government as the proliferation and
dispersal of techniques throughout society for administering to, ‘looking after’, and ‘watching out for’ subjects and simultaneously as technologies of discipline and securitization that involved surveilling and watching for potential ‘problem’ behaviours and subjects (Foucault 2003a). The liberal state is not only the State as shepherd (in both senses) but also various kinds of ‘shepherding’ and ‘policing’, in both senses, that are dispersed throughout society and life and that comprise a healthy ‘state of things’. Two implications follow that I want to emphasize. One is that the Modern transition from the ‘art of government’ to ‘political science’ and ‘political economy’ thus involved creating a rational, self-reflective, rule-based state of things — a propitious ‘arrangement’ of governmental resources/technologies for policing the health and well-being of subjects. The ‘reason’ and rationality of the state continually refined techniques for maintaining the ‘health’ of its subjects (throughout their life), while guarding against their ‘unhealthiness’ (however/wherever that might occur). A second implication is that the techniques of liberal government as a Modern form of pastoral power (‘watching over’ in both senses) involve counting, making accountable, measurement, dividing, differentiating, categorizing, cataloging — the Modern panoply of continually changing techniques for making individuals and populations knowable and thus manageable. The shepherd’s practice of recognizing and counting each and every subject — individually and as a flock — becomes a widening matrix of technical apparatuses (‘pastoral technology’) for making rational the omnes et singulatim.

Both of these implications are central to Foucault’s account elsewhere of the birth and development of bio-power. Foucault used the term in part to describe the emergent form of power (what he referred to as a ‘security society’) geared to the health and well-being of its modern target: populations. The term ‘population’ is part of the title that Foucault gives to his seminar in 1977–1978, ‘Security, Territory, Population’ (republished 2009) that introduced his thoughts on ‘governmentality’. Population is a Modern preoccupation, in all of the senses suggested above. ‘Taking charge’ of a population involved programmes of public and private hygiene, urban planning, demography, the keeping of birth, marriage and death certificates and an inventory of humans as a species (as opposed to the ‘non-human’ or non-productive). Healthy populations and healthy reproduction of human life, and in that way the life of a society, have been overseen by the Modern State but also by the various commercial, religious, community institutions and associations comprising civil society, which watch over and organize life to maintain a proper, rational arrangement of government.

My turn towards Foucault’s references about bio-politics and the government of populations allows me to emphasize several things about the relation between the current political populism and its media. First, I suggest that Laclau’s emphasis on the representational and rhetorical production of ‘populist reason’ overlooks the complex of technologies and sciences (the technical rationality as governmental rationality) through which power is
exercised and administered, healthy life and populations are overseen and reproduced, and the healthy, active self is achieved in Modernity. The latter is what Foucault brings to the discussion that the neo-Gramscianism of Hall and Laclau did not. Populism, long thought about as a ‘political movement’, is a profoundly organizational activity, reliant on and subject to technological complexes of organizing, ‘action’, and ‘movement’. It has been a modern response to and/or outgrowth of liberal government (a response to being governed too much or not administered to well enough), but it also has been the target of governmental oversight and policing. The populist ‘grassroots’ has always grown or been cultivated within a tension between these two poles.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, seeing political populism (particularly in the present) in terms of ‘the popular’ or ‘popular culture’ and ‘popular media’ misses how political populism has become technically implicated in the apparatuses of population management – the differentiating and individualizing machinery that ‘popular media’ and ‘popular culture’ have become since the era of broad-casting and its relation to a geographically unified public and a national-popular. Broadcasting did not lack technologies of audience measurement and counting, but they operated slowly. As Mark Andrejevic has compellingly pointed out, early twenty-first century media’s ‘i-commerce’, ‘i-politics’ and ‘i-culture’ not only have refined the technologies of audience monitoring but also made the ‘interactive’ media consumer-viewer into a subject who is encouraged and expected to customize, individualize and be productive in her/his media use – to generate content and in so doing to reveal more and more about her/his media investments and pleasures (Andrejevic 2009). It is not that the popular (as populism) disappears but that it becomes increasingly processed through media technologies and networks that are part of the apparatuses of population management – using demography to understand and differentiate audiences as niche-markets and ‘lifestyle clusters,’ but also administering to the health and well-being of specific populations through lifestyle programming and instructing individuals how to customize and personalize their own welfare and how to help themselves and be enterprising citizen-consumers, as in ‘makeover’ programming (Ouellette and Hay 2008).

Whereas Mr. Smith (the Common Man in Capra’s film) acts on an emergent problem in 1939 of making visible a grassroots populism localized in the hinterlands (the Midwest!), far away from the centre of national-popular government (Washington, DC) as the focus of national broadcast networks (represented through images of CBS radio coverage of his performance on the Senate floor in the film’s conclusion), Fox News and MSNBC and their related media operate as the machinery and networks that organize and mobilize specific populations into specific populisms and their cultures of media convergence cultures. Moreover, the current political struggle over the mantel of populism is waged through and over a new rationality about the role of government and citizens, about the virtues of localizing, privatizing and
personalizing the ‘programs’ and ‘networks’ of government, about ‘empower-
ing’ citizens as entrepreneurs to watch over and look after themselves.
FreedomWorks’ and Tea Party populism that formed over a national
healthcare policy, what they famously decry as ‘Obamacare’, amplify a
reasoning about the virtues of individual choice and individual sovereignty,
of freedom and liberty (their revival of ‘Don’t Tread on Me’ posters) as breaking
the chains of servitude and control, even as the technology and media of
governing and properly exercising freedom (such as FreedomWorks and Fox
News’ ‘Freedom Watch’) intensify and proliferate. In this sense, populism acts
on the technology, networks and media of converting ‘expressive’ media
consumers into ‘activists’ and of mobilizing media markets as populations
supposedly ready to sever their dependence on the State. Perhaps, a better way
of describing the populist, grassroots activism that has acted on and through the
current convergence of programmes and networks for exercising freedom,
citizenship and government would be ‘interactivism’ – whose subject is
actively encouraged (activated) to act through these programmes and networks,
through a new media regime of populism. The so-called ‘astroturfing’ of Tea
Party activism was one form of mobilization accomplished through an
interactivist media. In that the media networks of interactivism are the
specific and technical mechanisms for representing, authorizing and advancing
a political populism, then the truth of the activists’ claim to populism rests and
depends on the specific media networks’ ability to support that claim – what
could be described, following Foucault, as a media ‘regime of truth’ and a
media regime of political agency or citizenship.

Thinking about the current political populisms and their media as acting on
and through a new rationality and regime of interactivism, is not (as Jenkins
would have it) inherently optimistic or pessimistic, but an analytic and political
strategy that does not see grassroots as the opposite of media or state
institutions, or freedom as the opposite of control, or the creative, active(ist),
‘trans-media’ pro-summer as the opposite of the old, inert couch-potato. In
fact, there are good reasons to ask why the mantra of ‘convergence culture’
and ‘creative industries’, as a rationale about the ‘new’ and ‘liberated’ media
consumer, gained traction within the Bush-era rationality about government
and citizenship, and to look at how the political contradictions of ‘convergence
culture’ have come to the fore since the mid-2000s. It is also not enough
simply to suggest that the reinvention of ‘old’ media such as TV through
interactive technologies has given rise to ‘democratainment’ – Reality TV that
plays on the pleasures of voting. Voting by expressive media consumers occurs
through technologies and networks of sorting, counting, being counted, and
membership which comprise the technological regime and the network of
government and citizenship for the current politics of democratic ‘representa-
tion’. American Idol’s game of voting and interactivity (and once a year, its
mobilization of viewers to ‘Give Back’ as activist consumers) is therefore
technically part of the network of interactivist citizenship that brought some
US citizens the Obama administration’s ‘first ever Web town hall’ in March 2009, where citizens submitted online questions that were vetted by White House staff and responded to in a special live TV broadcast.

The Obama presidency was inaugurated (a day before the official swearing-in ceremony) through an HBO special, ‘We are One’. Significantly, the event could be followed on HBO’s website, through HBO’s on-demand and subscription cable facility, and through a simulcast on the old engine of ‘public broadcasting’, PBS; and the event was temporarily made available free (as a ‘public service’) to viewers who could not afford or did not subscribe to HBO’s premium cable programming. That ‘the many and the one’ (to invoke Foucault’s reference) are called forth, mobilized and governmentalized through America’s largest and most critically acclaimed subscription or on-demand TV network is a vivid example of the historical contradictions on which the Obama administration’s ‘politics of hope and change’ was born as media programme and convergent networks of citizenship (Hay 2010). To the extent that ‘We are One’ represented the People, it did so through some of the most refined machinery (subscription TV) for catering to specific consumer-citizens.

Concluding lines of thought and questioning: populist security

This essay outlines paths for understanding the recent populisms and their media through a study of political rationalities and their programmes and networks of government. Overall, this study considers how recent political populism and its media have been born within what Rose has described as ‘the powers of freedom’—how freedom, liberation, resistance and the sovereignty of the individual have become instrumental to and are acted on by a governmental rationality that authorizes and makes a virtue of self-reliance and entrepreneurial (activist!) citizenship. Those strands of media study that valorized and celebrated the interactive-media revolution as political revolution in the mid-2000s need to recognize the contradictions surrounding ‘We Are One’ as a ‘popular’ event that supposedly capped years of a web-based, ‘grassroots’ mobilization by the Democratic Party, and to address the interactivism of libertarian and neo-conservative formations such as the Tea Party since 2008.

The analysis suggested by this essay also seeks to move the discussion about the ‘irrationality’ of populism on the Left or the Right into a study of how the activation and inter-activism of these populisms as a grassroots are authorized through technologies and rationalities that provide the ‘order’ and discipline required for mobilization and the collectivization of ‘intelligence’. The relation of the individual and the many (the omnes et singulatim) is not simply a matter of empowering expressive and creative individual generators of content but a matter of attaching that expressivity, etc., to the rationality of media
programmes and networks that organize, discipline, and in that way mobilize and channel an interactivist populism. Not being silent and actively participating are also increasingly the requirements of media use, that make someone who refuses to or cannot participate, the aloof or inactive consumer (the old couch potato in front of broadcast TV), an uncooperative consumer and bad citizen. If anything, the Tea Party interactivism is a shining example of having rejected that old, ‘unhealthy’ model of bad citizenship and of having become the poster-children of the new liberal rationality that casts dependency as ‘irrational’ or unhealthy.

Another consideration has to do with the historical tendency to invoke the ‘popular’ in times of crisis (Oswell 2006; Virno 2004) and to cast ‘populism’ as a ‘revolutionary’ force. Thinking about an interactivism which acts on the prosumer as ‘creative’ and expressive media subject is helpful to understand how the current political populism has been articulated through a new model of ‘citizen-soldier’. Tea Party activists’ defiant display of their ‘right’ to bear firearms publicly (at rallies in 2010), and the secessionists who hitch their wagon to Tea Party and FreedomWorks events in Texas, represent their grassroots populism as a new stage of militiaism (a civilian soldier) whose mobilization is supposedly authorized by slogans from the American Revolution such as ‘give me liberty, or give me death’ and ‘don’t tread on me’. Although elaborating the recent regime of the citizen-soldier in a ‘war on terror’ and post-Homeland Security state lies beyond this essay, it is worth mentioning that the privatized technologies and networks of personal and collective security have been multi-fold and increasingly reliant on (embedded in) the current economy and culture of media convergence (Hay and Andrejevic 2006, Ouellette and Hay 2008). Moreover, we should ask how the current populisms’ mobilization through media programmes and networks is a kind of ‘civil’ (not just civilian) warfare — a new Civil War that is profoundly about a federalist, ‘state’s rights’ model of government but also a kind of warfare that is not fought primarily with weapons that maim and kill but through orderly media mobilization and interactivism. Of course, this line of study would need to acknowledge how State-sponsored military operations increasingly have been waged by privatized entities and chains of command and control that act through civilian communication networks.

The historical linkage between a new citizen-soldier and a new political populism also has raised questions about the correct balance between the proper exercise of freedoms and rights and the role of government in securing certain populations (or the ‘general population’) against a populism that is cast as loony, irrational and ‘conspiratorial’ (Bratich 2008). The response of the State during the Bush administration to protect citizens against shadowy networks of media-savvy terrorists laid some of the groundwork for (made rational) Texas Governor Perry’s claim that he was ‘protecting’ citizens from the policies of a ‘big’, over-reaching federal government, or for Wisconsin Governor Walker’s claim that his anti-public union legislation and effort to quel pro-public union activism was mandated by a populist wave that created a Republican majority in the state.
This is a crucial point to consider because of the contradiction on which a Tea Party/FreedomWorks activism is waged: the rejection of ‘big government’ and the valourization of private and personal sovereignty even as it mobilizes to ‘take back’ or take control of the levers of State government. It is worth asking whether this is a political populism that could govern politically without its own form of ‘big government’ (e.g. the Bush-era Homeland Security juggernaut), or whether it aspires to a continual state of civil war-fare — and media fan-fare for the Common Man.

Last, but not least, if (as Virno argues) the Popular once was a strategy for foiling danger and obtaining protection from the Multitude, how has population-management (across multiple privatized and individualized technologies and networks of government) become, in a new way, the point of political populist strategy about a new ‘security society’? As Foucault noted in explaining the emergence of the early-nineteenth century security society and its attendant forms of bio-power, the security society was about maintaining the health of the population — i.e. the population as a general object of administration. However, the current debate about healthcare, Medicare and Social Security in the USA — as the points of populist (inter)activism — have increasingly been about the role of individual states, with the help of the federal government, in administering to specific, localized populations. Furthermore, to the extent that ‘social welfare’ and ‘social security’ involved, as Foucault pointed out, forms and states of ‘policing’, then how has the populist politics over a healthy populations (protecting the one or the many, the general or the specific population) become a civil form of warfare waged by new models of citizen-soldier who act through the current economies and cultures of media convergence? This speaks to the current crisis of political populism and government and to the need for an alternative to old strategies of critique as truth-telling — to the need for an analytic that recognizes the historical convergence of techno-logics and networks of power in which each of us (in specific ways, as part of the oversight of specific populations) is implicated.

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