

# “The People” and Climate Justice: Reconceptualizing Populism and Pluralism within Climate Politics

---

**John M. Meyer**, California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt

Today, populism is widely understood to entail an exclusionary conception of “the people” that threatens climate change action. While this threat is real, I argue that populism itself can be understood as a response to perceived exclusion and marginalization, making it possible to conceptualize a more heterogeneous conception of populism’s “people.” Examining two approaches to climate change action rooted in contrasting conceptions of the people and the elite, I argue that climate justice organizing offers a promising effort to construct a heterogeneous people and offers a powerful critique of the elite representation of climate change action in which “we are all in this together.” Yet along with this promise, climate justice organizing must navigate tensions that are inescapable within any populist formation. One neglected thread of populist history and theory offers resources for doing so; in the final section of this paper, I explore its relevance to climate justice today.

Keywords: climate justice organizing, climate politics, populism, pluralism, the people

**I**n recent years, there has been growing attention to attacks on climate science and policy by many right-wing leaders and movements that have been labeled

---

Thanks to the participants in discussions on this topic as part of WPSA’s Environmental Political Theory Virtual Community and the Association for Political Theory’s online conference, and especially to Mauro Caraccioli who offered constructive and insightful feedback at the latter. Sherilyn MacGregor and I have collaborated on a different paper on climate populism; her thinking and contributions have shaped my ideas here. A 2022 fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (*now*: Research Institute for Sustainability) in Potsdam, Germany provided an invaluable opportunity to complete this paper and generous support of open access publication. Finally, thank you to the editors and reviewers, whose comments were invaluable in helping me to clarify and strengthen my argument.

Published online February 26, 2024.

*Polity*, volume 56, number 2, April 2024.

© 2024 Northeastern Political Science Association. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0), which permits non-commercial reuse of the work with attribution. For commercial use, contact [journalpermissions@press.uchicago.edu](mailto:journalpermissions@press.uchicago.edu). Published by The University of Chicago Press for the Northeastern Political Science Association. <https://doi.org/10.1086/729277>

populist.<sup>1</sup> Alongside nativist and anti-immigrant sentiments, climate change action is said to be an “ideal target” for “populist backlash” because its “abstract and complex nature allows populists to diminish these issues as elite projects.”<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, many political commentators now describe the threat of a backlash as a key obstacle to addressing climate change effectively.<sup>3</sup> These obstacles and dangers are real. Yet I argue that rather than leading to a rejection of populism per se, they should prompt us to reexamine and broaden our understanding of a conceptual category at its core: “the people.”

Today it is common for political theorists and political scientists to assert that populists conceive “the people” as inherently homogeneous and therefore exclusionary. Because this exclusionary “people” is often used to attack climate science and policy, advocates of the latter often pine for an imagined past in which science was more respected, politics more civil, pluralism more tolerated, and society less divided.<sup>4</sup> I argue that this anti-populist nostalgia is itself counterproductive, because it reinforces a failed approach in which climate politics is reduced to the “supposedly objective instructions of experts and technocrats.”<sup>5</sup>

---

1. Aron Buzogány and Christoph Mohamad-Klotzbach, “Populism and Nature—the Nature of Populism: New Perspectives on the Relationship between Populism, Climate Change, and Nature Protection,” *Zeitschrift Für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft* 15 (2021): 155–64; Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, “Repolicizing Environmentalism: Beyond Technocracy and Populism,” *Critical Review* (2021): 1–27; Matthew Lockwood, “Right-Wing Populism and the Climate Change Agenda: Exploring the Linkages,” *Environmental Politics* 27 (2018): 712–32; Amanda Machin and Oliver Wagener, “The Nature of Green Populism?,” *Green European Journal*, (February 22, 2019), <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/the-nature-of-green-populism/>; and Jens Marquardt, M. Cecilia Oliveira, and Markus Lederer, “Same, Same but Different? How Democratically Elected Right-Wing Populists Shape Climate Change Policymaking,” *Environmental Politics* 31 (2022): 1–24.

2. Robert A. Huber, “The Role of Populist Attitudes in Explaining Climate Change Skepticism and Support for Environmental Protection,” *Environmental Politics* 29 (2020): 959–82, at 960.

3. Liz Alderman, “Europe Fears That Rising Cost of Climate Action Is Stirring Anger,” *The New York Times* (November 1, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/01/business/energy-environment/europe-climate-action-cost.html>; Andrew Leigh, “How Populism Imperils the Planet,” *The MIT Press Reader*, (November 5, 2021), <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/how-populism-imperils-the-planet/>; Vlad Surdea-Hernea, “Curb Your Climate Enthusiasm, Here Come the Populists!,” *The Loop* (April 20, 2023), <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/curb-your-climate-enthusiasm-here-come-the-populists/>; and Izabella Teixeira Tubiana Ana Toni and Laurence, “The Populist Climate Threat,” *Project Syndicate, Sustainability Now*, (September 30, 2022), <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/populism-threat-to-climate-policies-in-brazil-europe-united-states-by-izabella-teixeira-et-al-2022-09>.

4. Benjamin Moffitt, “The Trouble with Anti-Populism: Why the Champions of Civility Keep Losing,” *The Guardian* (February 14, 2020), <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/feb/14/anti-populism-politics-why-champions-of-civility-keep-losing>.

5. Yannis Stavrakakis, “The Return of ‘the People’: Populism and Anti-Populism in the Shadow of the European Crisis,” *Constellations* 21 (2014): 505–17, at 506.

Climate justice organizers have been prescient critics of this failed approach.<sup>6</sup> They forcefully reject elite-driven policies, and advocate alternatives, in the name of a heterogeneous conception of “the people.” Examining these arguments through a populist lens, I argue that hope for a viable and transformative effort to address climate crisis can be found not by turning back *from* populism but by exploring alternatives *within* this conceptual frame much more seriously.<sup>7</sup>

To do so, I first challenge the assertion that a homogenous and exclusionary conception of “the people” is intrinsic to populism, arguing that it is instead among the elements that are contingent—often varying between left- and right-wing manifestations, between different world regions, and between different theoretical approaches. Here, I follow Jane Mansbridge and Stephen Macedo’s survey of the extensive literature in concluding that populism’s *only* core elements—in both theory and practice—are “pitting the people in moral battle against elites.”<sup>8</sup> The ways in which both “the people” and “elites” are populated is not fixed.

With Mansbridge and Macedo, I argue that the dangers in a homogeneous characterization of “the people” are real but not inherent to populism, which can also take “democratic politics back to its normative roots in the wants and needs of ordinary citizens and challenging, on egalitarian and justice grounds, elite political, economic, and cultural domination.”<sup>9</sup> Margaret Canovan has characterized these normative roots as the “redemptive vision” of democracy, a vision that stands in tension with liberal democracy’s “pragmatic” focus upon political institutions for electoral and legislative decision-making. She has argued convincingly that when democracy’s redemptive promise is neglected in mainstream politics, “it may well reassert itself in the form of a populist challenge.”<sup>10</sup> Following this theoretical vein, I argue that populism can challenge elite domination on behalf of “ordinary citizens” and tap into a “redemptive vision” of democracy that promotes demands for justice.

The present is shaped by a populist challenge in the sense that the boundaries of mainstream political representations are destabilized and the responsiveness, and

---

6. Farhana Sultana, “Critical Climate Justice,” *The Geographical Journal* 188 (2022): 118–24.

7. Much research by populism scholars asks what climate positions are adopted by populists. By contrast, I ask what *populist* positions and orientations are—and might be—embraced by *climate* advocates. Given that populism is only occasionally a form of self-identification by political actors, this can be an especially fruitful approach. It is consistent with Benjamin Moffitt’s argument that populism is “something that is *done* rather than a *property* of political actors.” Benjamin Moffitt, *Populism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020), 24.

8. “Populism and Democratic Theory,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 15 (2019): 59–77, at 60.

9. *Ibid.*, 60.

10. Margaret Canovan, “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy,” *Political Studies* XLVII (1999): 2–16, at 11.

so legitimacy, of “pragmatic” liberal democratic institutions is often questioned. There is a strand of environmental theory and practice that has long been framed in populist terms, yet has rarely focused on climate change, nor has it been in conversation with other scholarship on populism.<sup>11</sup> In identify promising synergies and opportunities for climate politics and climate justice within the animating principle of populism, I draw insight from this strand while remaining attentive to ever-present dangers and limitations.

In the next section, I develop the argument that “the people” of populism need not be homogeneous and exclusionary. By recognizing ways in which populism emerges in response to perceived exclusion and marginalization by elites, we can conceptualize a populism rooted in a more heterogeneous and inclusive conception of the people. In two subsequent sections, I use this as a lens through which to illuminate two broad, contrasting approaches to the relation of the people and elites in climate change action. The first, which I label “we are all in this together,” remains the dominant framework for climate action. I argue that this elite-led approach is limited, in part, by its *anti*-populism. The second approach is rooted in climate justice organizing, challenges elite domination in the name of the people, and fits within an inclusive populist frame. Given its centrality to my theorizing, I examine this approach in more depth. While I argue for its promise, a heterogeneous conception of the people rooted in climate justice is not a panacea, and the final section considers salient tensions that remain. These cannot be escaped by rejecting populism, as they are integral to the effort of climate justice organizers to build social and political power. I argue that a model that recognizes inescapable tensions offers a powerful contrast to both exclusionary populism *and* to forms of exclusion endemic to mainstream, anti-populist conceptions of climate change politics or policy. In this way, I aim to illuminate some of the key fault lines in contemporary climate politics, highlighting both the significance of and challenges facing climate justice movements. At the same time, attention to these fault lines strengthens the case for a populism rooted in a heterogeneous conception of the people.

### “The People”: Homogeneous or Heterogeneous?

#### *Exclusionary Conceptions of “The People” Within Populism*

Homogeneous characterizations of “the people” exclude those deemed “other.” In doing so, they deny forms of heterogeneity that always exist within a populace. On the authoritarian right, anti-immigrant policies and nativist denigration of

---

11. E.g., Andrew Szasz, *Ecopopulism: Toxic Waste and the Movement for Environmental Justice* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). I discuss this literature below.

those outside of a dominant ethnic, racial, or religious group have been advanced through populist rhetoric. Relatedly, attacks on climate policy have often been made via a populist elevation of a raced and gendered conception of the working class in extractive industries.<sup>12</sup> Here, exclusion is overt and its dangers should be clear.

Many contemporary political theorists and political scientists argue that this exclusionary stance is inherent in the very meaning of populism itself. Jan-Werner Müller and Nadia Urbinati offer two powerful theoretical expositions of this argument. In *What Is Populism?*, Müller presents Donald Trump's assertion that "the only important thing is the unification of the people—because the other people don't mean anything"<sup>13</sup> as revealing all populists' inherent impulse. Urbinati argues that "populism in power . . . depicts only one part of the people as legitimate," and that an elected populist leader rules "in disdain of pluralism and the principle of legitimate opposition."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Cass Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser's ideational definition, the most influential in empirical research, also centers an anti-pluralist conception of the people. While interpreting populism as a "thin" ideology, they nonetheless characterize it as thick enough to require a monistic conception of the general will "based on the unity of the people and on a clear demarcation of those who do not belong to the demos."<sup>15</sup> Mudde and Rovina Kaltwasser leave a bit of ambiguity here, allowing that populism can be inclusive or exclusive.<sup>16</sup> Yet their conception of inclusion is limited to allowing for multiple identities (including Indigenous peoples<sup>17</sup>), while brooking no dissent or plurality of interest, objective, or priority that these identities entail. They continue to insist that "all manifestations of populism [depict] . . . the pure people' . . . as a homogenous and virtuous community"<sup>18</sup>

These influential accounts are premised on a different sort of exclusion of their own: they focus solely on what Urbinati describes as "populism in power" or those

---

12. John Hultgren, "Those Who Bring From the Earth: Anti-Environmentalism and the Trope of the White Male Worker," *Ethics, Policy & Environment* 21 (2018): 21–25; and Tobias Haas, Jeremias Herberg, and David Löw-Beer, "From Carbon Democracy to Post-Fossil Capitalism? The German Coal Phase-out as a Crossroads of Sustainability Politics," *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 18 (2022): 384–99.

13. Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 22.

14. Nadia Urbinati, "Political Theory of Populism," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (2019): 111–27, at 120.

15. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 18.

16. Cass Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America," *Government and Opposition* 48 (2012): 147–74.

17. *Ibid.*, 165.

18. *Ibid.*, 151.

striving “to become a ruling power within the state.”<sup>19</sup> As a result, she and others dismiss the significance of populism as a form of inclusive movement-building from below. This, too, is a mistake. Movement populism has been integral to many rich historical and theoretical accounts, despite being overshadowed in recent years by attention to national leaders and parties. Indeed, among those who have sought insights from the original US populist movement of the late 1800s, the most distinctive and significant contributions have often been drawn from their movement-building efforts to organize cooperative economic organizations and opportunities for political education, rather than from the later campaigns for national office.<sup>20</sup>

Urbinati justifies turning away from populism in movements on the grounds that it is “not unusual in electoral democracy.”<sup>21</sup> Yet it is in movement organizing that “free spaces” for new political thinking and forms of action can be found.<sup>22</sup> Thus Urbinati and the others discussed here dismiss possibilities for innovative practices that construct a heterogeneous people by definitional fiat, rather than considered argument. By contrast, I argue that it is by looking to organizing in movements such as climate justice that we can see nascent political possibilities prefigured and cultivated.

### *Populism Against Elite Domination and Exclusion*

Mansbridge and Macedo provide a necessary corrective to this overly narrow view of populism by arguing that homogeneity is a contingent feature of populism’s “people” and observing populists in power is not the only relevant place to develop distinctive insight. Displacing these contingent features from the core of populism is their recognition of its focus on elite domination in extant liberal democracies. In this way, their understanding draws attention to the forms of exclusion and marginalization that already constitute mainstream politics and thereby provides a crucial context for theorizing “the people” in populism. As Camila Vergara argues, populism’s “people” can be better understood as “a part that wants to assert

---

19. Urbinati, “Political Theory of Populism,” 118.

20. Jason Frank, “Populism and Praxis,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017); Lawrence Goodwyn, “Organizing Democracy: The Limits of Theory and Practice,” *Democracy* 1 (1981): 41–60; Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1976); and Laura Grattan, *Populism’s Power: Radical Grassroots Democracy in America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016).

21. Urbinati, “Political Theory of Populism,” 118.

22. Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

itself as a *legitimate* part that now is effectively excluded from power.”<sup>23</sup> “The people” is therefore “an inherently *heterogeneous*, inclusionary subject, determined by material conditions of exclusion and second-class citizenship rather than substantive . . . traits.”<sup>24</sup> “The people” is a conceptual category constituted by elite exclusions. By understanding populism first as a challenge to forms of elite domination and exclusion, rather than by any necessary constitution of “the people,” the dominant account of exclusions *within* populist formations no longer appears *sui generis*.

As I noted in the introduction, there is a thread of writing about ecological populism—often place-based—that resists dominant constructions of environment and society, imagining instead “alternative mazeways in modernity.”<sup>25</sup> Gregory Koutnik taps into this thread to argue compellingly for a “politics in defense of home,” positioned in opposition to “developmentalist elites, norms, and institutions that threaten their environs with destruction.”<sup>26</sup> Yet there are two limitations to this otherwise valuable literature that I aim to address in this article. First, this work is commonly overlooked by populism scholars—and vice versa. Because its focus is on making sense of environmental politics, it often employs populism as a loose signifier that leaves ambiguities unaddressed. Second, it is not immediately clear whether or how something like Koutnik’s ecological populism in defense of home can be translated to address the challenge of catastrophic climate change. Does populism offer strategic and conceptual resources to move from a place-based problem of immediate experience to a global crisis? Or is there an inherent conflict here between what

---

23. Camila Vergara, “Populism as Plebian Politics: Inequality, Domination, and Popular Engagement,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 28 (2019): 222–46, at 233.

24. *Ibid.*, 243.

25. Timothy W. Luke, *Capitalism, Democracy, and Ecology: Departing From Marx* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 6. In addition to works cited below, see: Szasz, *Ecopopulism: Toxic Waste and the Movement for Environmental Justice*; Timothy W. Luke, “The People, Politics, and the Planet: Who Knows, Protects, and Serves Nature Best?,” in *Democracy and the Claims of Nature*, ed. Ben A. Minteer and Bob Pepperman Taylor (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); Mark Beeson, *Environmental Populism: The Politics of Survival in the Anthropocene* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Herbert Reid and Betsy Taylor, *Recovering the Commons: Democracy, Place, and Global Justice* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010); James R. Stone Jr., *Populism, Eco-Populism, and the Future of Environmentalism* (London, UK: Routledge, 2022); Priya R. Chandrasekaran, “Remaking ‘the People’: Immigrant Farmworkers, Environmental Justice and the Rise of Environmental Populism in California’s San Joaquin Valley,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 82 (2021): 595–605; and John M. Meyer, “Populism, Paternalism, and the State of Environmentalism in the U.S.,” *Environmental Politics* 17 (2008): 219–36.

26. Gregory Koutnik, “Ecological Populism: Politics in Defense of Home,” *New Political Science* (2021): 2–5.

Daniel Hausknost describes as a localized “lifeworld” versus global “systemic” sustainability?<sup>27</sup> Certainly, the latter presents a more difficult context for an ecological populism, since global climate change is often cast as an abstract topic remote from everyday concerns. Yet this challenge need not be insurmountable.

Here, some of the central premises of climate justice organizing become legible as populist challenges. Climate justice movements are distinctive in the discursive and political struggles over climate change action, precisely because they contest this account of climate change as abstract and remote. Climate change is not framed as a simple need to “decarbonize,” but as the resistance and inaction of elites to the growing disruptions and threats experienced by the most affected people and areas facing catastrophic wildfire, drought, sea-level rise, toxic co-pollutants, loss of livelihood, and more. It threatens not simply abstract “future generations” but the already-present and diverse generation of youth—vocalized by Fridays for Future and the Sunrise Movement—rejecting the “blah, blah, blah” of “so-called leaders.”<sup>28</sup> Climate justice organizers and advocates reject the long-dominant, elite-driven agenda of technocratic and market-driven approaches as “false solutions,” push back against marginalization and exploitation, and prioritize livelihood and solidarity in order to enable us to “live well together.”<sup>29</sup> These arguments, that mainstream politics is constituted by elite domination, also need not equate domination with unanimity. It can, instead, echo the quip by E.E. Schattschneider that “the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent.”<sup>30</sup> A degree of plurality among elites can exist, but the bias undermines representative claims.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that we should be sanguine about the threats and practices of exclusion posed by authoritarian right-wing populist politicians and parties. Yet when one regards them as *uniquely* populist, it leads to neglecting

---

27. Daniel Hausknost, “The Environmental State and the Glass Ceiling of Transformation,” *Environmental Politics* 29 (2020): 17–37.

28. Damian Carrington, “‘Blah, Blah, Blah’: Greta Thunberg Lambasts Leaders over Climate Crisis,” *The Guardian* (September 28, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/sep/28/blah-greta-thunberg-leaders-climate-crisis-co2-emissions>; Karl Mathiesen, “Greta Thunberg Doesn’t Want You to Talk about Her Anymore,” *POLITICO* (April 28, 2022), <https://www.politico.eu/article/greta-thunberg-climate-change-activism-fridays-for-future-profile-doesnt-want-you-to-talk-about-her-anymore-2022/>.

29. Giovanna Di Chiro, “Care Not Growth: Imagining a Subsistence Economy for All,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 21 (2019): 303–11, at 309.

30. E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 35.



the elite exclusions that have always been core preoccupations of populism.<sup>31</sup> This, in turn, facilitates misleading *anti*-populist diagnoses that pluralism can only be ensured by a return to the “normal” politics that populism challenges.<sup>32</sup> In sum, while populists can threaten pluralism, the inverse proposition does not follow: anti-populism does not ensure it, as climate justice advocates make clear.

When we begin by recognizing populism’s own critique of marginalization, we can see that the ascription of a uniquely exclusionary conception of the people to populism often reflects a nostalgic political imaginary that fails to recognize its own exclusions.<sup>33</sup> In this mainstream imaginary, objective scientific findings about climate change should shape public opinion and direct the formulation of climate policy by technocratic experts, to the benefit of all. I now turn to this rationalistic and consensus-based imaginary, which “underlies current global efforts to respond to climate change.”<sup>34</sup>

### “We Are All in This Together”: Elite Representations of Climate Change Action

In his opening remarks to the COP25 climate change conference in Madrid, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres made hard-hitting statements about dire threats from climate change and the need for decisive action to slow it. In his call for world leaders to pursue this work, he sought to foster a sense of unity: “We are all in this together,” he asserted.<sup>35</sup> Here, the Secretary-General’s rhetoric resonates with much of mainstream climate advocacy and policymaking, which frequently claims to speak and act on behalf of the interests of the undifferentiated, homogeneous “people” in attempting to advance policy objectives.

If we imagine that “we are all in this together,” then the policy objectives to be pursued would seem to be consensual, not political. These ends could then be achieved

---

31. Antonio Roman-Alcalá, Garrett Graddy-Lovelace, and Marc Edelman, “Authoritarian Populism and Emancipatory Politics in the Rural United States,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 82 (2021): 500–504.

32. E.g., Matthew Yglesias, “Biden’s Fight To Return Us To Normalcy,” *The New York Times*, (January 23, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/20/opinion/joe-biden-presidency.html>.

33. Moffitt, “The Trouble with Anti-Populism”; Yannis Stavrakakis et al., “Populism, Anti-Populism and Crisis,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 17 (2018): 4–27.

34. John S Dryzek, Richard B. Norgaard, and David Schlosberg, *Climate-Challenged Society* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.

35. António Guterres, “UN Secretary-General’s Remarks at Opening Ceremony of UN Climate Change Conference COP25” (COP25, Madrid, December 2, 2019), <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/UN%20Secretary-General%27s%20remarks%20at%20opening%20ceremony%20of%20UN%20Climate%20Change%20Conference%20COP25.pdf>.

by technocratic means, focused on managing overall CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the most efficient manner possible. Climate justice scholar Michael Méndez labels this approach “carbon reductionism.”<sup>36</sup> Carbon reductionism has been the dominant discourse of western political elites and mainstream environmental NGOs. It emphasizes “reaching consensus and adhering to scientific and technical-driven tools and goals that meant that politics—understood as antagonistic disagreement—was actively marginalized.”<sup>37</sup> For several decades, market-based mechanisms—cap-and-trade schemes, carbon taxes, carbon offsets—have been the central tools proposed and utilized.<sup>38</sup>

Erik Swyngedouw has been a prominent critic of this technocratic, market-focused, carbon reductionism. He draws valuable attention to how the claim that “we are all in this together” denies the significance of political subjectivity, thereby occluding the inherently political character of climate advocacy and policymaking.<sup>39</sup> This homogenized “humanity as a whole” serves to flatten and erase divergent voices, experiences, and vulnerabilities.<sup>40</sup>

Yet Swyngedouw labels this carbon reductionist approach “environmental populism,” and describes it as “inherently reactionary.”<sup>41</sup> Given accounts of populism as rooted in homogeneous conceptions of “the people,” Swyngedouw’s label might appear to make a certain amount of sense. It is the claim of elites to be speaking in the name of an undifferentiated “people” that leads Swyngedouw to characterize carbon reductionism as populist. Here it is mainstream climate advocates, rather than skeptics or denialists, that are cast as promoters of this populism. Elites, he argues, “have not only acknowledged the climate conundrum and, thereby, answered the call of the “people” to take the climate seriously . . . it also mobilizes [these demands] in ways that serve their purposes.”<sup>42</sup> His aim is to reject both

---

36. Michael Méndez, *Climate Change from the Streets: How Conflict and Collaboration Strengthen the Environmental Justice Movement* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 17–30.

37. Kai Bosworth, “Climate Populism & Its Limits,” *Progressive International* (April 12, 2020), <https://progressive.international/blueprint/b0e56b61-d2b9-4f97-8e2e-a2e9f3edef50-kai-bosworth-climate-populism-its-limits/en>; and Invernizzi Accetti, “Repoliticizing Environmentalism,” 7–10.

38. Leah C. Stokes and Matto Mildenerger, “The Trouble with Carbon Pricing,” *Boston Review* (September 24, 2020), <https://bostonreview.net/articles/leah-c-stokes-matto-mildenerger-tk/>.

39. Erik Swyngedouw, “Apocalypse Forever? Post-Political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 27 (2010): 213–32; and Erik Swyngedouw, “Depoliticized Environments: The End of Nature, Climate Change and the Post-Political Condition,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 69 (2011): 253–74.

40. Swyngedouw, “Apocalypse Forever?,” 221.

41. *Ibid.*, 223.

42. *Ibid.*, 223–24.

for their displacement of that which is distinctively political with “technocratic management and consensual policy-making.”<sup>43</sup>

While elements of his criticism are pointed and insightful, Swyngedouw’s account of populism is misleading. By equating it with homogeneity, he argues that “populism cuts across the idiosyncrasies of different, heterogeneously constituted, differentially acting, and often antagonistic human and non-human ‘natures’; it silences ideological and other constitutive social differences and disavows conflicts of interests by distilling a common threat or challenge to both Nature and Humanity.”<sup>44</sup> Yet as we have seen, homogeneity is not a necessary condition of populism. It therefore cannot be a sufficient condition to qualify as populist.

Those that Swyngedouw identifies as making claims on behalf of “the people” are themselves widely recognized as elites: UN leaders and representatives of nation-states in international climate negotiations, leaders of well-financed, mainstream climate and environmental NGOs in the global North, corporate CEOs, and so forth. His normative conflation of these elites with populism muddies already clouded definitional waters. While the discourse he highlights certainly does claim to speak on behalf of the interests of an undifferentiated humanity who are “in it together,” the invocation of “the people” is not sufficient to conceptualize it as populist. Instead, this is a discourse that denies the conflictual core that Mansbridge and Macedo identified in populism: “pitting the people in a moral battle against elites.” To the contrary, what is highlighted by Swyngedouw is an avowedly consensual technocratic discourse: elite claims to act on behalf of the universal and undifferentiated interests of all—a “people” with no outsiders—enabling these elites to claim to represent even those most marginalized.<sup>45</sup>

In sum, Swyngedouw offers insight into the still-dominant approach to climate change policymaking, which suppresses difference. Rather than identifying an “environmental populism,” however, the approach he delineates—proclaiming its legitimacy based upon consensus, technocratic expertise, and an ability to minimize political conflict—is the very antithesis of populism, whether understood as right-wing opposition to climate policy, or rooted in the heterogeneous movement for climate justice to be discussed next.

---

43. *Ibid.*, 214.

44. *Ibid.*, 221.

45. The discourse Swyngedouw describes reflects a paternalism that can be productively contrasted to populism; see Meyer, “Populism, Paternalism, and the State of Environmentalism in the U.S.”

## Climate Justice Organizes a Heterogeneous People Against Elite Representations

Where, then, might we look for resistance to this elite representation of undifferentiated interests in climate policy and action? Climate justice (CJ) movements can be a fertile source of insight. CJ movements and scholarship have drawn a sharp distinction between policy and action that targets the reduction of carbon emissions abstracted from everyday life, and action that centers attention on the differential distributional effects, co-benefits (i.e., improved public health, livelihood, and quality of life), and the localized effects of co-pollutants (i.e., toxins that accompany greenhouse gas emissions, causing health and environmental harms).<sup>46</sup> These movements build upon the science of climate change, but radically broaden the understanding of what sorts of expert knowledge are relevant and where one can find these experts. In doing so, they tease apart experts from elites.<sup>47</sup> In discussing strategies and ideas of CJ movements, my aim is not to present new empirical findings, but to illustrate a distinctive conception of “the people” that is integral to them. This becomes the basis for an equally distinctive critique of elite “false solutions” to the climate crisis.

Language of “the people” is integral to CJ organizing. Overlapping platforms and initiatives include “The People’s Demands for Climate Justice,” the “International People’s Platform for Climate Justice,” “The People’s Summit for Climate Justice,” and the “People’s Solution Lens” for evaluating policy proposals at the COP27.<sup>48</sup> An earlier example was the 2014 “People’s Climate March,” the largest and most diverse climate mobilization to that point, with marches in 156 countries and headlines around the globe.<sup>49</sup>

---

46. Patrick Bond and Michael K Dorsey, “Anatomies of Environmental Knowledge & Resistance: Diverse Climate Justice Movements and Waning Eco-Neoliberalism,” *Journal of Australian Political Economy* 66 (2010): 286–316.

47. For extended discussion of this distinction, see: John M Meyer, “Power and Truth in Science-Related Populism: Rethinking the Role of Knowledge and Expertise in Climate Politics,” *Political Studies* (2023): 1–17.

48. “The People’s Demands for Climate Justice,” The People’s Demands for Climate Justice (accessed January 21, 2022), <https://www.peoplesdemands.org>; “About IPCJ,” International People’s Platform for Climate Justice (accessed May 27, 2022), <https://ourclimateimpact.org/about-ipcj/>; “COP27 - UN Climate Change Conference 2022 - Climate Justice Alliance” (accessed May 27, 2022), <https://climatejusticealliance.org/cop27/>; and “Events - COP26 Coalition” (accessed May 27, 2022), <https://cop26coalition.org/peoples-summit/>.

49. “Climate Change Summit: Global Rallies Demand Action,” *BBC News* (September 21, 2014), <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-29301969>; and Lisa W. Foderaro, “Taking a Call for Climate Change to the Streets,” *The New York Times* (September 21, 2014), <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/nyregion/new-york-city-climate-change-march.html>.

Discussions of climate justice have grown rapidly and the term has come to be used in a variety of contexts. I focus on movements grounded in intersectional organizing and informed by a gender lens that leads them to center the importance of care and support for social reproduction.<sup>50</sup> Such movements are often led by people in frontline communities most affected by the impact of climate change: in poorer countries at the periphery of the world economy, where climate change is also disrupting lives and livelihoods, and marginalized communities within affluent countries like the US, where the connections with environmental justice organizing have been strong. As Priya Chandrasekaran argues with respect to immigrant farmworker communities in the US, “because the deleterious effects of neoliberalism have profoundly exacerbated place-based harms and endangered land, water, air, homes, communities and human and nonhuman life, ‘environment’ and ‘climate’ provide a means for expressing a collective ‘people’ in ways that aren’t constricted by identity, but nonetheless express it.”<sup>51</sup> CJ organizing has been highly visible both inside and outside of international climate negotiations for more than a decade.<sup>52</sup>

This CJ movement—rooted in concerns for environmental justice and arguing for systemic change—is distinct from both the work of elite Northern NGOs that have adopted the language of CJ and from the applied philosophical literature on climate justice that often leans toward a cosmopolitan conception. While there is overlap, the animating principles of these movements are not the same.<sup>53</sup>

Evaluating which stories can best be told through the language of the people, Kai Bosworth examines debates about the 2014 global climate march. Building upon the concurrent publication of Naomi Klein’s book *This Changes Everything*, Bosworth notes that “the march featured the slogan ‘To Change Everything, We Need Everyone.’ Like Klein’s book, the march’s themes were explicitly populist: it attempted to stitch together . . . diverse and perhaps contradictory subject positions under the name of ‘the people.’”<sup>54</sup> This was an explicit contrast with elite-driven technocratic approaches. “The people,” here “stood symbolically for . . . a vision

---

50. Sultana, “Critical Climate Justice.”

51. Chandrasekaran, “Remaking ‘the People,’” 604.

52. Jen Allan, *The New Climate Activism: NGO Authority and Participation in Climate Change Governance* (Toronto, CAN: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 95–120.

53. David Schlosberg and Lisette B. Collins, “From Environmental to Climate Justice: Climate Change and the Discourse of Environmental Justice,” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 5 (2014): 359–74; on these differences, see Di Chiro, “Care Not Growth.”

54. Kai Bosworth, “The People’s Climate March: Environmental Populism as Political Genre,” *Political Geography* 83 (2020): 5–6; and Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 10, 117.

of a mass movement of unity-in-difference.”<sup>55</sup> Bosworth documents a multidimensional debate among organizers and activists about how inclusive, representative, and “popular” the march was and should be, and along which dimensions. Yet it is clear that the march both invoked an inclusive vision of the people and that the actual participants were far more heterogeneous in general and multiracial in particular than previous climate mobilizations. Thus, while it did not—and I argue below, could not—*resolve* tensions that Bosworth surveys and that are inherent in an inclusive conception of the people, it created a platform on which pluralism was manifest and tensions were confronted and debated.

### “False Solutions”

One of the most consistent arguments made by CJ organizers is that “market-based mechanisms and technological ‘fixes’ currently being promoted by multinational corporations are false solutions and are exacerbating the problem.”<sup>56</sup> For example, Ameer Raval of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network summarized the findings of two reports by arguing that “the reality is cap and trade is really letting California’s business polluters off the hook, concentrating pollution in working class communities of color and undermining the credibility of our climate policy.”<sup>57</sup>

This charge of “false solutions” also has been applied to the widespread development of target dates for “net zero” carbon emissions (not to be confused with actual zero-emissions targets). Net zero, they argue, “is used by the world’s biggest polluters and governments as a façade to evade responsibility and disguise their inaction or harmful action on climate change.”<sup>58</sup> The arguments highlight particularistic impacts of climate change and in doing so they both critique the ostensive universalism of carbon reductionist arguments and advance a more inclusive vision of the people.

CJ organizers argue that these solutions are false for several reasons: because they fail to attend to the disproportionate negative impacts that co-pollutants can have on poor and marginalized communities; because their policies fail to resonate

---

55. Bosworth, “The People’s Climate March,” 7.

56. International Climate Justice Network, “Bali Principles of Climate Justice” (August 28, 2002), <https://www.corpwatch.org/article/bali-principles-climate-justice>.

57. Kristoffer Tigue, “Why Do Environmental Justice Advocates Oppose Carbon Markets? Look at California, They Say,” *Inside Climate News* (February 25, 2022), <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/25022022/why-do-environmental-justice-advocates-oppose-carbon-markets-look-at-california-they-say/>.

58. ActionAid International, “Not Zero: How ‘net Zero’ Targets Disguise Climate Inaction,” Joint technical briefing by climate justice organizations (October 2020), <https://actionaid.org/publications/2020/not-zero-how-net-zero-targets-disguise-climate-inaction>.

deeply among a broad intersectional coalition needed to mobilize action for change; and finally—using the slogan “system change not climate change”—because by privileging efforts to maintain elite consensus, these approaches fail to grapple with the central role of elite domination.<sup>59</sup>

### *Organizing “The People” for Climate Justice*

To interpret climate justice through a populist lens, I briefly draw from analyses of three prominent struggles in opposition to fossil fuel pipelines in North America. These campaigns—against Keystone XL and the Dakota Access Pipeline in the US and the Northern Gateway in Canada—illustrate possibilities and tensions in this form of organizing. These pipeline protests revitalized and transformed the North American climate movement in the 2010s, at a time when it appeared to many to have reached a dead-end, with policy failures in both the domestic and international arenas. “As these emerging anti-pipeline sentiments coalesced into organized opposition, mainstream climate activists began to see this movement as ‘more capable of keeping carbon in the ground than lobbying efforts,’” Bosworth concluded.<sup>60</sup> Thus, “rather than appeal to the power of policymakers, ‘the people’ was taken to be the principle subject capable of enacting democracy and defending the land.”<sup>61</sup>

These protests have brought together Indigenous nations, residents of predominantly white rural communities in the pipelines’ path, and environmental activists into movements “oriented around the protection of regional ecosystems—and the communities dependent on them” from outside elites.<sup>62</sup> This has coalesced in a place-based populist storyline, though the consequence of resisting extraction and keeping fossil fuels in the ground is of global climate significance. The concerns center on connections to land and water, and the need to center attention on the needs of social reproduction and care.<sup>63</sup> This stands in contrast to the nationalist and extractivist storyline fostered by pipeline proponents.<sup>64</sup>

---

59. Allan, *The New Climate Activism*, 95–97.

60. Kai Bosworth, “The People Know Best: Situating the Counterexpertise of Populist Pipeline Opposition Movements,” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 109 (2019): 581–92, at 585.

61. *Ibid.*, 586.

62. Robert Neubauer and Shane Gunster, “Enemies at the Gateway: Regional Populist Discourse and the Fight Against Oil Pipelines on Canada’s West Coast,” *Frontiers in Communication* 4 (2019): 1–14, at 2.

63. Alyssa Battistoni, “Ways of Making a Living: Revaluing the Work of Social and Ecological Reproduction,” *Socialist Register* 56 (2020): 182–98; and Giovanna Di Chiro, “Living Environmentalisms: Coalition Politics, Social Reproduction, and Environmental Justice,” *Environmental Politics* 17 (2008): 276–98.

64. Neubauer and Gunster, “Enemies at the Gateway.”

Populist pipeline alliances have nonetheless often remained tenuous and instrumental. As Robert Neubauer and Shane Gunster conclude regarding the campaign against the Northern Gateway project, “if settler communities and environmentalists are to grow their alliance with some Indigenous communities into a broader counterhegemonic challenge to Canadian extractivism, they will have to seriously consider how to constitute a meaningful politics of Indigenous reconciliation that goes beyond short-term alliances against specific projects.”<sup>65</sup> The mobilization against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) at Standing Rock offers promise. Native leader Mechelle Sky Walker argues that the role of tribal nations in the battle over DAPL was “totally different” than in other pipeline struggles. “Standing Rock was fully Native-based. It was one tribe standing up to an oil company, and they asked for help.”<sup>66</sup> Here, whiteness is decentered; multiracial participation was the result of organizing within an Indigenous-led movement.

### *Multiracial Populism and the “Solidarity Dividend”*

A compelling vision of a heterogeneous people bridging divides rooted in Indigeneity, race, class, and gender requires a focus on their everyday concerns and drawing out connections to a shared obstacle or struggle. Heather McGhee has been working to advance this vision as one that unites “everyone who struggles, everyone who feels shut out of power.” Tying this to climate change, she argues that “white identity politics is being used to promote climate denialism. With multiracial populism, we can fight it.” This multiracial populism is “a politics that tells a very clear story about the concentration of wealth and power, but also talks about how those at the top use racism to divide working people from people who actually share their common interests across lines of race.”<sup>67</sup> This challenges a dominant “zero-sum” narrative about racial privilege, by demonstrating “the costs of white supremacy to our entire society.”<sup>68</sup> By failing to overcome this narrative, she argues

---

65. Cf., Kai Bosworth, *Pipeline Populism: Grassroots Environmentalism in the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 73; and Robert Neubauer and Shane Gunster, “Enemies at the Gateway,” 12.

66. Kate Aronoff, “The Unlikely Alliance That Could Stop Keystone and Transform the Democratic Party,” *In These Times* (September 26, 2017), <https://inthesetimes.com/article/pipeline-populism-keystone-xl-dapl-standing-rock-democratic-party>; and Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London, UK: Verso, 2019), 25–65.

67. Johnathan Guy, “Multiracial Populism Will Deliver Climate Justice: An Interview with Heather McGhee,” *The Trouble* (August 6, 2019), <https://www.the-trouble.com/content/2019/8/6/multiracial-populism-will-deliver-climate-justice-an-interview-with-heather-mcgee>.

68. Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (New York, NY: One World, 2021), xx.



that climate activists often neglect “the biggest untapped base . . . for organizing,” in minoritized communities.<sup>69</sup> Pursuing this multiracial organizing can help societies achieve a “Solidarity Dividend.”<sup>70</sup> This point is crucial. By taking it seriously, we can conclude that this intersectional approach is not only normatively compelling; it is strategically invaluable.

McGhee highlights the Green New Deal framework as an example of a multi-racial alliance that pursues this dividend.<sup>71</sup> Organizing by the youth-based, multi-racial Sunrise Movement on behalf of a Green New Deal in the US—and similar initiatives elsewhere—offers a clear contrast with carbon reductionist approaches. When such initiatives center the meeting of human needs and care, they advance climate justice by fostering multiracial populism.<sup>72</sup>

To some, the Green New Deal might seem to have appeared from nowhere in late 2018 when Sunrise Movement activists organized a protest on Capitol Hill, and in early 2019 when Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey introduced a Congressional resolution advancing this framework for integrating climate, economic, and social policy. Yet a Green New Deal had been discussed on both the center and the left since the early 2000s, while gaining little traction.<sup>73</sup>

What changed? The growing visibility of climate justice organizing is an important part of the answer. By critiquing carbon reductionism and the elite formations promoting this dominant approach; by highlighting the intersections of climate change across racial and class constituencies not often identified with “environmentalism”; and by demonstrating the many ways in which injustices, co-benefits, and localized harms mean that climate policy cannot be pursued in abstraction from social and economic consequences, this organizing fundamentally altered perceptions of what counts as—and who counts in—climate policy and politics. Of course, the agenda remains unrealized, though pared-down elements informed the so-called Inflation Reduction Act passed in 2022. The broader agenda faces both external obstacles and important internal tensions and critiques.<sup>74</sup> Yet it is

---

69. *Ibid.*, 199.

70. *Ibid.*, 216.

71. *Ibid.*, 217–18.

72. Battistoni, “Ways of Making a Living”; and Sherilyn MacGregor and Maeve Cohen, “It’s Time to Talk about a Feminist Green New Deal,” *openDemocracy* (May 20, 2020), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/its-time-to-talk-about-a-feminist-green-new-deal/>.

73. Kaufman, “What’s the ‘Green New Deal’?”; Patel and Goodman, “The Long New Deal”; and Friedman, “The Power of Green.”

74. On internal tensions, see Jasper Bernes, “Between the Devil and the Green New Deal,” *Commune*, (April 25, 2019), <https://communemag.com/between-the-devil-and-the-green-new-deal/>; Nick Estes “A Red Deal,” *Jacobin* (August 6, 2019), <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/08>

now a highly visible example of an effort to build a heterogeneous people motivated to act in response to climate breakdown: a climate populism.

### Navigating Tensions Within a Heterogeneous People

#### *On the Provincial and the Universal*

Climate justice organizing builds upon a heterogeneous conception of the people. While such movement-based organizing offers a very different conceptualization of the people than those who characterize populism as exclusionary, in anti-pipeline organizing and in competing plans for a Green New Deal, we have nonetheless seen that it cannot escape tensions within its alliances and visions. Here, Simon Tormey offers a generative way of thinking about populism, characterizing it as “democracy’s *Pharmakon*.”<sup>75</sup> Drawing inspiration from Jacques Derrida’s reading of Plato, he argues that populism embodies contradictory and contingent possibilities as *both* a remedy and a poison for what ails liberal democratic societies.<sup>76</sup> For the *Pharmakon*, as for populism, everything depended upon the “dosage, context, the receptivity of the body to the toxin . . . good outcomes as well as bad were fully acknowledged in its use.”<sup>77</sup>

To imagine action to address climate justice in populist terms requires facing up to both the poison and the potential remedy in this destabilization of political representations and questioning of institutional legitimacy. In this final section, I turn to theorists of populism who explore political formations that overtly support an inclusive conception of the people to help make sense of and navigate tensions that reflect populism as *Pharmakon*.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the most prominent theorists of an avowedly inclusive left populism in recent decades, have described the appeal to “the people” as an “empty signifier” that is given substance only via the aggregation of democratic demands from differing groups into a “chain of equivalence” that might ultimately become a “new hegemony.”<sup>78</sup> More recently, Mouffe has also argued that

---

/red-deal-green-new-deal-ecosocialism-decolonization-indigenous-resistance-environment; and Thea Riofrancos “Plan, Mood, Battlefield - Reflections on the Green New Deal,” *Viewpoint Magazine* (May 16, 2019), <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2019/05/16/plan-mood-battlefield-reflections-on-the-green-new-deal/>.

75. Simon Tormey, “Populism: Democracy’s *Pharmakon*,” *Policy Studies* 39 (2018): 260–73.

76. Cf., Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 70.

77. Tormey, “Populism,” 261.

78. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London, UK: Verso, 2005); and Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London, UK: Verso Books, 2018), 24.

“Green Democratic Revolution” is a populist framework connecting “the manifold democratic struggles against different forms of domination, exploitation, and discrimination with the defence of the habitability of the planet.”<sup>79</sup>

Yet even with this attention to inclusion and difference, populist conceptions can serve to exclude. As Laura Grattan has noted, such movements can evince a “temptation to erase divisions for the sake of “standing together” behind a common cause.”<sup>80</sup> This threat to heterogeneity is less explicit and violent than the forms of exclusion manifest by right-wing, authoritarian populists, but it must nonetheless be confronted.

Benjamin McKean offers a convincing analysis of a means by which exclusion can be embedded in even avowedly inclusive populist projects. Focusing on Laclau, McKean notes that his inclusion of groups and democratic demands in the construction of “the people” falters when it comes to racialized groups, immigrants, and others whose difference is naturalized in the polity and whose democratic demands therefore can’t readily be assimilated within his framework.<sup>81</sup> Laclau regards equality as ultimately homogeneous; the result is that “the insistence on the part of oppressed groups that they be regarded as different and equal stands as an affront to populist political logic; it smacks of *special pleading*.”<sup>82</sup> As a result, McKean argues convincingly for the need to envision a more truly inclusive populism in which “difference and equality can be thought together and ‘the people’ can be represented without rendering them homogenous.”<sup>83</sup>

A contemporary analogy to Laclau’s position, here, can be found in the retort to Black Lives Matter activists that their rallying cry is also something like “special pleading.” McKean’s critique echoes the argument that it is the ostensibly universal claim (“all lives matter”) that is in fact exclusionary in its refusal to acknowledge the

---

79. Chantal Mouffe, *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution: Left Populism and the Power of Affects* (London, UK: Verso Books, 2022), 65.

80. Laura Grattan, “Lessons from the Margins of Populist History,” *Boston Review* (April 21, 2020), <http://bostonreview.net/forum/reclaiming-populism/laura-grattan-lessons-margins-populist-history>; Laura Grattan, “Populism, Race, and Radical Imagination: #FeelingTheBern in the Age of #BlackLivesMatter,” in *Populism in Global Perspective: A Performative and Discursive Approach*, ed. Benjamin Moffitt, Pierre Ostiguy, and Francisco Panizza (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021); cf., Akwugo Emejulu, “Feminism for the 99%: Towards a Populist Feminism?,” *Soundings* 66 (2017): 63–67.

81. Benjamin L. McKean, “Toward an Inclusive Populism? On the Role of Race and Difference in Laclau’s Politics,” *Political Theory* 44 (2016): 805–8.

82. *Ibid.*, 813, emphasis added.

83. *Ibid.*, 816. In her 2018 book, Mouffe explicitly affirms that she “will follow the analytical approach developed by Ernesto Laclau that I find particularly fruitful,” making clear that this critique also applies to her recent work. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 10.

distinctive violence perpetrated against Black lives. By contrast, the superficially particularistic claim that Black lives matter is a demand for an end to this violence so that these lives, too, are fully recognized as “mattering” and thereby included in the universal. Similarly, when CJ movements focus attention on particularized harms and place-based co-benefits, they pull back the curtain of ostensive universalism from the carbon reductionist policy framework.

Erin Pineda faults many studies of populism for “mistaking the provincial for the universal” in just this way, arguing that they study *white* populism and call it populism.<sup>84</sup> She argues for rethinking the US civil rights movement as a populist moment, drawing from civil rights organizer Fannie Lou Hamer who famously declared “Nobody’s free until everyone’s free.” In this formulation, Pineda argues convincingly, “the civil rights movement offers a different lesson: populist politics *must* center the needs and voices of those most marginalized by racism and capitalism; and convincing white Americans of their stake in this work is the product of organizing, not its precondition.”<sup>85</sup> Cases like the Indigenous-led movement to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline bring this account of the “product of organizing” to the forefront of contemporary efforts, to a degree that other pipeline protests have not. Still, the question remains how organizing might cultivate the spaces within which these tensions might be productively negotiated.

### *Cultivating a “Movement Culture” Through New Institutions and Practices*

Strategic goals might be formulated and realized by cultivating opportunities for participants to think and see their challenges in fresh ways. Laura Grattan’s account of “aspirational democratic populism” centers “affinities for grassroots politics, which cultivate more robust institutions and practices for enacting popular power.”<sup>86</sup> This focus on institutions and practices opens spaces for fresh thinking and stands in contrast with Laclau’s approach that focuses upon the assembly of preferences into a “symbolic resistance.”<sup>87</sup> The difference in emphasis here can be conceptualized in terms of a widely noted distinction between activism and organizing.<sup>88</sup> While activists are characterized by self-expression, organizers focus on movement-building

---

84. Erin R. Pineda, “Another Populism,” *Boston Review* (April 27, 2020), <http://bostonreview.net/forum/reclaiming-populism/erin-r-pineda-another-populism>.

85. *Ibid.*

86. Grattan, *Populism’s Power*, 28.

87. *Ibid.*

88. Astra Taylor, “Against Activism,” *The Baffler* (March 8, 2016), <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/against-activism>.

and therefore on cultivating spaces for changing perceptions and expressions. The cultivation of these institutions and practices is, following Pineda, the *product* of organizing rather than the precondition. It is this organizing that has been integral to the vision of climate justice movements, which have cultivated new imaginaries, a new clarity about the false promise of dominant climate policy agendas, and new alliances and participants who would not otherwise see themselves as integral to the climate movement.

Aspirational democratic populism builds upon different threads of populist argument and history than either that of Laclau and Mouffe or that of right-wing exclusion. It has roots in the nineteenth-century US populist movement that lends its name—but all-too-often little else—to contemporary discussions. One of the pre-eminent historians of this populism, Lawrence Goodwyn, describes their distinctive achievement as creating a “movement culture” that developed a new political imaginary and thereby enabled its members to envision possibilities for change. This was achieved through experiments in building cooperative institutions, under the umbrella of Farmers’ Alliances, that created alternative forms of support for everyday life and thereby cultivated new “perception[s] of social possibility” that enabled political struggle.<sup>89</sup> Jason Frank has convincingly emphasized that these “institutional improvisations and formative praxis” are among populism’s “most important resources for democratic theorizing” and a key example of prefigurative politics.<sup>90</sup>

We can find these goals being pursued through what Farhana Sultana terms the climate justice movement’s “solidarity praxis.”<sup>91</sup> Such praxis focuses upon organizing to address the everyday needs and concerns of their members, with a goal of cultivating solidarity, education, and the ability to envision new possibilities.<sup>92</sup> In discussing a vision of the Green New Deal rooted in a politics of care, Alyssa Battistoni argues that this project can allow “workers performing the work of social and ecological reproduction, whether for wages or not . . . [to] form part of the political force for left climate programs.”<sup>93</sup> Pursuing this project can enable new alliances and motivate new bases of support for climate justice agendas.

---

89. Goodwyn, “Organizing Democracy: The Limits of Theory and Practice,” 49–50.

90. Farhana Sultana, “Populism and Praxis,” 629, 634, 639; cf., Patel and Goodman, “The Long New Deal,” 438.

91. Sultana, “Critical Climate Justice.”

92. Harry C. Boyte, “Introduction: Reclaiming Populism as a Different Kind of Politics,” *The Good Society* 21 (2012): 173–76, 173; and Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*.

93. Battistoni, “Ways of Making a Living,” 193.

## Conclusion

My aim has been to learn from climate justice organizing as an emergent foundation upon which to envision and theorize an inclusive climate populism, one that mobilizes the people in a struggle against both climate-destructive elites and elite-driven “solutions.” Climate populism builds up from the needs and voices of those most marginalized, in contrast to a populism that is handed down from charismatic leaders aiming to mobilize a people in their name.

It may seem tempting to suggest that the tensions embedded in even the most inclusive and intersectional conceptions “the people” is an argument for rejecting all populist political imaginaries. Yet we don’t escape tensions simply by ignoring them; they are key to movements that aim to build coalitions and political power. Importantly, there are resources within populist movement-building and theorizing that can provide support in navigating them.

In sum, a populist framework in which a heterogeneous people challenge elite policies and priorities provides a promising alternative to what has long ailed climate politics. Rejecting the “carbon reductionism” of market-based and technocratic policies, it fosters an approach that engages people where they are at.<sup>94</sup> Understood as an inclusive and therefore multiracial movement that centers the experiences of marginalized and frontline communities, it facilitates thinking and arguing about equality and difference together. Cultivating institutions and ways of experiencing everyday life via projects like a Green New Deal, it fosters new alliances, new forms of political engagement, and thereby new political imaginaries.

Tensions between the quest for a politics of the commons, on the one hand, and the forms of marginalization that calls for unity can generate, on the other, are deeply rooted. These often come to the fore as a struggle between what is imagined by some as “popular,” and the more transgressive visions advanced by others. Grattan describes taking place among movement supporters of the Sanders campaign and Bosworth examines it among the organizers and activists debating the meaning of the “People’s Climate March.”<sup>95</sup> Yet I argue that these inherent tensions can be productive if and when the quest for the common and the recognition of the need to overcome marginalization are pursued *together*. They are destructive when the appeal to commonality reinforces marginalization *or* when the need to recognize the latter leads to the abandonment of a quest for the former. While climate populism cannot escape tensions inherent in any appeal to “the people,” it can better position those involved to recognize, confront, and negotiate these.

---

94. Cf., Goodwyn, “Organizing Democracy: The Limits of Theory and Practice,” 50.

95. Bosworth, “The People’s Climate March”; and Grattan, “Populism in Global Perspective.”

The dangers of a homogeneous conception of “the people” are real, whether they emanate from the disturbing visions of authoritarian populists or from the false universalism of mainstream climate action proponents. But in recognizing this, we must specify these dangers clearly enough to be able to embrace other manifestations of populist frames in climate change action. If populism is democracy’s *Pharmakon*, then for the sake of democracy as well as the hope to meaningfully mitigate and adapt to climate crisis, it is vital to get the dosage and receptivity right.

**John M. Meyer** is Professor of Politics at Cal Poly Humboldt, on California’s North Coast, where he also serves in interdisciplinary programs on Environmental Studies and Environment & Community. Meyer is the author of the award-winning *Engaging the Everyday: Environmental Social Criticism and the Resonance Dilemma* (MIT, 2015) and co-editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory* (Oxford, 2016). From 2020–23, he served as editor-in-chief of the international journal, *Environmental Politics*. He can be reached at [john.meyer@humboldt.edu](mailto:john.meyer@humboldt.edu).