

## Mediatized Populisms: Inter-Asian Lineages

### *Introduction*

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This essay offers an explanation for the rise of contemporary “mediatized populisms.” Disaggregating the idea of a singular media logic of populist politics, we examine the institutional and political-economic dynamics of mediatization and the variegated structures of mediated political fields in which contemporary populist political formations are embedded. Moving away from broad “global populism” approaches as well as case studies from Europe and the Americas that have thus far dominated discussions of populism, we make the case for empirically grounded comparative studies of populism from the particular standpoint of regional contexts across Asia that offer theoretical insights often missed in prevailing “technology-first” and election-focused approaches. We then outline three distinctive features of media-politics relations (and their transformations) that have enabled the contemporary rise of mediatized populism across the Inter-Asian region.

*Keywords: populism, mediatization, Inter-Asian, comparative politics, political economy*

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There has been a surge of scholarly and journalistic writing on media and populism of late. In past decades, scholarly interest in this topic was largely confined to specific world regions, primarily Latin America, or Western Europe for the specific subset of right-wing populism. However, in the aftermath of a series of electoral victories by populist political leaders and parties ranging from Donald Trump in the United States to Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, a new genre of literature on mediatized populism as a global phenomenon, a *zeitgeist* or world spirit of our times whose rise has been enabled by and through media, has gained considerable public traction.<sup>2</sup>

Scholarship on media and populism that precedes the Brexit–Trump phenomena focused primarily on the European and, to a lesser degree, Latin American “pink tide” examples—covering the rise of new Right and new Left political forces that have emerged since the 1990s (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015b). In contrast to both the European and Latin American contexts, the mass-mediated spectacle of popular politics is a relatively new phenomenon across much of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, where it was only since the last decade of the 20th century that the government-monopolized propagandist architectures of television were replaced by commercial television news. In the intervening years, media—both old and new—have become privileged domains of politics for the first time. The series of essays in this Special Section consider what difference the relatively late arrival of mediatized politics in these regions makes to the logic of populism. The essays in our collection aim to unpack and disaggregate the idea of a singular media logic of populist politics and examine instead the institutional and political-economic dynamics of *mediatization*, and the variegated structures of *media fields*, in which contemporary forms of populist politics are embedded.

The first section reviews current analyses of global populism and makes a case for empirically grounded comparative studies that offer theoretical insights often missed in prevailing technology-first (i.e., “Facebook elected Donald Trump”) and election-focused approaches. The second section outlines what we argue are three distinctive features of media-politics relations (and their transformations) that have enabled the contemporary rise of mediatized populism across the Inter-Asian region. The final section provides a brief thematic overview and summaries of the eight articles in our collection.

### **Global Populism**

The current scholarly interest in the topic of populism reflects the familiar Eurocentric practice of granting world-historical significance and generalizability to a phenomenon only when it occurs in Europe and North America—hence, the “global age of populism” is pronounced to be upon us only after the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency in November 2016. But a significant portion of recent attention has also been focused on world regions such as the Middle East and Asia, where the rise in recent years of so-called populist strongmen such as Erdogan in Turkey, Modi in India, and Duterte in the Philippines has provided transregional and comparative empirical fodder for the global populism thesis (Coll, 2017; Moffitt, 2016; Peer, 2017).

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<sup>2</sup> Notable examples include Coll (2017), Judis (2016), Mishra (2017), and Peer (2017). The term *zeitgeist* was used by Cas Mudde (2004), who was in fact working on a global/comparative account well before the current Trump moment.

Although the “global” label encompasses a diverse range of regional contexts, the dominant explanations and descriptions of populism’s rise reference quite similar causal and enabling conditions whether in Hungary or Turkey, India or the United States. As even a cursory look at the recent popular and scholarly literature on the rise of populism will quickly reveal, a common figure of the angry, misinformed, and deluded voter is at the explanatory core of most discussions, singled out as the main reason for populism’s current surge across the globe (Calhoun, 2016; Mishra, 2017).

Four key presumptions anchor this line of analysis and ground the figure of the angry voter. The first and most prominent is the presumption of *democratic electoralism*. Contemporary populism is usually defined as an electoral political formation. For the most part, when we talk about the rise of global populism we mean the electoral victories of organized political parties in a formal democratic system (which may vary in its democratic substance and level of institutionalization). Regardless of the country under consideration, the contemporary public and scholarly imagination of populism is mostly preoccupied with the growing electoral popularity of particular political parties and leaders, and explaining the populist vote is usually the main analytical task (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; Moffit, 2016; Moffit & Tormey, 2014; Müller 2016).

Second, the electoral preoccupation of contemporary discussions means that they are also overwhelmingly *presentist*, or concerned with explaining an immediate (or relatively recent) outcome—that is, the most recent populist vote. The static freeze-frames on a particular populist vote cast the discussions in exceptionalist terms. The “populist problem” is approached as a deviant occurrence that stands outside the landscapes of democratic politics-as-usual. It is a sudden aberration or puzzle that needs to be explained (D’Eramo, 2017). Regina Lawrence and Amber Boydston’s (2017) recent observations about Donald Trump’s media coverage is a case in point:

Trump is the proverbial exception that proves the rule—or in this case, the informal rules that guide campaign coverage. In fact, we can think of Trump as a non-naturally occurring politician, akin to—bear with us here—what evolutionary biologists call a “supernormal stimulus.” (p. 150)

The third common presumption is *psychologism*. Contemporary discussions of mediatized populism inevitably place populism “on the couch” and reference some kind of internal psychic drive or emotion on the part of the individual voter or citizen as an explanatory mechanism, variously described as anger, resentment, *ressentiment*, or “prepolitical feelings.” Whether motivated by fear and fanaticism or empowered by desires for inclusion on the part of those excluded, these individual emotions are seen to scale up or aggregate to reproduce a collective version of the same psychodynamic that then yields a particular kind of political action, such as the act of voting for a populist political leader or party (Mishra, 2017; Ott, 2017; Papacharissi, 2015, 2016). Take, for example, journalist and writer Pankaj Mishra’s (2016) influential account of populism as an “age of anger.” His theory of the rise of global populism holds that those pushed aside by neoliberal economics are stirred to action by “dislike of one’s own self while stoking impotent hatred of others . . . [this] can quickly degenerate into an aggressive drive, whereby individuals feel acknowledged only by being preferred over others, and by rejoicing in their abjection” (para. 26).

Finally, most discussions of global populism advance a common thesis of *media mystification*. Reviving the “hypodermic syringe” accounts of powerful media effects that we thought had been discredited by empirical evidence to the contrary, these explanations for the rise of populism commonly reference the powers of media to persuade and ultimately distract or delude the voter from his or her “real” concerns.

With this narrative of the largely passive voter-as-media-consumer who is misled and duped by “fake news” and “media spin” to support populist parties, populism is put on the couch in a second sense. Within the field of media studies, this has been a primary area of focus with a disproportionate emphasis on the volume of media coverage of populist leaders like Trump (Azari, 2016), the misleading powers of “post-truth” social media that serve as “filter bubbles” (Benkler, Faris, Roberts, & Zuckerman, 2017), the gullibility of uninformed publics for “fake news” (Norris, 2017; Ott, 2017), and the dangers of polarized politics in the face of “passive and uncivil social media users” who are more likely to fall prey to extremism on the Right due to their exposure to Fox News or “Jihadi populism” on the Web (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Lapowski, 2015).

All these presumptions rest on rather fragile empirical ground. For instance, as even a cursory glance at the large corpus of work on “the age of anger” will show, the theses of psychologism and media manipulation are informed mostly by individual (albeit arresting and rich) anecdotes rather than sustained empirical evidence for how particular media-driven or psychological/emotional dynamics actually induce individuals to undertake the specific political action of voting for a populist political party. For example, neither Pankaj Mishra’s popular take on the angry working-class voters in the United Kingdom and the United States nor sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s (2016) account of Southern Tea Party supporters marshals much empirical evidence about the concrete institutional mechanisms that convert anger over economic exclusion into support for populist political movements and parties driven by racism and xenophobia.

Where empirical data are provided, they usually present a correlative rather than explanatory or causal picture. We get aggregate maps that associate particular kinds of voter emotions and “states of mind.” But even if supporters of populist parties can be located in areas where we can also locate particular knowledge deficits or “low information” (Schram & Fording, 2017) or social emotions such as anger and resentment, the explanatory mechanism of a theory of emotionally motivated or media-motivated political action is lacking. Why would resentful and angry voters bother to cast a vote? Why not opt out of politics altogether? Beyond correlation, what are the concrete causal mechanisms and pathways connecting fake news consumption and the voting decision and action? Such questions remain unanswered.

Moreover, the presentist and electoralist understanding of populism—as explanations of populisms are ultimately about the electoral successes of this or that populist political party—fails to engage a simple empirical fact. Populism does not fall from the sky. There is both a spatial and a temporal aspect to this statement. In spatial terms, populist politics are contextually specific and shaped by the variegated institutional fields that structure political democracy in different national and regional contexts. In temporal terms, populist electoral victories have antecedents as well as afterlives. There are lineages of populist politics that stretch before and beyond the immediate and presentist moment of elections. It is

located not just in the moment of the electoral exception but in the unremarkable and routinized rhythms of everyday, “normal” politics. As anthropologist Matt Wilde (2017) puts it, “in order to understand populism, we need to think about a lot more than populism” (para. 16).

This collection of essays is about the “lot more.” Shifting focus from the exceptional figure of the angry populist voter to the antecedents, afterlives, and grounds of the populist everyday, we draw attention to the historical lineages and political-institutional contexts of mediatized politics as enabling conditions for the contemporary rise of populism. If populism is a “thin-centered ideology” or worldview of political and social life as a Manichean moral combat between a unitary and pure people and a dissolute and corrupt elite/system (Arditi, 2007; Laclau, 2005; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Müller, 2016), then we need to understand how it both converges and conflicts with existing ideas of the people: the central subject of modern political thought and practice.

What ideas of the people have influenced and shaped projects of democratization, nation-building and citizenship, modernization, and economic growth in the context of neoliberalism and state violence, among others? How does contemporary populism engage with—build upon but also counter—these other kinds of people-making projects that precede and also coexist with populism’s current ascendance? How have media norms and institutional configurations of publics, audiences, markets, and communities shaped and enabled populism’s contemporary rise? These are the questions that inform this essay and the alternative conceptualization of populist politics that it aims to provide.

### ***Inter-Asian Contexts and Standpoints***

The essays that follow are part of a larger collaborative research project on the Inter-Asian contexts of (East and South) Asia and the Middle East/North Africa (MENA).<sup>3</sup> Although variations of ethnonationalist populist politics are a salient and growing force in these parts of the world, from Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines, across India and Pakistan, to Turkey and much of the MENA region, these world areas have mostly remained outside the dominant European and (North and South) American-centered theorizations of populism.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> We draw from the framework developed over a number of years by a network of scholars involved in the SSRC’s InterAsia Program, which reconceptualizes Asia as a dynamic and interconnected formation spanning Central Asia, East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East (including Turkey and Russia). Srirupa Roy, a coauthor of this essay, is a member of the SSRC InterAsia Program’s steering committee, and together with Paula Chakravartty, coordinates the InterAsia Program’s transregional virtual research institute on media, activism, and the new political.

<sup>4</sup> Scholars such as Cas Mudde (2004) and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012, 2014) have taken a comparative approach to the study of populism, but the comparison is mostly of Europe and Latin America. In general there is a paucity of work on populism across Asia and the Middle East. Exceptions include Moffitt and Tormey (2014) and Olle Törnquist (2000, 2006) on Southeast Asia. South Asianist scholarship on populism includes the work of Narendra Subramanian (1999), John Harriss (2001), and Francis Cody (2015), who have written on electoral populism in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, and, more

However, relocating the study of populism to these new regional contexts is not simply a matter of filling a knowledge gap by adding to a global series of regional populisms. Instead, as we argue below, approaching the politics of populism from Inter-Asia—framing populism as an Inter-Asia question and taking the empirical context of Inter-Asia as the specific point of analytical entry and departure—de-exceptionalizes contemporary populism and shows how it is closely interrelated and entwined with other (both older and contemporaneous) political practices and imaginaries of the people, including those that contemporary populism explicitly disavows and opposes.

For instance, when we track the evolution of the current political theme about a strong, unitary state that is so central to the antipluralist “strongman populism” of India’s Narendra Modi in 2017, we are quickly led to the *étatisme* of civic nationalist discourses about the people from an earlier era of Nehruvian modernity in India. Although the two are neither identical nor causally related, there are several dialogical resonances and affinities, and the burden of our explanatory story of contemporary populism must include these “family resemblances” as well.

In our work, Inter-Asia is figured as a comparative and transregional “standpoint” or perspective from which generalized theory building can proceed (Chen, 2010; Go, 2016; Punathambekar, Sabry, & Roy, 2014) rather than a fixed territorial location that, by scaling up nationally bounded area studies frameworks, only reproduces the pitfalls of “container thinking” at a wider transregional level. Space constraints prevent a detailed discussion of this issue, but an Inter-Asian standpoint on populism leads us away from exceptionalism and presentism and toward contextual and genealogical pathways due to the compressed political histories of nation-state formation alongside radical political economic shifts that marked these parts of the world in the second half of the 20th century (Chatterjee & Katznelson, 2012).

As demonstrated in the articles that follow, layered and dense political fields have resulted in which there is no singular and exceptional populism (or any other political ideology for that matter) that can stand apart as politically pure or altogether new. Instead, all political interventions are dialogic and ongoing processes that are refracted through other, older as well as current, political ideas and formations, and their analysis requires an appropriately wide-angle frame that takes these relations and entanglements into account. In short, Inter-Asia gives us a particular *embedded* view of populism and shifts our perspectives on media and politics as well.

### Lineages and Contexts

The dominant form in which populist politics manifests across Inter-Asian regional contexts today is that of “mediatized populism.” Esser and Strömbäck (2014) define mediatization as “a long-term process through which the importance of news media as an institution, and their spill-over effects on political processes and political institutions, has increased” (p. 22), and media institutions, technologies, practices, and affects are shaping the context and currency of political action and expression. The influence is mostly in a populist direction, with mediatized politics increasingly exhibiting the main

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recently, a special issue of *Television and New Media* edited by Chakravartty and Roy (2015a, 2015b) that focuses on the rise of Hindu majoritarian populism in India.

characteristics of *populist* political expression: namely (1) the tendency toward moralizing simplifications (binarisms; immediacy); (2) the proliferation of crisis/emergency rhetorics; (3) the resort to spectacularization (Moffitt, 2016; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014); and (4) the harnessing of emotional or affective repertoires, in particular those labeled as “anger,” which diverge from the deliberative and pedagogical norms of “cool-headed,” deliberative, and objective coverage that govern ideals of liberal democratic media (Fishkin & Laslett, 2008; Hallin & Mancini, 2011; Krämer, 2014; Roy, 2016).

This convergence is usually explained by structural rather than intentional or instrumental factors. For instance, in a widely cited account of mediatized populism, Gianpietro Mazzoleni has drawn attention to the intersection of media logics and populist logics, and shown how particular structural compulsions of commercial media extend and enable populist politics. For Mazzoleni (2008), drawing on the continental European context, there is unintentional “collusion between the goals of the [commercial] media and the political strategies of populists” (p. 63), whereby the media in profiting from the application of “emotional codes in public information” (p. 63) have diminished the quality of public deliberation and informed citizenship. Other scholars, such as Colin Sparks and John Tulloch (2000) in the United Kingdom and, more recently, Victor Pickard (2017) in the United States, have developed accounts of “news tabloidization” and its constitution of a new political sensibility that lends itself to a populist rendering.

In building on this emerging literature on the mediatization of populism, we draw on political economic critiques that point to the necessity of centering an analysis of media politics *and* markets (or the “market fundamentalism” that marks contemporary media fields as per Murdock, 2017) in understanding the logic of mediatization itself. Thus, while the structural orientations of existing accounts quite sensibly veer away from any crude sense of “media manipulation” and understand mediatized populism as a historically contingent and contextualized formation, the sense of context is itself curiously invariant. The depiction of commercial media or tabloid media logics and their intersection or affinities with populist logics turns on a binary opposition with “established, sacerdotal, mainstream” media as representative of the ruling political, economic, and cultural classes that protect elite interests undergirded by a normative liberal worldview (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990; Mazzoleni, 2003, 2008). From this perspective, commercialized or tabloidized and new media constellations (and hence new media logics) are seen to yield a populist illiberal imaginary of the people that established, public interest-oriented “old” media did not.

This binary and the abstract typology and trajectory of media transformation on which it is based (from elite albeit liberal media to illiberal, commercialized, and tabloidized media or its current variant, from real news to fake news) does not explain the distinctive media histories of regions beyond the particular Euro-American referent that they draw upon. Understanding the lineages and contexts of mediatized populism in “most of the world,” (Chatterjee, 2006) requires a different understanding of the histories of media transformation, the political role of the media, and the contours and horizons of the political itself. We argue that we can identify the following three distinct features of the media-politics-people formation from our studies of mediatized populism across Inter-Asia.

### ***The Antipolitical Sublime***

Instead of relying on the Euro-American normative model to make sense of mediatized populism in the rest of the world, we have argued in previous work that postcolonial media have a distinctive developmentalist or pedagogical self-identity and mandate that is analytically consequential for discussions of media and politics. Both in India, the primary subject of our own research, as well as other decolonizing "new nations" of the third world, the free press of the postindependence period was positioned as a partner of the developmentalist state in a common project of modernizing and uplifting the people as citizens and eventually consumers (Chakravartty, 2012; Chakravartty & Roy, 2013). The people in this formulation were positioned as unruly and even feared subjects who required disciplinary and tutelary interventions by the state and its allies, such as the established nonstate/independent print media and the state-owned broadcast media. As we have argued in the Indian context, and scholars of media-political fields have shown from across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, the state's relationship to both free and state-owned media retained this pedagogic relationship to "the people."

Developmentalist media ideology presented a marked contrast to liberal-democratic understandings of the media's role in an idealized pluralist democracy (Curran, 2010; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Schudson, 2008). Postcolonial media institutions positioned themselves not as liberal watchdogs that checked the power of the state and ensured the exercise of individual freedom, but rather as developmental guardians that checked the unruly ignorance of the people and worked in concert with the state to advance a common project of social intervention and improvement. In other words, postcolonial media were normatively positioned (and also positioned themselves) as agents, not obstacles, to statist developmentalist intervention.

This distinctive formation of *étatized free media with a pedagogical imperative* had two main implications for the future rise of populist politics. First, "the people" in postcolonial contexts were constituted as infantile subjects who were in constant need of guardianship and representation by the state and its partner, the media. As Colombian media theorist Martín-Barbero (1993, p. 165) pointed out in the 1980s, the postcolonial state appropriated the modernizing technologies of communication in part to realize its self-proclaimed mandate of development. This pedagogic relationship was a common feature across the global South and especially in all newly established nation-states in this period, regardless of formal colonial-anticolonial histories, including in the cases of China, Thailand, and Turkey. As a result, the liberal fiction of the autonomous individual who is protected from the state by the neutral media, was replaced by the postcolonial narrative of how the agency of the collective people could only be developed and realized through the joint intervention of the enlightened state and media.

According to Jan-Werner Müller (2016), contemporary populism asserts that "we and only we are the people" (p. 70). *Pace* Müller, we might say that in India and other postcolonial countries in the initial decades after independence, the state and the media asserted that only they can know and realize the people. Simply put, the early decades of postcolonial developmentalism in India and other new nations of the time put in place a particular vocabulary of "peopleness" that legitimized media institutions and actors along with the state as the authoritative (and indeed, exclusive) vehicles of popular sovereignty. Postcolonial media, like the state, were normatively positioned as the essential or foundational institutions

and agents of popular expression: not merely as reflections of the already-existing people and neutral providers of information to already existing subjects, but as active creators—shapers and makers of the people. The people-making role and mantle of media was thus authorized and consecrated in the initial years of mid-20th-century postcolonial nation-building.

The second implication of the media-state-people alliance that characterized the early postcolonial conjuncture is that it posited “petty politics” as the common enemy. A normative ideal of the “antipolitical sublime”—a transcendent space occupied by the pure, enlightened people and their politically untainted representatives—informed public discourse of the time, whether state discussions, media debates, or popular cultural texts such as novels and commercial cinema. In practical terms, this meant that media representations of electoral politics were cautionary if not outright negative, and the idea of a transcendent agency that was somehow disconnected from the swirl of electoral politics was central to media and state discourses about the people (Roy, 2006, 2007).

This binary distinction between “clean” political outsiders and corrupt political insiders, and the corresponding valorization of the redemptive political agency of extra-electoral agents and institutions as the true saviors of the people, continues as a major refrain of contemporary populist politics in Inter-Asian as well as in wider global contexts today (Roy, 2014). There are resonances as well with the moralizing registers of mid-20th-century developmentalism. The eschatological terms of contemporary populist discourse, where political conflicts and choices are framed in terms of good and evil, right and wrong, echo the (equivalent though not identical) moralisms of mid-20th-century nation-building and its righteous rhetoric about political transcendence and sacrifice that were formative to media discourses of the time.

### ***Media Liberalization: Market Freedom, Multiple Publics, and Ethnomajoritarianism***

The second notable feature of media-politics relations in Inter-Asian contexts is the simultaneity of media and economic liberalization. If we agree that politics the world over has become highly mediatized in the 21st century, we can see that, in contrast to the long-term progression of media-political-market relations that defined modular Western democracies, almost all Asian and MENA countries have relatively recent mediatized markets. Beginning only in the mid-1980s and into the 1990s do we see mediatized political and economic reforms in societies embedded in most cases within postcolonial architectures that structure the media-state-society relationship along the lines discussed above (Athique, 2012; Chakravartty & Roy, 2013; Guha Thakurta, 2012a, 2012b; Thomas, 2010). In contrast to Latin America, for example, the Inter-Asian region represents newly mediatized political cultures where media reach and commercialization occurred simultaneously alongside profound political economic transformations, as recently as the 1990s.

The temporal coincidence of media commercialization/privatization and the opening up of the economy in Inter-Asian contexts has several implications for media’s political role and relationships that, in turn, have created particular kinds of political opportunities for the politics of populism in the last decade.

First, media actors have played a key role as vanguard and champions of economic reform. Drawing once again from the Indian case, which shares notable similarities with newly commercial media actors across the wider Inter-Asian region, we see since the 1990s an assertive commercial media field across print and television that "recasts popular outrage against the violence of the state into a mandate for economic neoliberalism" (Udupa & Chakravartty, 2012, p. 494). Media actors have increasingly taken on the role of a free market crusader, prioritizing economic freedom, mostly defined as entrepreneurial self-making, over political freedom (Roy, 2014). In countries with distinct political cultures ranging from China to India and Turkey, the violation of civil liberties by the state gets sparse mention if not overt censorship in the commercial media, while reports about bureaucratic corruption in free markets and clientelistic obstacles in the way of depoliticized and entrepreneurial visions of development receive round-the-clock attention (Mudgal, 2015; Sonwalkar, 2002).

Here we see the continuity of the postcolonial media-state-society architecture, with commercial media adopting a new pedagogy of "consumer citizenship," whereby modern citizenship is increasingly defined as the capacity for individual entrepreneurship and consumption (Srivastava, 2014). This has a pernicious long-term effect of devaluing principles of political freedom (including the right to dissent and assemble) in media discourse and hence public discourse. When contemporary right-wing populists like Erdogan and Modi take this to a logical extreme, as they are doing today, they are not operating in a total discursive or value vacuum. In short, we see already in the older media worlds of "real news" the gradual but steady sidelining of political freedom/civil liberties concerns that "fake news" worlds erase, dismiss, and ridicule.

Second, the simultaneity of media and economic liberalization means that media ownership becomes a vehicle for capitalist transformation and social-economic mobility as opposed to a reflection of partisan politics alone. The media landscape in Inter-Asian contexts does not reflect formal-partisan cleavages, but instead the intra-elite competition between new and old capitalist classes.

For instance, new commercial media organizations in India harness the rhetoric of "people versus elites" to position themselves against and ahead of old "legacy media." There is, of course, a sociological truth to this that must be acknowledged. In deeply unequal Inter-Asian societies, the postcolonial developmentalist media that took up the mantle of people-making in the initial years of nation-building was a tiny elite fraction in terms of its social location. For example, in India, prominent media organizations that enjoyed cultural, political, and economic status as national media for the first few decades after independence in 1947 were overwhelmingly composed of English-speaking, upper-class, metropolitan, and upper-caste men. In the postliberalization era of the 1990s and beyond, this dominance has been challenged by other vernacular language (Hindi, Telegu, etc.) media organizations. Significantly, these formations that were equivalently elite in many respects (such as caste and class) but lacked the linguistic and spatial capital of their metropolitan English-language counterparts, also positioned themselves as people-making developmentalist authorities, addressing and claiming to represent the real people ignored by the metropolitan English media organizations.

It is in such a context of multiple or "split publics" (Rajagopal, 2001) that media liberalization and economic liberalization unfold. For instance, in India the entry of new media agents has transformed an

ethnolinguistically and spatially fragmented media field into an “elite versus people” polarization, as new entrants position themselves as the true voice of the people who the elite media cannot represent. What is significant here is that the language of “anti-elitism” is being pushed forward by a *new media elite* (Roy, 2011). Paying attention to media discourse alone, without looking at the social character of media ownership, would lead us to overlook this point and focus on the “left-behinds” as the exclusive constituency of populist politics; to see populist media rhetoric as somehow reflecting a subaltern position and voice. Instead, we need to pay attention to the new plutocrats and crony capitalists (Bardhan, 2017) who are powerful players in the new media fields where populists like Modi, Erdogan, and others find favor.

Related to the above changes in media ownership are the growing polarization and ethnomajoritarianism that are taking place across the mediatized Inter-Asian landscape. In India, for example, we see the expansive monopoly media power of the country’s largest private corporation, the Reliance group, and its close proximity to the Hindu nationalist Modi government (Guha Thakurta, 2012a, 2012b; Parthasarathi, 2011). Once again it is helpful to return to the lineages of the compressed postcolonial media-state-society relationship that have led to this current conjuncture where media consolidation amplifies majoritarian populisms. As we have argued above, postcolonial state and media apparatuses retained and modified class, race, ethnic (sectarian), and regional divisions that had structured colonial rule—formal or otherwise. It is therefore shortsighted to see the current surge in polarized ethnonationalist media as a rupture from previous idealized secular or developmentalist configurations, whether in India or elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Divided Societies and the Anxieties of Dissimulation***

Finally, the contemporary phenomenon of populism must be located within, and explained by, the distinctive contours of the Inter-Asian political field and the particular nature and trajectory of democratization or the lack thereof.

In almost all Inter-Asian contexts, deeply divided and unequal societies have been reconfigured as formal political democracies, and there is a wide divergence between political, economic, and social equality (Bayat, 2013; Kaviraj, 2012; Mitchell, 2002; Ong, 2006; Tsing, 2011). This generates a constant political anxiety about national unity and makes the call to unite the people a constant priority of national

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, Cihan Tuğal (2016) links the ruling AKP party’s “marriage” of political Islamism and neoliberal economic policy to the longer history of exclusionary politics of a previous “secular” era in Turkey. As many scholars of early- to mid-20th-century Turkish republicanism have noted, Kemalist ideology did not recognize any form of subnational identity or religious sectarian difference other than the dominant Turkish-Sunni mode. Müller’s (2016) “we and only we are the people” argument about antipluralist populism would apply to this earlier historical moment as well. These existing exclusions were sharpened in the contradictions of the “Turkish model” that played out during the 2013 Gezi protests, when those “enriched by neoliberalism”—the new cosmopolitan middle classes—revolted against the neoliberal regime, thereby pushing it to “intensify its authoritarianism and conservatism” (Tuğal, 2016, pp. 21–22).

public discourse. National fragments or divisions are a perennial specter for the national imagination. Some of these are more spectral and haunting than others: They are emphatically denied and disavowed, yet the disavowal only reinforces their importance so that they serve as the “unspoken secret” of democracy and political modernity. In India, this is the secret of caste inequality (simultaneously denied and affirmed by declarations that “we are a casteless society”).<sup>6</sup> This has a wider global resonance. For instance, in the contemporary “White backlash” politics of the United States and Europe, race and nativism have a similar normative status of disavowed truths, condensed in equivalent declarations that “we are postracial” and “racism was a historical atavism that has been overcome.”

The broader point here is how the unequal social realities of all these democracies end up reaffirming the truth and persistence of certain axes of inequality that cannot be named, that enfant terrible populist actors then take up in their self-ascribed role as disruptive outsiders. Differently put, this is about recognizing the “dog-whistle” code of populism as a code that has been put in place by the historical experience of an incomplete and uneven democracy and economy. Here, we might see parallels between postcolonial polities where variations of democratic governance and market societies were built on extant but seemingly invisible fault lines of caste, ethnicity, and sectarian and religious difference encoded in practice by colonial rule, and what Black radical scholars such as Cedric Robinson (1983) and others have argued are always existing and foundational racial inequalities built into Western liberal market societies—whether in Europe or across settler colonial nations of the Americas and beyond (Da Silva, 2007; Mamdani, 2015; Wynter, 2003).

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the complex and important differences in these debates. But what the Black radical theoretical tradition alongside decolonial and postcolonial theory add to the conversation on populism and democracy is to de-exceptionalize and historicize the current moment. These works help us understand that it is not that Trump, Modi, and Erdogan are “evil,” but that there is a wider historical and structural context of violence, discrimination, humiliation, and inequality within which their politics unfolds. We need to recognize and confront the shaping of mediatized populist repertoires by “so much more than populism.”

### Looking Ahead

The eight articles that make up this collection expand on the themes developed in this essay. Three authors speak broadly to our first point about the distinctive contours of postcolonial media ideologies. Addressing the developmental legacy of the Turkish state, in “Digital Populism,” Ergin Bulut and Erdem Yörük provide a rich empirical account of how President Erdogan’s governing JDP (Justice and Development Party/AKP in Turkish) has become a global leader in social media trolling orchestrated by the state. They analyze how the JDP’s strategic use of Twitter, “one of the most important commercial media

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<sup>6</sup> The postcolonial nation-state that emerged in the latter half of the 20th century across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East “indigenized” but did not democratize the state (Mamdani, 1996, p. 8). Consequently, “the symbolizing codes of race/caste, class, and ethnicity were relied upon in order to domesticate difference between what used to be the citizen and the subject” by denying the existence of an oppressed majority defined by ethnicity, class, and location (Alhassan & Chakravartty, 2011, p. 371).

platforms in the world,” has rather seamlessly been deployed as “primarily a medium of government-led polarization” (Bulut & Yörük, this Special Section) that demonizes political opponents and speaks on behalf of an ethnoreligiously homogeneous Turkish people. Their argument shows how new media technologies innovate upon, rather than build *ex novo*, historically sedimented precepts of republican statist and media ideologies.

In a reminder that the historical depth of postcolonial media ideologies does not mean an absence of political dynamism and transformation, Subir Sinha in “Fragile Hegemony” documents the political open-endedness of postcolonial media ideologies by tracing both the unprecedented social media success of Indian prime minister Narendra Modi and the limits of the “interpellative function through which millions self-enrolled in the Modi project” (Sinha, this Special Section). Sinha suggests that the Modi government’s prolific social media presence has inadvertently created a “counterarchive on which to build a counternarrative.” Recognizing the fractured nature of a “counterhegemonic project,” Sinha nonetheless shows the persistence of satire, critique, and dissent of the “Feku” (“someone who tells tall tales”) prime minister by cynical citizens, opposition political parties, and social movements.

Taking forward this theme of the “open edge” of mediatized political ideologies and fields, in “Exuberant Politics on the Internet,” Jiyeon Kang examines the 2008 case of youth-led and Internet-fueled protests over imports of U.S. beef in Korea—an event and moment of mediatized populism that foreshadows the tremendous public outrage that led to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye in 2017. Drawing from Jacques Rancière, Kang argues that a shared sense of vulnerability to contaminated beef and to the state’s unpopular neoliberal economic policies led to “Korean youth [forming] an affective network of the *demos* without being anchored in elite politicians or agendas” (Kang, this Special Section). The larger point in the article is to demonstrate the dynamic political cultural context of postcolonial state formations, where a “political leader and agenda can achieve overwhelming public support but soon become subject to public scrutiny or criticism.”

The next set of articles expands on our second point highlighting the simultaneity of media and economic liberalization across Inter-Asia. In “New Media, New Partisanship,” Duncan McCargo examines the hyperpolarized media landscape of Thailand since 2006, when a “polyvalent” media landscape gave way to firmly divided political-media hyperpartisan camps. McCargo argues that the “emergence of the anti-Thaksin movement after 2005 coincided with the rise of a new generation of political media entrepreneurs” (McCargo, this Special Section). The two leading political opponents centered their political ambitions on competing satellite television channels, transforming “television into a source of incendiary provocation,” which then mutated and accelerated on digital media across platforms. In a development that has been replicated across wider Inter-Asian contexts over the last decade, the blurring of boundaries between political actors (this includes military and monarchy in the Thai context) and media entrepreneurs “became a norm rather than an exception” in Thailand.

Amplifying this theme of how the rise of new constituencies of “vernacular capitalists” consecrates economic freedom as the lodestone of media and political ideology, Ayesha Mulla, in “Broadcasting the *Dharna*,” examines how the tenure of Pakistani president General Pervez Musharraf allowed for the parallel expansion of the “growing economic might of nonliberal new middle classes”

(Mulla, this Special Section). Mulla focuses on the English-language Pakistani news media coverage of the "political-celebrity figure" of Imran Khan and the series of protests orchestrated by Khan's party in Islamabad in 2014. Mulla finds that "the Pakistani liberal narrative on the transformation of the political mediascape turns most anxiously on the specter of populist politics, particularly on the illiberal nature of such figurations."

In "Innuendo as Outreach," Pal et al. provide an empirical analysis of tweets from @narendramodi, the popular Twitter account of the Indian prime minister that he used to speak directly to his supporters well before Trump's mastery of the social media platform. Pal et al.'s analysis finds that social media use by Modi emphasizes "humorous innuendo in place of aggressive direct confrontation" (Pal et al., this Special Section) whereby the prime minister curates a narrative as a "clever, connected leader" in contrast to "uncool and bureaucratically minded opponent." Thinking comparatively, the article argues convincingly that Twitter allows a

young urban [middle-class] population that is typically excluded from the bustle of the election campaign in the streets to be politically engaged. While marching the streets and shouting slogans was left out the subaltern political workers, creation of memes and images around '*Abki Baar Modi Sarkar* [It's time for a Modi government!]' gives Twitter users a means to exercise their political selves. (Pal et al., this Special Section)

The final two articles in this Special Section focus on the structures and relations of the wider political field that fuel the dog-whistle politics of populism. In "Conspiratorial Webs," Rolien Hoyng and Murat Es offer an original argument about the "material ecological dynamics of communication reshaping" (Hoyng & Es, this Special Section) of authoritarian modes of censorship. Their analysis reveals a "split media ecology" built on the political antagonisms between "the disenfranchised conservative masses and the Kemalist bureaucratic elite political Islamists" who wielded power until the rise of President Erdogan and the AKP. Their study reveals the paradoxical power of censorship in the Turkish polity, where beyond the more visible question of growing state control of media, they uncover a more dynamic regime of censorship and countercensorship and suspicion and distrust on both sides that require interventions well beyond the liberal normative promises of neutrality and objectivity.

Finally, Hatim El-Hibri, in "Disagreement Without Dissensus," takes the argument beyond the arena of domestic politics and explains how the contradictions underlying Hizballah's populist claims in Lebanon are accentuated by their involvement in transregional geopolitical struggle. El-Hibri draws from Rancière's conception of the politics of disagreement and dissensus through an analysis of Hizballah's appeals to and claims to speak in defense of "the people." He considers both the fractured political landscape of multiethnic Lebanon and the impact on local political reorientation in relation to both neighboring Israeli occupation and the Syrian civil war. He argues that the new right-wing populisms of today "can embody the intensified articulation of ethnosectarian idiom within contemporary capitalist and militarist formations" (El-Hibri, this Special Section).

In closing, we hope that the collection of essays that form this collection move forward our call for an embedded approach to future scholarship on media and populism. It is precisely in this moment of political and cultural crisis that we might wish to eschew exceptionalist narratives about

populism as a sudden deviation from democratic political norms to consider instead the historical and systemic lineages and pathways of populist politics.

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