Materializing Populism: The Crucial Role of Objects in Shaping Collective Identity and Rhetoric

"The absurdity of things having agency is precisely what makes them so fascinating. They become characters in the drama of human life, shaping and being shaped by our actions."— Jean Baudrillard

Baudrillard's quote encapsulates the absurdity of ascribing agency to inanimate objects, a notion that is both intriguing and comical. The idea that lifeless things could possess animacy and play a role in the portrayal of human life is indeed a paradoxical and somewhat humorous concept.

Yet, could it be that these inanimate objects help define the very animacy tied to human endeavors such as populism? This paper seeks to unravel this apparent absurdity by exploring the intricate interplay between populism and material objects. It argues that material or inanimate entities are central to populist rhetoric and that any definition of populism—however loosely or "thin-centered" (Mudde 2004) it may be—is incomplete without acknowledging their material dimension.

This paper draws on literature related to material culture and reinterprets Laclau's concept of populism, extending it to encompass the significance of material objects. It argues that material things are not merely passive by-products of populist endeavors. Rather, they act as "active participants" in the articulation of populist ideas, sometimes even forming the foundation of such articulations. Laclau's definition of populism frames it as a logic of articulation (Laclau 2005). This is particularly suited for this extension because it is more fundamental and "all-encompassing" than other definitions,which focus on the ideological aspects or contents of populism, often overlooking the role of material objects. However, Laclau's definition still does not directly address the materiality inherent in populism. Therefore, this paper extends his concept to argue that the logic of articulation associated with populism serves to imbue its contents—both linguistic and material—with meaning.

This paper advances its argument by first analyzing the literature on material culture and populism. Through this analysis, it extends the definition of populism beyond the traditional discourse, framing it as a "logic of articulation" (Laclau 2005) that encompasses material

objects. In this view, material objects do not merely reinforce populist rhetoric—they actively constitute it. To substantiate this expanded definition, the paper examines the Zapatista movement in Mexico, particularly their symbolic use of ski masks as a crucial element in articulating their populist ideas.

The choice of the Zapatista movement in particular as a case study is justified because it exemplifies the fusion of individual demands into a collective identity—a key aspect of populist discourse as described by Laclau. The Zapatistas, through their strategic use of material objects like ski masks, not only communicate their resistance but also unify disparate voices under a singular, powerful narrative that challenges established power structures. This case illustrates how material objects can transcend mere symbolism to become integral components of populist rhetoric. It also provides an instance of how they evolve to embody the very essence of the movement's goals and ideals.

The Role of Material Culture in Shaping Social Realities

This section adopts a sociological and anthropological perspective to material culture to provide a comprehensive understanding of how material objects contribute to political discourse. Central to this inquiry is the question: “How important are material objects in the articulation of populism?

To ground this discussion, it is essential to revisit an intellectual shift known as the “linguistic turn,” (Boivin 2010) which significantly influenced the study of materiality in the latter half of the 20th century. This period marked a profound change in the humanities and social sciences – language became the primary lens through which scholars understood reality (Boivin 2010). This shift was largely driven by Ferdinand de Saussure, whose posthumously published notes on linguistic sign systems revolutionized the way meaning was conceptualized. Saussure’s model proposed that language was not merely a tool for representing reality, but a system of signs that constructed it. He emphasizes the relational properties of language, rather than the referential (De Saussure 1959). This suggests that meaning is derived not from direct correspondence with the external world, but from the intricate relationships between words and concepts in a broader system of signification.

This idea—that meaning is constructed through a network of associations rather than being inherent—had profound implications for the study of material culture. It suggested that material objects are not passive reflections of social realities but active participants in their construction (Boivin 2010). This realization paved the way for a new understanding of material culture, one that recognized the power of objects to shape and define the social and political worlds they inhabit.

The "linguistic turn" fundamentally altered anthropological thinking about material culture, giving rise to ideas such as "material culture is like a text" (Hodder 1986). Ian Hodder, a key figure in this intellectual movement, emphasized that to fully understand the meaning of artifacts, one must adopt a contextual approach. The Latin root of "context," *contextere*, meaning "to weave" or "join together", highlights the necessity of placing artifacts within their broader social and cultural "texts" to discern their significance (Hodder 1986). Hodder's work marked a departure from earlier archaeological approaches that viewed material culture as a passive backdrop to human activity. Instead, he argued that material culture plays an active role in constituting social realities, challenging the notion that objects are mere byproducts of human actions. The emergence of this "post-processual archaeology" (Hodder 1982) critiqued previous attempts to link material culture to social structures, asserting that these had failed to account for the dynamic power of objects. This movement argued that material culture should be seen not only as reflective of social realities but as an integral force in their creation and perpetuation.

Central to the arguments of this paper is the concept of animism as defined by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. He describes animism as "an ontology that postulates the social character of relations between humans and nonhumans, where the space between nature and society is itself social." (Viveiros de Castro 1998) This perspective challenges traditional distinctions between the human and the nonhuman, suggesting that the boundaries separating nature and society are, in fact, socially constructed and permeable. This notion is further supported by sociologists of science who argue that objects and subjects—people and things—are commingled and relationally intertwined, forming a complex web of interactions (Callon 1991).

This paper draws heavily on this discourse surrounding material culture and animism to argue that material objects are not merely passive elements, but active agents in constituting populist

realities. These objects, far from being inert or secondary, can even form the very foundation of populist movements, shaping and reinforcing the narratives that populist leaders seek to promote. If the space between the human and nonhuman is inherently social, then material objects must be recognized as integral components of social phenomena such as populism. This perspective compels us to rethink populism not just as a linguistic or ideological phenomenon but as one that is deeply intertwined with the material world. The objects employed by populist movements—whether they be symbols, artifacts, or everyday items—are more than mere representations; they are active forces that help to construct and sustain the populist narratives that resonate with the masses.

Rethinking Populism: Integrating Materiality into the Discourse

This paper does not seek to redefine populism entirely but rather to extend its definition to include the crucial dimension of materiality. To accomplish this, it is essential to anchor the analysis in a definition of populism that is both foundational and process-oriented. Laclau's conceptualization of populism as a logic of articulation—a dynamic process of constructing and linking demands and identities—provides the most suitable framework for this extension.

First, it is important to address why other influential definitions have been set aside in favor of Laclau's. Cas Mudde's widely accepted definition characterizes populism as a thin-centered ideology that divides society into two antagonistic groups: "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite." (Mudde 2004) While insightful, it primarily focuses on the ideological content of populism, emphasizing a moral dichotomy that frames populist discourse. This focus, however, comes at the expense of understanding the dynamic processes through which populism is articulated and gains traction. Mudde's definition also highlights the role of charismatic leadership and the communicative style of populist leaders. However, it overlooks the material aspects of populism——that are instrumental in shaping and reinforcing populist identities and narratives. By viewing populism strictly through an ideological lens, Mudde's approach neglects the performative and material dimensions that are critical to understanding how populism functions in practice.

Moffitt and Tormey's definition of populism, which characterizes it as a political style marked by appeals to “the people,” the use of “bad manners,” and the dramatization of crises, offers an innovative perspective by focusing on the performative and stylistic dimensions of populism (Moffitt and Tormey 2014). This approach sheds light on how populist leaders craft their public personas, the rhetorical strategies they deploy, and the theatrical nature of their interactions with “the people” versus “the elite.” While this emphasis on style and performance is valuable for understanding the mechanics of populist leadership, it falls short for the purposes of this paper, which seeks to broaden the definition of populism to include the critical role of materiality.

Their framework concentrates primarily on the performative aspects of populism—how leaders embody and project their populist credentials through speech, gestures, and public appearances. However, this perspective largely overlooks the significance of material objects and symbols, which are not merely supplementary tools in the populist playbook but are foundational elements of populist movements. These objects—whether they are clothing, banners, or other tangible items—are more than just stage props; they are deeply embedded in the construction and reinforcement of populist identities and narratives. These material objects and symbols play a crucial role in articulating and solidifying the distinctions between “the people” and “the elite,” serving as physical manifestations of the populist divide. In populist movements, materiality is not merely a backdrop to the performance; it is an active and essential component that helps to shape and sustain the movement's message and identity.

While Laclau’s definition does not explicitly identify material objects, it provides a broad enough framework that can include them. Mudde’s and Moffitt and Tormey’s definitions, however, cannot be expanded in the same way to incorporate the material dimension, as they are more narrowly focused on ideological and performative aspects, respectively. This limitation makes Laclau’s procedural approach to populism the most malleable and suitable for this paper’s aim to explore the intersection of populism and materiality. This paper argues that material objects are not merely optional in populism but are essential components. Laclau’s definition offers the necessary flexibility to substantiate this claim, allowing for the argument that material objects are a fundamental aspect of populist movements.

More significantly, Laclau defines populism as an ontological category rather than an ontic one (Laclau 2005), which aligns with the theoretical foundation of this paper. Drawing heavily from Viveiros de Castro's concept of animism as an ontological framework, this alignment strengthens this paper's argument that material objects are essential components of populist movements.

Laclau also introduces the concept of a "chain of equivalence," formed when diverse, unmet demands converge into a unified populist identity. This process leads to the emergence of what he terms "empty" and "floating signifiers"—symbols that encapsulate the collective demands of the movement (Laclau 2005). As these diverse demands are linked, they become diluted into a monolithic entity. This paper argues that material objects play a crucial role in this process of unification, as seen in the case study of the Zapatista movement. The Zapatistas' use of material objects not only symbolizes their cause but also actively contributes to the merging of heterogeneous demands into a cohesive populist identity.

Laclau's definition of populism acknowledges the transformative power of populism to unify diverse elements into a single, powerful entity. This paper extends this, demonstrating how material objects are central to this unifying process, effectively turning disparate demands into a collective populist reality.

Behind the Mask: The Hidden Power of Ski Masks in the Zapatista Revolution

This section delves into perhaps the most iconic symbol of the Zapatista movement—the ski mask. To truly grasp the significance of these masks, it is crucial to consider the historical and social context in which they emerged (Hodder 1982). The Zapatista movement, formally known as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), made its dramatic entrance onto the world stage on January 1, 1994, in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. On that day, 3,000 masked Zapatista soldiers emerged from the dense jungles and remote mountain villages, seizing control of seven towns, including the historic colonial city of San Cristobal de las Casas (ICCROM 2018)

The black balaclavas and red kerchiefs they wore concealed faces with distinctive Mayan features, characteristic of the indigenous people native to these lands—people who had been

enduring and resisting centuries of repression, exploitation, racism, and genocide. The timing of their uprising coincided with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which the Zapatistas viewed as the latest in a series of neoliberal policies that had systematically marginalized and impoverished indigenous communities in Mexico (Reyes-Galindo 2021). The movement, named after the revered Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, came up in direct response to centuries of exploitation, poverty, and the stark absence of political representation for the indigenous peoples of Mexico.

The ski masks worn by the Zapatistas during their uprising quickly became an enduring emblem of their resistance. Unlike the MAGA caps, which Silva and Rogenhofer (2022) describe as having a "materiality spanning both linguistic and non-linguistic media," the ski masks of the Zapatistas represent a purely non-linguistic form of materiality. Yet, despite the absence of written or spoken language, these masks convey powerful meanings that resonate deeply within the Zapatista movement and beyond.

This section will explore the significance of ski masks in three key aspects. First, it will delve into the practical origins and advantages of the ski masks, examining how they provided not only anonymity but also protection in the harsh environments of Chiapas. Next, it will explore the affective meaning attached to the masks, considering how they evoke powerful emotions and symbolize the struggle of the indigenous people. Finally, it will highlight the unifying nature of the ski masks and their role in constituting the "empty signifier" as defined by Laclau, through which diverse demands are brought together into a cohesive, collective identity. Through these three perspectives, this paper will demonstrate that the ski masks do more than merely facilitate the populist reality of the Zapatistas—they actively constitute it, serving as a vital component in the construction and perpetuation of the movement's identity and message.

The first aspect: the seemingly straightforward practical aspect of the ski mask—providing anonymity to those participating in protests and shielding their identities—might explain why there is relatively little academic literature focused on them. However, even this seemingly obvious function of anonymity plays a crucial role in advancing the populist goals of the Zapatistas. While the strategic use of anonymity has been extensively discussed in the context of online platforms, such as Reddit, particularly in aiding gendered populism (Dignam and

Rohlinger 2019), the concept is equally relevant in the physical realm. Just as individuals online find comfort in the ability to express controversial views anonymously, the ski masks provide Zapatista fighters with a similar shield in the physical world.

Online anonymous spaces are appealing because they allow individuals to mask their identities and express agreement with certain views without the fear of social repercussions from their immediate circles (Caren, Jowers, and Gaby 2012; Beyer 2014). This anonymity fosters the spread of populist ideas by offering a safety net for those who might be hesitant to openly align themselves with a cause. This same advantage of anonymity extends beyond the digital space to tangible objects like the ski masks. The masks do more than just protect the identities of the Zapatistas; they serve as a tool for inviting others to join the cause without the fear of being exposed.

Thus, the so-called obvious advantage of the ski masks—anonymity—is not merely a practical benefit but a critical component of the Zapatista's populist rhetoric. By obscuring individual identities, the masks make it easier for people to participate in the movement, lowering the barriers to entry for those who might fear retribution or ostracism.

In order to fully grasp the second aspect: the affective qualities of the Zapatista ski mask, one must first understand its physical characteristics. The masks are stark black, enveloping the entire face save for the eyes, with even the mouth obscured, seemingly cutting off the wearer's "voice." This deliberate concealment is laden with deeper meaning, as illustrated by a poignant demonstration held on the balcony of the Municipal Palace in San Cristobal, where a masked figure read a declaration that began: "For centuries, indigenous people had been the ones without faces, the ones without voices… [and] today we say, '¡Ya basta!' Enough is enough!" (Netpol 2015). This powerful statement encapsulates the significance of the ski masks—they symbolize the centuries-long struggle of Mexico's indigenous population, who have been historically rendered faceless and voiceless.

The masks serve not just as a form of concealment, but as a way to highlight the very visibility and recognition that these communities have been denied for so long. By hiding their faces, the Zapatistas paradoxically demand to be seen and heard, using their anonymity to draw attention to their collective past. The once-overlooked faces became immediately recognizable, and the ski

masks quickly evolved into a powerful symbol of their identity. It is clear that the ski masks were not merely a part of their attire; they were the catalyst that gave the Zapatista movement its momentum and legitimacy.

Next, this act of masking also taps into a broader political memory, a concept that has been explored in the context of state security and ideology. As Subotic (2019) discusses, political memory provides a state with mnemonic security, ensuring the continuity and ideological stability of the state's identity. Similarly, in the context of populism, the Zapatista ski masks evoke a collective memory of past struggles and silenced voices, imbuing the movement with a sense of historical continuity and ideological security. The memory of these suppressed struggles becomes a foundational element of the Zapatista movement, helping to secure its identity and longevity.

Lastly, it is crucial to emphasize the unifying nature of the ski masks, which serve not only to facilitate the convergence of ideas and demands but also to actively constitute this unified reality. This concept has been explored in the context of other powerful symbols, such as MAGA caps (Carreira da Silva and Rogenhofer 2022) and LGBTQ flags (Nagle 2018). Nagle, for instance, discusses how symbols generate what Anthony Cohen (1985) called the "symbolic construction of community," providing a sense of shared belonging to a specific group or political project. The ski masks of the Zapatistas function in much the same way. Anthropologists often highlight that material consumption—such as wearing a MAGA cap—can be a form of self-fashioning or a means of joining an imagined community of like-minded individuals (Carreira da Silva and Rogenhofer 2022). Similarly, the Zapatista ski masks are not merely items of clothing; they are powerful tools for creating and solidifying a collective identity. This sentiment is also echoed by Gerbaudo (2022), who claims that social movements' populism involves the adoption of a 'popular identity' as a unifying notation to compensate for identity fragmentation. The ski-masks *are* precisely this 'popular identity.

Building on our extended definition of populism, which includes the critical role of material objects in creating a populist reality, Laclau's concept of populism as a logic of articulation offers further insight. He explains that when multiple unmet demands form a chain of equivalence, they merge into an "empty signifier" representing a broader concern. The ski masks

worn by the Zapatistas do more than facilitate this process; they embody it. The masks blur the individual identities of the indigenous people, representing them as a unified whole both physically and affectively. Physically, the ski masks create a homogenous appearance, erasing individual faces and replacing them with a collective, faceless black monolith. This visual uniformity reinforces the idea of a unified front, where the individual is subsumed into the collective cause. The ski masks themselves become the "empty signifiers" described by Laclau—symbols that encapsulate the broader demands of the movement while allowing for the inclusion of diverse, specific grievances. In this manner, the ski masks do not just facilitate populism—they *are* populism.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to illuminate the often-overlooked role that material objects play in the articulation and sustenance of populist movements. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of material culture and populism, particularly through the lens of Laclau's logic of articulation, it has been argued that material objects are not merely supplementary to populist rhetoric but are, in fact, central to its construction. These objects—whether they are symbols, artifacts, or everyday items—actively participate in the creation of populist realities, shaping and reinforcing the narratives that resonate with the masses.

Ultimately, this paper calls for a rethinking of populism, not just as a linguistic or ideological phenomenon, but as one that is deeply intertwined with the material world. Recognizing the agency of inanimate objects in populist movements offers a more nuanced understanding of how these movements operate, thrive, and endure. As populism continues to shape global political landscapes, acknowledging the power of materiality will be essential for comprehending its full impact. After all, even the most powerful movements need something tangible to hold onto—because ideas alone don't win elections, but a well-placed symbol just might.

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