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Geographies of entitled anger: Revanchist populism in Brazil and beyond

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Abstract

In an age of resurgent populism, emotional geographies play an underexamined yet pivotal role in explaining cross-class alliances that have enabled particularly angry forms of revanchist politics across world regions. This essay delineates the notion of “revanchist populism” and its grounding in “entitled anger,” as well as self-righteous geographical imaginations more broadly, to shed new light on the Brazilian case in recent years, which is further explored in this special issue. Beyond Brazil, we suggest how this approach can be used to bring a more geographical perspective to related iterations of revanchist populism elsewhere in the world and across the political spectrum, from Venezuela to Turkey, and Argentina to India.

Keywords

populism, revanchism, Brazil, emotional geographies, cross-class alliances

Introduction: Anger and populist resurgence around the globe

Democracies worldwide are on fire with anger at the moment. Moreover, in many places, a deep sense of entitlement underpins this angry lashing out, which is directed not only at elites or politicians but often, primarily, at categories of people deemed threats — unentitled, undeserving, and fundamentally “other” — whether specific groups of fellow citizens, immigrants/refugees, or longtime foreign allies. This theme issue aims to elucidate the geographical nature of this turn in political imaginations toward the retaking of “the nation” in line with a powerful discourse of “the people” and righteousness. Such shifts are evident in Trump’s electoral discourses and Brexiteer narratives in the UK, both with clear geographies relying on well-documented notions of right/

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wrong, us/them (Bhambra, 2017; Hochschild, 2016; McQuarrie, 2017). These map onto populations who nostalgically sense they have lost what was rightfully, morally, genealogically theirs, which might be regained by applying that angry sense of entitlement to an authoritative, indeed authoritarian, exercise of government. Yet populist rage paired with populist simplicity is reshaping far more than Anglo-American politics.

In 2018, Brazil surprised the world by electing far-right congressman Jair Bolsonaro as president. A retired military officer, Bolsonaro's 27-year tenure in congress was better known for his virulent rhetoric of hatred, often directed at minorities, than for policy accomplishments or political deftness. Once low-ranking with restricted influence, Bolsonaro vaulted to the presidency in an election that redefined Brazil's political map. His victory was built on a puzzling cross-class alliance that subverted familiar political geographies. Unlike the expected pattern – i.e., support in rural areas versus contestation in urban zones – this successful campaign relied on massive support among urbanites, including a socioeconomic range of voters (Bradlow, 2019). Beyond Brazil, a similar trend is also visible in Duterte's victory in the Philippines (Garrido, 2019) and Milei's in Argentina (Andrino and Pérez, 2023). This issue builds on recent debates to contribute a missing part of the puzzle, that is, the spatialities of cross-class alliances that have underpinned the contemporary spread of angry populisms.

To do so, we respond to calls to incorporate emotion into analysis of politics (Hochschild, 2016), offering the idea of revanchist populism, inspired by the work of late critical geographer Neil Smith (1996) on urban revanchism. Centering Brazil as the primary focus, we trace geographies of anger, mapping the self-righteous hatred that is redefining political landscapes of the Global South. Although attentive to the fact that populism in general is not new, we argue this kind of revanchist populism – attempting to take back, wresting space both material and symbolic from the supposedly undeserving – bears novel features. We thus argue that tracing such geographies of entitled anger provides one way of locating the alliances that make the turn to populism possible.

Revanchist populism: The geographical power of self-righteous imaginations

Many have attempted to unpack recent populist expansion, but the element of emotion, so entrenched in political discourse, is often flagged (e.g., Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Eichengreen, 2018), yet not dissected – as signaled by sociologist Hochschild's (2016) corrective analysis. Our focus on anger, however, is not directed at the feeling itself, but its formation and geographies. What structures, discourses, and spaces have produced a certain cross-class alliance of angry citizens rebelling against the political establishment as both an imagined benefactor of "others" and an object of disgust in itself? Although work on emotional geographies explores how powerful feelings imbue political imaginations surrounding economic and social transformation (e.g., Davidson et al., 2007; Pain, 2009; Wright, 2012), such contributions rarely focus on populism per se (cf Hannemann et al., 2023; Santamarina, 2021; Sophos, 2021). Here we discuss the lineage of related populist analyses, introducing the lens of revanchism as a simultaneous strategy and an imaginative geography, operating through an especially emotional charge.

In populist politics, "the people" (Latin: *populus*) are articulated as a category with discernible, ordinary interests, and a governing party or individual leader reflects that "people," personifying their will in policymaking. Populism, as a label, encompasses governments ranging the political spectrum that deploy senses of "the people" as a broad political base, prioritizing them as beneficiaries, often in contrast to elites – identifiable from the People's Party led by Roosevelt in the 19th-century US (Lowndes, 2017), to the expansion of industrial workers' rights under various 20th-century Latin American governments, such as Vargas in Brazil and Perón in Argentina (Collier and Collier, 2002). In his final monograph, *On Populist Reason*, foundational theorist Laclau (2005: 67)

debunks prominent, dismissive depictions of populism as vacuous and ineffectual because they hinge on “vague” figurations of “the people” in a sprawling “rhetoric,” which is more about discursive ideals than clear achievements. While populism indeed often bears such features, Laclau underlines these are precisely what makes it a powerful mode of politics. We must put our analytic attention to how “the people” are crafted in different instances, scrutinizing the productivity of discursive maneuvers that draw in political support by offering a sense of belonging and entitlement, regardless of whether these are ever delivered in material form.

If populism entails a circumscribed version of greater inclusion in the political sphere, the idea of revanchism pivots on an opposite, yet potentially twinned, principle: exclusion, and especially expulsion. Smith (1996) popularized the “revanchist city” notion as related to the gentrification of New York City in the 1980s. Invoking the military strategy of *revanche*, or retaking territory previously lost to an adversary, Smith illustrated how capital mobilizes punitive discourses and measures to “take back” parts of the city for its purportedly rightful uses and occupants. This discursive campaign was waged against those construed as enemies of the proper, civilized city – especially the unhoused, the poor, and often racialized minorities. Eventually postulating the global diffusion of revanchist logics, Smith (2001, 2002) argued that concomitant rescalings of economic calculations were transforming political geographies of belonging in ways that upended urban and national imaginations of which populations enjoyed rightful presence.

Our use of Smith’s concept brings focus to the political economy of space production. Although we see recent political developments partially as responses to global-capitalist restructuring, we concur with anthropologists Sharma and Gupta, 2006: 4) that “[t]he emergent transnational economic order is not only reshaping the global labour map, but also transforming the relationship between citizenship, national identity, and the state.” Relationality among these three aspects is key, hinging on imaginations and discourses that chart out emotive maps of “the people,” their allies, and their “others.” We embrace a broad view about how the shaping of space and politics can be intimately related by exploring the geographies of entitled anger that shape revanchist populism. While observing commonalities across cases, we also heed cautions about imputing generality, remaining open to understanding formative relational connections among cases with apparent likenesses (see Hart, 2018) – alive to the fact that populist discourses, imaginaries, and interests in one part of the world may well affect developments elsewhere.

Essential to thinking through these variable, relational geographies of meaning, similarity, and otherness is Said’s work on “imaginative geographies.” Said (1978) critiqued how North Atlantic depictions of “the Orient” pivoted on fanciful ideations of a presumably civilized self (the Occident) in contrast to an uncivilized, irrational other (the Near East, Middle East, and Asia broadly), rather than any empirical understanding of “Oriental” cultures and complexities according to their own logics. Expanded by Gregory (1995b, 1995a, 1995c, 2004), the notion of imaginative geographies indicates a link between one place and another, where distance and difference can be problematically conflated, and that “other” place is represented simplistically yet emphatically as fundamentally incompatible with one’s own civilization, entailing a geographical dehumanization. In contrast, imaginative geographies can also work to highlight symbolic similarities between locales, or to signal hierarchies of civilization, desirability, and emulability, including within a single polity (e.g., Bakić-Hayden, 1995; Harris, 2014), and operative well beyond the projected civilizational geographies of “West”/“East” (see Centner, 2013; Nogueira, 2020; Vanderbeck, 2006). “Others” are not only populations but places on a map. Indeed, they may be imagined places, or real places imputed to have abiding characteristics of right/wrong, compatible with Manichaean cartographies of us/them.¹ These are self-righteous imaginations that position “others” as not only radically distinct, but also belonging elsewhere, no matter where they are actually located. Revanchist populism relies on imaginative, emotionally charged geographies of signification to mark the “people” who deserve to be a part of the nation and enjoy its prowess, in stark contrast to those

populations and places undeserving of inclusion, benefit, or goodwill – from whom it should be wrested.

In this collection we highlight how recent populist rhetoric reacts to prior episodes that sought to include perceived “others,” resulting in what might be regarded as an expansion of citizenship. Revanchist populism is about re-taking space perceived as lost to the benefit of groups identified as outsiders. Amid increasing anxiety around precarized work and economies, the desire to restore a sense of security and social mobility is ripe for political entrepreneurs to provoke reactions among uneasy segments of the populace against those regarded as unfair competitors or beneficiaries. The “others,” here, are populations who have supposedly benefited from inclusion. Discourses framed around revanchism seek to reimagine the nation, reasserting values that become key mediators of inclusion, restricting membership to a past imagined political community. Such reactions find legitimacy in feelings that those included are not original members of “the people,” either because they are regarded as foreigners and, therefore, not real citizens, or because they do not share the traits associated with some stylized version of the nation and are, therefore, undeserving.

Brazil & beyond

The collection of papers in this theme issue focuses foremost on the case of Brazil (Nogueira, Tucker & Granero de Melo, Richmond & McKenna), while Samet’s contribution focuses on Venezuela as a counterexample. The inspiration to put this issue together began with a session on the “Geographies of entitled anger: Revanchist populism in Brazil & beyond” at the 2019 AAG annual meeting. The initiative sprang from a sense of urgency following the result of Brazil’s dramatic 2018 national elections. Since then, many academic papers have endeavored to analyze the rise of Bolsonaro, focusing on the electoral role played by religion (Lapper, 2021; Rivera and Fidalgo, 2019), criminality and corruption (Rennó, 2020; Ruediger and Grassi, 2023), and the influence of both social media (Davis and Straubhaar, 2019) and traditional media (Araújo and Prior, 2021) in the campaign. (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, 2018; 2020; Richmond, 2018; 2020) have offered socio-spatial perspectives from the peripheries of São Paulo and Porto Alegre, respectively, uncovering the cross-class alliance that enabled Bolsonaro’s victory. Such empirically grounded accounts reveal how fear of crime, anxiety about the future, and frustration with the present are key explanations for Bolsonaro’s appeal to lower-income people. Much like Hochschild’s (2016) portrait of impoverished Americans in “red states,”² they provide a rationale for understanding how people, arguably targeted by Bolsonaro’s angry rhetoric, opted to support him.

Such recent contributions demonstrate how us/them formulations – key for the successful spread of recent populist narratives – are reproduced by populations who are generally portrayed as the “other” in mainstream political discourse. The process through which harmed populations reproduce the discourses justifying violence against themselves was explored by Ghertner (2015) in his study of slum clearance in Delhi. He argues that “for such a system of rule to be effective it must not only work as an observational grid for ordering space, but also be internally appropriated by the population it would govern; its vision of social order must be imprinted on their sensibilities, inscribed in their senses” (ibid, p.125). Following a similar understanding, this set of interventions will explore the multiple elements that sustain such powerful imaginative geographies, uniting centers and peripheries in a vengeful reaction against liberal democracy. By offering “revanchist populism” as a framework and Brazil as a focal case, we intend to foreground how the exploration of place-based reactions rooted in anger, disillusionment, and frustration against the loss of perceived entitlements can be utilized to understand paradoxical cross-class alliances.

Central to the success of Bolsonaro's electoral campaign was its appeal beyond his longtime constituency of white, wealthier Brazilians; using spatialized voter data, Richmond and McKenna explore this part of the revanchist-populist puzzle. Their contribution examines long-term electoral trends in low-income peripheries of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro to show how they went from strong supporters of Lula's Worker's Party (PT) in the early 2000s to significantly favoring Bolsonaro in 2018. They argue for the relevance of place-based factors, such as "socio-economic conditions, institutional arrangements, and attitudes," which were collectively shaping electoral behavior in urban peripheries. Nogueira's contribution further develops this argument by exploring the entanglements between urban policy and national politics. Her analysis focuses on street vendors in Belo Horizonte, whose activities were criminalized during a local PT administration in the early 2000s. Amid threats to their livelihoods under a new round of displacement, resentful memories against the party who "sold them out" were revived, fueling support for Bolsonaro. Ultimately, Nogueira argues the PT's association with traditional unionism combined with the influence of developmentalism in Latin America's left have shaped a negative discourse of informal work that contributes to the marginalization of non-waged workers. Feeling betrayed by the "worker's party," informal workers associated with Bolsonaro's conservative anti-crime agenda, which positions them as morally deserving workers rather than criminals.

One of the key issues unifying voters around Bolsonaro's revanchist agenda was the topic of corruption. This is explored by Tucker and Granero de Melo who offer the notion of "corruption talk" to demonstrate how "a dominant discourse of corruption" mobilized "the political emotions of resentment, outrage, love and fear" that were key for Bolsonaro's construction of an us/them narrative. Inspired by Caldeira (2000) notion of "talk of crime," Tucker and Granero de Melo approach corruption as a disputed and malleable concept associated with the PT through an effective media campaign that amplified corruption scandals involving the party. Importantly for Tucker and Granero de Melo, corruption talk is racialized, positioning mostly white middle-class *cidadãos de bem* (good/law-abiding citizens) against the Black and poor *bandidos* (bandits) or *corruptos* (corrupt ones). Simultaneously, corruption talk is emotional, cultivating a range of sentiments that "conjure political enemies and construct consent to punitive, illiberal versions of anti-corruption".

Samet's contribution takes us beyond Brazil to neighboring Venezuela, a country whose complex political situation under Maduro's left-wing government was negatively projected by Bolsonaro's campaign as Brazil's potential future under PT rule. Samet argues that while the comparison between Venezuela and Brazil might seem farfetched, it foregrounds how popular demands for security, or what he calls, "the will to security," can work as a successful populist articulation. Samet's contribution demonstrates the political appeal of tough, yet largely ineffective, law-and-order approaches while emphasizing both the difficulties and the urgency of addressing criminality from a leftist perspective – showing how this spans the political spectrum. In the absence of effective solutions for a vital issue that affects the everyday lives of Latin Americans from disparate classes and social groups, the exploitation of the will to security as a way to articulate revanchist grievances for political gain will remain a powerful populist tool. Beyond Latin America, we can see similar turns to security discourses in revanchist-populist governments from Turkey to India, suggesting the further utility of thinking via Brazil even in very different settings.

Conclusion

After having his conviction overturned, Lula returned to the presidency in a tight victory against Bolsonaro in the 2022 elections. Meanwhile, Bolsonaro became ineligible for elected office and

faces potential imprisonment for charges of planning an attempted coup. In tandem, these events could invite hopeful optimism and indicate the tail-end of Brazil's far-right. Yet Bolsonaro's political capital and mobilization powers remain strong, as demonstrated by a recent rally that convened tens of thousands on the streets of São Paulo protesting his perceived persecution by the judiciary. Elsewhere, in Argentina, Javier Milei secured another historical victory for Latin America's far-right. A self-declared supporter of Bolsonaro and Trump, Milei's pro-gun discourse, libertarian economic agenda, and anti-feminist bile have been particularly successful among angry young men. Revanchist populism, it seems, is alive and well. Dismantling it will require a further understanding of the geographies of entitled anger that underpin its growth.

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Notes

1. Widely publicized examples in the American political context include the defamation of "shithole countries" by Trump while in office, or the praise of Republican-voting areas of the US as "real America" by former Alaska governor Sarah Palin. On this dynamic of imaginative "shithole" geographies in a more quotidian discursive context, see [Butler et al. \(2018\)](#).
2. "Red states" are those where a majority of active voters elect Republican candidates for president. The name derives from the color-coded election map used by US media when visualizing voting results, wherein red designates Republican victory, and blue stands for wins by Democrats.

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