



2025 APSA Annual Meeting & Exhibition  
11-14 September / Vancouver, BC, Canada

---

## Reimagining Politics, Power, and Peoplehood in Crisis Times

### POPULISM, DEMAGOGUERY, AND RHETORIC IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Roundtable, September 14, 8:00am - 9:30am (PDT)

#### Session Description

Populism, Demagoguery, and Rhetoric in Historical Perspective (Oxford University Press, 2024) brings together an international group of contributors to enrich the debate on populist politics. In this roundtable, the volume's editors and several of its contributors discuss the book's themes in relation to their work in progress. To what extent is populism a distinctively modern phenomenon? To what extent does it have roots in earlier periods of political history? In addressing such questions, the contributors to this volume explore the links between populism and a wide range of topics in the history of political thought and the tradition of rhetoric. Below are summaries of each presentation:

#### **Paula Diehl (University of Kiel)**

Populist communication has become extremely entangled with celebrity politics and "politainment." I will highlight the constitutive elements of this hybrid form and discuss the implications of these transformations: the radicalization of celebrity politics, and the blurred borders between politics and entertainment, private and public, and reality and fiction.

#### **Rob Goodman (Toronto Metropolitan University)**

My presentation considers the racial and rhetorical dynamics of the 1820-1850 period in U.S. politics, an era often regarded as a "golden age" of American oratory. In this chapter (part of a project on race and American oratory), I consider how orators of this period grappled with a traditional problem in rhetoric—justifying privileged access to the public sphere—and how they encountered the paradox that speech at the furthest remove from ordinary language generated the most powerful democratic mandates. For white orators and audiences, it was often the notion of shared whiteness that papered over these difficulties. By surveying the construction of a rhetorical culture in which eloquence was white by definition, we can better grasp the subversive charge of Black abolitionist rhetoric in the antebellum period.

**Tae-Yeoun Keum (University of California, Santa Barbara)**

My book project is concerned with the symbolic dimensions of politics—a topic that gained special urgency in the German postwar. At stake in a set of debates between Hans Blumenberg, Jürgen Habermas, and Carl Schmitt was the question of how cultural meaning gets condensed into figurative forms of discourse that operate through imaginative representations, rather than propositional claims.

**Simon Lambek (University of the Fraser Valley, British Columbia)**

I consider the implications of the hermeneutic account of rhetorical resonance, which I developed in the volume, for the constructivist turn in the theory of representation. Specifically, I explore the constitutive power of populist meta-representational claims, highlighting the unique ways in which they work to construct the demos.

**Cary Nederman (Texas A&M University)**

In his writings about translation, Leonardo Bruni took the Latin rendering of the *Politics* by William of Moerbeke to stern task for transliterating Greek words rather than offering a proper translation. This is certainly true of the term *dēmagōgos*, which strictly speaking has no equivalent in Latin. I survey what sense the earliest medieval commentators on the *Politics* made of Moerbeke's literal translation of *dēmagōgos* as *demagogus* in the absence of any context for its meaning. This forms a part of a larger project that inquires into the medieval and Renaissance vocabulary related to Greek regime types.

**David Ragazzoni (University of Toronto)**

On the account of the Italian civic humanists, intellectual distinction and moral excellence were the prerequisites for legitimate authority, based on love of justice and the common good. Any ruler who lacked education and virtue was doomed to be a tyrant. Building on my chapter in the volume, I will clarify how the Italian humanists' concern with educated, virtuous leaders differed profoundly from the later understanding of political virtue championed by Machiavelli; I will also explain what lessons we can draw from these rival perspectives when it comes to assessing political leaders in our hyper-polarized and populist present.

---

Link to the Annual Meeting's homepage, including programme and further information: <https://connect.apsanet.org/apsa2025/>