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MICHAEL MOORE, AN AMERICAN POPULIST?[1]

Abstract

This article contextualizes the films of Michael Moore in the tradition of American populism. Extending in particular from historian Thomas Frank's argument in *People without Power* that populism can usefully be understood as a particular American tradition of leftism, the article traces how three of Moore's films—*Roger & Me* (1989), *Sicko* (2007), and *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009)—articulate political concerns that overlap with the political beliefs of American populism. The article also explores some of the populist elements in Moore's style and argues that there is good reason to see Michael Moore as a twenty-first-century American populist but that any attempt to do so must remain clear about the definitions of populism used to make this contextualist argument.

Keywords: Michael Moore, populism, leftism, American film, documentary film

[1] Jelena Šesnić prepared the paper for publication.

Introduction

Media scholar Douglas Kellner labels the filmmaker Michael Moore a "populist artist" without really explaining how Moore fits into that category (132). In a similar vein, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* speaks of how Moore in his teens started his "populist assault on what he viewed as the injustices of American capitalism" ("Michael Moore"), and in 2004 journalist Larissa MacFarquhar asserted in *The New Yorker* that "Michael Moore is a comedian and a populist" (MacFarquhar). MacFarquhar elaborates more than these other examples the alleged link between Moore and populism—she writes that "populists want to return to roots, to basic values, to solid things"—but the connection between Moore and populism remains unexamined to a fault. This seems, in part, related to the ambiguity of the term.

'Populism' is used in so many ways that the term sometimes seems to be almost void of meaning. To many pundits and commentators, populists are rightwing political figures such as Trump, Orban, and Bolsonaro, and several scholars use the term populism to refer to contemporary threats to liberal democracy (e.g., Müller 103). Intellectual historian Jan-Werner Müller, however, notes that both the Tea Party movement and Occupy Wall Street have been labelled populist and concludes that "all kinds of political anxieties get articulated in talk about 'populism' " (7). Indeed, American studies scholar Nathalie Massip notes that in the U.S. "the word seems to be as flexible as can be, covering the whole political spectrum, from Bernie Sanders to Donald Trump" (1). In what sense of the word, then, does it make sense to label Michael Moore a populist?

Historian Thomas Frank loathes the fact that the term is used today to refer to a variety of rightwing political figures. Capital-P Populism as a self-designation originally emerged in the 1890s as a leftist politics directed against the monied elites of America. This party was created to fight for "the rights and needs, the interests and welfare of the *people*" as a newspaper put it in May 1891 (qtd. in Frank, *People* 11; emphasis in the original). This new party, which originated in the rural population of the American Midwest, protested against widespread poverty, the debts that banks held over many farmers, and the monopolies that dominated the economy in that era (Frank, *People* 11). Frank wishes that his compatriots would start using the term populism to refer not to contemporary right-wingers, but instead use the term to refer to an American tradition of leftist egalitarianism.[2]

[2] It is important to emphasize that many scholars identify populism in several different regional and national contexts. Even though Frank wishes to reserve this label for a tradition of American leftism,

It is a crucial point for Frank to make, in his rather opinionated account of American Populism, that "Populism is not only a radical tradition, it is *our* radical tradition, a homegrown Left that spoke our American vernacular and worshipped at the shrines of Jefferson and Paine rather than Marx" (*People* 33; emphasis in the original). To Frank, the term populism should only be used to refer to a specific tradition on the American Left, and his way of writing "our" two times (and even italicizing the word) and invoking Jefferson and Paine at the expense of Marx connects with how states such as Kansas and Oklahoma were the birthplaces of this American leftist tradition. In some of the most Republican-dominated states of today, there once sprang to life a leftism that tried to improve the living circumstances and economic standing of ordinary people. So, when people today are using the word populism to talk about right-wing anti-democrats, Thomas Frank laments that they ultimately "are also attacking the American radical tradition" (*People* 34).

In other words, there is a populist tradition going back some 130 years in the U.S. that informs the country's political culture, and the fact that Moore himself identifies as being "on the Left" ("Michael Moore Talks") motivates my attempt to situate him in relation to populism-as-leftism in the way that Frank lays out the term. This means that while my discussion of populism does incorporate arguments and ideas from scholars such as Michael Kazin, Jan-Werner Müller, and Pierre Ostiguy (who all see populism both on the left and the right), my definition of populism as a leftist tradition is culled from Thomas Frank. It is this tradition of *American populism-as-leftism* that I try to see Moore in relation to.

In 2003, historian Kevin Mattson remarked in the leftist magazine *Dissent* that filmmaker "Michael Moore is probably America's most prominent leftist. People who have never read *Dissent* have probably seen Moore on prime-time television . . . or in a movie cineplex . . . or maybe purchased one of his best-sell-

many scholars see a populist tradition in Latin America, one in Europe, and another one in Russia etc. Populism, in this broad way of discussing the term, is regionally specific and is not "the same in France, the US South, Venezuela, Southeastern Europe, or the Philippines" in the words of political scientist Pierre Ostiguy (76). Indeed, the label's meaning varies from context to context, usually denoting "clientelism and economic mismanagement" in the Latin American context while most often pointing to "anti-immigration and xenophobia" in Europe (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2). For many scholars, American Populism is thus but one form of populism, which is in line with how historian Michael Kazin argues that while lower-case populism is a fitting label for several groups and individuals, upper-case Populism should be reserved for discussing the People's Party formed in 1892 (5). This qualification is merely to say that my way of positioning Michael Moore is in relation to the American tradition of Populism, not the other traditions of discussing the term.

ing books" (Mattson). A year after Mattson made this comment, Moore released *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a scathing indictment of the Bush administration, which to this day is the highest grossing documentary in film history ("Genre Keyword: Documentary"). The commercial success of this film certainly lends weight to Mattson's comment on Moore's status. Indeed, in 2018 journalist Owen Gleiberman argued that the release of *Fahrenheit 9/11* marked a time when Moore "had become instrumental in defining the national dialogue" (Owen). Maybe Mattson was being hyperbolic in 2003 about Moore's status in the public eye but considering the commercial and critical success of *Bowling for Columbine* (and later *Fahrenheit 9/11*) it does seem to be a probable characterization.

If nothing else, Mattson was able to confidently make this claim in a leftist magazine at the time, which surely lends weight to its probability. Moore's prominent status as a leftist in the public eye in the U.S. is a motivation for why we should explore exactly *how* Moore embodies leftist sentiments and politics. I am not suggesting that Moore's popularity is what makes him populist, but I do find it relevant to explore how this prominent leftist filmmaker and author can be understood in that tradition of "a homegrown Left that spoke [an] American vernacular" (Frank, *People* 33). Any attempt, however, to situate Michael Moore's oeuvre in the populist tradition means going back to the place where the term came from: Kansas in the 1890s.

The People's Party and the Longer Tradition of American Populism

In the 1870s, the U.S. was experiencing growth in the industrial sector and the country's economy was overall doing well. But farmers in the Midwest and in the South did not reap the profits of this economic boom. Their situation was only getting worse as the prices of their crops were dropping and in the late 1880s a drought made things worse. On top of that, farmers relied on railroad companies to transport their produce to other parts of the country and to foreign markets. But these companies used their monopoly status to hike their prices. Some farmers grew more politicized with the creation of the Farmers' Alliance, and they concluded that they shared a common foe with the labor federation Knights of Labor. This bringing together of farmers and workers was one of the Populists' feats and one of its "boldest move[s]" (Massip 28).

By the 1890s, this situation of extended economic hardship had caused severe problems for many Americans. Farmers could not make a living off the

land (Taggart 36) and this situation spurred the foundation of the People's Party in 1892. During its brief flourishing in this decade, the People's Party had success in capturing six seats in the U.S. Senate along with getting more than forty members elected to the House of the Representatives (Magliari 389). In addition to its electoral success in federal bodies, it won the governorships in Colorado, Kansas, South Dakota and won governorships in collaboration with both the Democrats (Idaho, Nebraska, Oregon, and Washington) and Republicans (North Carolina) ("People's Party [United States]"). But the party soon died out in the aftermath of its ill-fated endorsement of Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan in the 1896 election (Frank, *People* 31).

The leftism in the People's Party came from its ambition to make the government intervene in the economy in the interests of working people (Frank, *People* 24). To historian Michael Kazin, populist rhetoric in American history has "stressed economic grievances and reaffirmed the producer ethic" which refers to how the Populists of the 1890s represented the producing classes: especially farmers but also industrial workers (17).

To Frank, the People's Party of the 1890s, FDR's New Deal policies in the 1930s, and the New Left of the 1960s represent the three pinnacle points of populist politics in contemporary American history. The substantial difference between the 1890s and the 1930s was, to Frank, that after Herbert Hoover handed over the reins of the Executive Branch to Franklin Roosevelt, "the federal government no longer automatically took the side of the business class" (*People* 85). Historian Jefferson Cowie supports this interpretation, arguing that FDR's policies meant that the federal government used its power to change American society in "the economic interest of nonelite Americans in ways that it had not done before or since" (9). To Frank, the New Deal policies of the 1930s represent the populist tradition. Populism, in this sense, "is what strengthened the unions and built a middle-class democracy" (*People* 115). The New Deal created an era in American history where unions were relatively strong, where economic inequality was relatively modest compared to the eras before and after it, and where political divisiveness was less prominent (Cowie 10–13).

Frank extends his narrative of American populism-as-leftism to the 1960s and sees in both the civil rights movement and the New Left of that era another generation of intellectual inheritors of the original Populists of the 1890s. The Students for a Democratic Society (who Frank describes as "the main organiza-

tion of what was then called the New Left") called for *participatory democracy*, which, for example, was expressed in the *Port Huron Statement*'s (1962) call for that "big economic decisions 'should be open to democratic participation and subject to democratic social regulation.'" To Frank, the SDS echoed Populism though these New Lefters did not always acknowledge this affinity (*People* 183).

Though Frank sees in the left of the 1960s an important chapter in the history of American populism, he does not fully embrace all aspects of how the New Left understood inequality. He criticizes the students of the New Left for not seeing a point in aligning with the working class in America. To Frank, the New Left focused too much on the internationalist idea of declaring solidarity with what we today would call the Global South, thus disregarding the American working class (*People* 187). Another part of 1960s populism is, to Frank, embodied by Martin Luther King's 1961 speech to the United Auto Workers Union where King called for these auto workers to support the southern cause of the civil rights movement. King expressed hope for a future political reality where "congressmen from the South" would join "those from the northern industrial states to design and enact legislation for the people rather than for the privileged" (King, qtd. in Frank, *People* 174). To Frank, to champion a politics that was "for the people rather than for the privileged" represents "a classic variation on the tradition populist formula" (*People* 175). In the 21st century, Frank sees Bernie Sanders as a current representative of the longer stretch of American populism (*People* 254) yet he also emphasizes that the core of populism is to build a mass movement ("Thomas Frank Is Sick of Anti-Populists").

Though Frank is most famous for his books on American *political* history, his first book (which was based on his PhD dissertation) was actually on postwar American *cultural* history (Frank 1997). Given this scholarly background it is no surprise that Frank also touches briefly upon how media texts are able to speak into the tradition of American populism. To Frank, especially Frank Capra's films embody a populist sentiment, specifically citing *Meet John Doe* (1941) as a good example of what populism looks like in the world of film (*People* 100). In Frank's definition, then, populism can indeed be articulated in the world of filmmaking, which leads me to the question of how Michael Moore can be said to fit into this American populist tradition?

Michael Moore

Douglas Kellner argues that "there are filmmakers who aspire to a norm of maximum objectivity, contrasted to those who insert themselves in a nonobjective partisan camp" (155). Given the political edge of his films, Moore clearly belongs to the latter category, which is an important through-line in his oeuvre. When an interviewer in 1989 asked if Moore thought of *Roger & Me* as a documentary, he said "No, I think of it as a movie, an entertaining movie," likening it to films such as *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and the works of Charlie Chaplin; films that Moore believed "dealt with social commentary, the problems of the day, but also [let] a lot of people laugh a little" (Moore, qtd. in Jacobson 24). He thus emphasizes *Roger & Me*'s status as a social problem film rather than its status as documentary, which speaks to how much Moore stresses the importance of films engaging with the real world on important issues.

This ambition of engaging head-on with social issues with a dose of humor is a central feature of his style. Indeed, fifteen years into his career as a filmmaker Moore would lament that the "The Left is boring . . . We used to be funny. The Left was funny in the 60s, and then we got really too damn serious. I don't think it did us any good" (Moore, "Michael Moore's 13 Rules"). (Interestingly, the 1960s are to Frank the last time that leftist populism had a heyday.) Moore's use of humor arguably accounts at least for some of his popularity and maybe also why people label him a populist. But his use of humor connects with the issue of how to label Moore's films. Moore has suggested that documentarians should: "Stop making documentaries. Start making movies. . . . People love going to the movies. . . . Why wouldn't you want to make a *movie*? Because if you made a *movie*, people might actually go see your documentary" (Moore, "Michael Moore's 13 Rules").

Moore downplays the importance of discussing, say, *Roger & Me* in relation to the tradition of documentary filmmaking. This is maybe because his film breaks with certain conventions in documentary filmmaking. Moore's political ambitions with *Roger & Me*—wanting to attend to the deindustrialization crisis of the 1980s—can be sidetracked in discussions that center very much on the formal aspects of his filmmaking.

Moore's signature style testifies to how much Moore wants to make sure that his voice is heard and that his messages reach a large audience. This connects to how he seems to be more interested in discussing the state of contemporary

social issues like deindustrialization and unemployment than he cares about situating his films in relation to the work of other documentarians. You cannot separate the content from form, but it is important to Moore that the formal aspects of his films do not overshadow their content.

This connects with another aspect of Moore's approach. When Moore compared *Roger & Me* to *Sophie's Choice* and Chaplin's films, he did so because these films so clearly engage with fundamental social "problems of the day." They obviously reach out into the world to engage with it, and that ambition has been part of Moore's approach as a filmmaker from day one. That 'day one' came in 1989 with *Roger & Me*. But before proceeding to the analysis of the films in question I should explain why I choose to focus on these three films in Moore's oeuvre. In order to explore links between Moore's films and the populist tradition, I take a starting point in topics that were also of interest to the original Populists or some of their ideological heirs.

Roger & Me attends to the situation of the working class, which is similar to the structural background of the nineteenth-century Populists. *Sicko* makes a case for universal healthcare, which to Frank ought to be an obvious cause for twenty-first–century populists (*People* 254), and *Capitalism: A Love Story* takes issue with the economic structure of America, which the Populists also did. From those preliminary points of comparison, I can thus set out to see in greater detail how Moore's films articulate a form of contemporary American populism.

Roger & Me (1989)

Roger & Me is a somewhat sprawling and multifaceted portrait of the city of Flint, Michigan. The film presents a cascade of interviews that together form of a mosaic of Flint, but the film's narrative through-line is created through Moore's continued attempts to interview then-CEO of General Motors Roger Smith in order to discuss the poverty and unemployment that followed in the wake of GM's plant closings in Flint in the 1980s (Jensen 35). The populist thrust in *Roger & Me* lies in how Moore shows Roger Smith as being disconnected from the trials of this rapidly deindustrializing city. To Moore, this is a case of a corporate elite against a struggling working-class city. The relationship between GM and Flint was once of reciprocal benefit, but this relationship since turned almost antagonistic. *Roger & Me* features an old clip where a GM representative says in reference to union activity and several strikes that: "The GM employee has made great advances. It is our wish that he con-

tinue to prosper. Most of our employees, even those who at times cause problems . . . are conscientious and hardworking men and women" (*Roger & Me*).

This proclamation of shared interests between GM and workers in Michigan almost embodies the heyday of postwar American capitalism where social inequality was lower than it had ever been and where industrial workers got a share of the profits. Industrial work had allowed many working-class Americans to achieve middle-class lifestyles and livelihoods but then deindustrialization hit. In 1982, economists Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison argued that deindustrialization resulted in "a fundamental struggle between capital and community" (19), which is also how *Roger & Me* portrays the issue. Anthropologist Kathryn Marie Dudley argues that deindustrialization came with the "cultural recognition that blue-collar laborers are of a lower social status than they ha[d] been pretending to be" (Dudley, qtd. in Berger and High 3). This is the crisis *Roger & Me* zooms in on. There once was an overlap between GM's and Flint's interests, and Moore shows how GM's representatives have changed their tune. When interviewed by Moore, the GM lobbyist Tom Kay says that he does not "understand all your connection that by saying that because General Motors was born here it owes more to this community." Continues Kay: "I don't agree with that. . . . I believe it's a corporation that's in business to make a profit and it does what it has to do to make a profit. That's the nature of corporations or companies. It's why people take their own money and invest it in a business: so they can make money. It isn't to honor their hometown" (*Roger & Me*).

The discrepancy between the former statement and Kay's views here are astounding. Where the other GM representative emphasized the strong links between GM and Flint, Tom Kay completely discards that argument. To Kay, GM does not owe anything special to its home city. There once was a time when GM's and Flint's interests overlapped. The company's profits were big enough and some of those profits ended up in the city and in the workers' pockets. But in the 1980s GM laid off 30,000 workers. In Moore's way of presenting the deindustrialization crisis, GM was still doing fine while the city's workers were struggling. Moore's take on this development extends directly from an indignation, which aligns perfectly with how Frank defines populism as being "for the people rather than for the privileged" in the words of Martin Luther King.

Moore's critique in *Roger & Me*, however, is not reserved for the corporate elite. The entire opening of the film has to do with how Moore's family history is

intertwined with the history of GM where Moore's father, for instance, is told to have worked "at GM's AC Spark Plug in Flint for 33 years. In fact, as I grew older, I discovered that my entire family had worked for GM: Grandparents, parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins. Everyone but me" (*Roger & Me*). Moore suggests that his life story makes him intimately vested in Flint and its working class. He holds up his working-class upbringing to assert that his take on deindustrialization is that of the insider's perspective. He then tells, however, how he landed the position as editor of the left-leaning magazine *Mother Jones* though he soon runs afoul with its owner:

> I went in to work and announced that I was going to give a monthly column to a Flint autoworker. The owner instead told me to run an investigative report on herbal teas. I told him I had a better idea: Let's put that autoworker on the cover. The owner wasn't amused and declared that California and I were a mismatch. Just before he offered me my free U-Haul back to Michigan. (*Roger & Me*)

This is Moore critiquing the parts of the American left that focus too much on the interests of the cultural upper-middle class (as symbolized by the herbal tea). To Moore, this group disregards the situation and the interests of the American working class. Though Moore's main grievance in *Roger & Me* is deindustrialization and the corporate elite embodied by Roger Smith, Moore is here emphasizing that parts of the American left were too concerned with issues that, in Moore's eyes, paled in comparison with the crisis of deindustrialization in the 1980s. A left-leaning magazine like *Mother Jones* should pay attention to a reality where tens of thousands of industrial workers are losing their livelihoods. If nothing else this transformation of the American economy must be more important than herbal tea that here comes to stand as a symbol of the consumption patterns of the cultural upper-middle class (Jensen 35). Moore points his finger at some of his fellow leftists in the U.S. and shows that even though he did not want to work in manufacturing, he did not turn his back on the industrial working class. In both cases, Moore is presenting himself as the proverbial 'little guy' that speaks 'upwards' against dominant and dominating institutions, which is also embodied in the film's promotional poster:

Moore's way of presenting himself as the lone microphone-wielding-man embodies his populist stance. He is on the side of 'the people' against the established elites, a central aspect of populist politics and rhetoric according to Cas

Mudde and Cristobal Kaltwasser (6). In terms of critiquing America's left, this position connects to how dominant sections of the Democratic Party at that point in time had severed its ties to labor and the working class. Thomas Frank's main complaint in *Listen, Liberal* (2016) is that many Democrats since the 1970s "actually *chose* to reach out to the affluent and to turn their back on workers" (48; emphasis in the original).

Fig. 1. Promotional poster of Michael Moore's 1989 motion picture *Roger & Me*.

Frank's critical view of this move echoes *Roger & Me*'s critique of how some American leftists in the 1980s had too little interest in the fate of the industrial working class. This sequence at the start of the film gives *Roger & Me* its *raison d'être*: 'Enough with your talk of herbal tea, here is a story of the most central economic transformation of America in decades,' Moore seems to say to his fellow leftists and his compatriots in general. This is all the more important given how *Roger & Me* is one of the only films to focus on deindustrialization apart from Ron Howard's 1986 comedy *Gung Ho* (Jensen 80–82). There are other documentaries like *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* (2009) and *Detropia* (2012) but arguably none with the type of distribution deal that *Roger & Me* got from Warner Bros.

Another important point in Moore's populism is the fact that he does not vilify the white working class. Some scholars argue that the white working class has been belittled for decades. Law professor Joan Williams argues that "the white working class has been insulted or ignored during precisely the period when their economic fortunes tanked" (3). In a similar fashion, literary scholar Sherry Lee Linkon notes that "many in the white working class [are] all too aware of how they are seen" (xiii). Media scholar Matthew Henry argues that the problem is not only the negative depiction of working-class people (of all colors) in the mass media. The working class as a whole is underrepresented in popular culture, an issue that has fueled "the belief that everyone in the United States is, at a minimum, middle class (or should be). What is absent in all of this is an honest image of a discussion about the working class" (Henry 136).

The white working class was not always ignored or portrayed in negative terms, but Frank argues that it started being vilified in the 1960s where many New Left activists came "to believe that the American people were not the protestors getting fire-hosed by the police in Birmingham, Alabama; the American people were now seen as the ones turning the fire hoses on those protestors" (*People* 187). Moore decidedly avoids this form of portrait of the (industrial) working class. Indeed, the purpose of *Roger & Me* is to 'protect the interests' of the working class of all colors in what since became known as the American Rust Belt. This is a central part of Moore's populism. But his populist creed, however, was not just evident when he dealt with deindustrialization, it also came to the fore when he decided to tackle the issue of public health in the U.S.

Sicko (2007)

Sicko is an indictment of the American health insurance industry. Roughly the first 30 minutes of Moore's two-hour film are devoted to showing one example after another of different people's problems with being denied care when they are insured or with being told that they are ineligible for taking out insurance because of various reasons. This is the little man against the corporate elite, which connects this film clearly with Moore's angle in *Roger & Me*.

Sicko is preoccupied with measuring the distance between the ideals Moore holds up for American society and the realities he presents in the course of the film. The film operates with this distance between ideals and reality while embodying an optimistic take on 'the people.' "Populism was and is," Frank argues, "relentlessly optimistic—about people, about political possibilities, about life, and about America in general" (*People* 242). This is the ideological starting point for how Moore presents healthcare in the U.S. After having shown a parade of people who do not get the help they need from the pharmaceutical industry and showing a very marginalized woman that was released from a hospital even though she evidently needed further care, Moore muses that, "I always thought and believe to this day that we're a good and generous people. This is what we do if somebody's in trouble. Anybody gets sick, we all get together and help" (*Sicko*).

Moore's words express the optimism that Frank finds to be so characteristic of populism. Moore emphatically does not cast himself in opposition to American society in general. Sometimes Moore has been accused of being anti-American (Krzych 88) and 2004 even saw the release of a film titled *Michael*

Moore Hates America. Such critique is surely informed by people disagreeing with Moore's views, which, of course, is a wholly legitimate approach, but I find it hard to find textual evidence in his documentaries that Moore hates or rejects American life and society as such.

These different invocations of 'America,' however, also show just how politically flexible this national discourse can be. In the case of Moore, however, there is hardly any anti-Americanism to be traced. Moore continuously and emphatically wraps himself in a metaphorical Stars and Stripes and laments the distance between what he believes the United States ought to be and what he observes as reality.

Sicko features interviews with volunteers who helped out at Ground Zero after the 9/11 attacks in New York City. These rescue workers have not received the medical help they need despite the fact that they became sick due to their time spent at Ground Zero. This comes to stand as emblematic of the disconnect between what Moore believes should be a humane society who treats people fairly and how these people—whom Moore labels heroes—are denied treatment for, for instance, respiratory illnesses (*Sicko*).

The film's dramatic climax comes when Moore, after having demonstrated through archival footage that the detainees at Guantanamo Bay have access to medical treatment, invites several people to travel to that military facility to demand treatment for them. There are no confrontational interviews in *Sicko* like in, say, *Roger & Me* or *Bowling for Columbine*, but standing on a boat off the coast of Cuba Michael shouts to a guard tower: "Permission to enter. I have three 9/11 rescue workers. They need some medical attention. These are 9/11 rescue workers! They just want some medical attention! The same kind that al-Qaida is getting. They don't want any more than you're giving the evildoers, just the same!" (*Sicko*)

This situation is, of course, staged. Moore cannot reasonably expect a military base to let civilians enter without prior clearance, but the scene dramatizes the disconnect and the disappointment of the rescue workers who are not getting the treatment that they, in Moore's view, should be able to get in the U.S. In Frank's view, universal healthcare would be an obvious cause for contemporary populists (*People* 254) and thus, in a political sense, *Sicko* follows in the footsteps of this American tradition of populist politics. The humor in this scene, however, is also populist in the sense that it bemoans an obvious disconnect between the fact that terrorists receive treatment while post-9/11 rescue workers do not.

Pierre Ostiguy writes that political *styles* can either be 'high' or 'low.' A left-leaning figure in the 'high' category would be George McGovern while a right-leaning political figure in that category would be Nelson Rockefeller or David Cameron in the UK. Conversely, a rightist figure in the 'low' category would be Sarah Palin, while a leftist 'low' figure would be Huey Long, the populist Democratic Governor of Louisiana in the interwar period (Ostiguy 75).[3] The 'low' style of populist rhetoric is thus historically tied to American populism-as-leftism.

The labels 'low' and 'high' are not supposed to suggest that one form of communication is better than the other, but that there are ways of presenting yourself in public that signal different attitudes. Indeed, Ostiguy emphasizes that "the 'low' in politics is not synonymous with poor people or lower social strata" pointing to how much wealthier, for instance, the 1990s presidential candidate Ross Perot was compared to Al Gore though the latter "was clearly more 'high' " (78).

My point here is that Moore's posturing here is the 'low' leftist stance. This is central in Ostiguy's approach insofar as he "define[s] populism, in very few words, as the 'flaunting of the 'low' " (73). Moore could have made his critique of the lack of treatment of rescue workers in a borderline technocratic, dispassionate way, but instead he chooses to shout theatrically at a guard tower in the Caribbean from a boat. This is one way that Moore continues in the footsteps of an American populist rhetoric.

Moore then travels to Cuba in order to get treatment for his ailing fellow travelers, which offers the filmmaker the chance to muse about the Cuban system, noting that "Their only sin when it comes to healthcare seems to be that they don't do it for a profit" (*Sicko*). An earlier scene features archival footage from the 1950s showing Ronald Reagan's ads to warn against socialized medicine. Reagan argues that such a program will be followed by "other federal programs that will invade every area of freedom as we have known it in this country. Until one day. We will awake to find that we have socialism" (*Sicko*). Moore counters this Cold War discourse by pointing to how other public services like the police, libraries, the postal service, and public schools work fine as publicly owned and run operations.

[3] Thomas Frank sees Huey Long's "Share Our Wealth" movement as having "admirable social-democratic aims," but Frank also notes that Long's "name became synonymous with demagoguery" (*People* 99). Paul Taggart labels Long a capital-P Populist though Long ran as a Democrat (6, 38).

The key scene in the trip to Cuba comes when a middle-aged woman tears up when she expresses her gratitude over getting medical treatment by the Cuban health professionals for free. The emotionality of that scene is central to *Sicko*'s indictment of the American health care system. To me, that woman's gratitude is irreducible. Viewers who are critical of Moore's politics or his storytelling choices might be skeptical of how the subsequent montage sequence showing various medical procedures is accompanied by extra-diegetic string music that arguably adds to the emotionality of the sequence. But that woman's gratitude is, at least to me, a strong 'argument' in favor of Moore's politics. The patients' gratitude can hardly be reduced to a stylistic choice on Moore's part. But Moore certainly embraces the melodramatic potential that this footage offers. In choosing between dispassionately portraying human suffering in a way where the footage is supposed to speak 'on its own' on the one hand and, on the other hand, to employ audiovisual techniques to emphasize the emotionality of the situation, Moore opts for the latter approach, which is also part of his populist style.

Michael Moore is fond of taking on big topics. *Roger & Me* took on the massive topic of deindustrialization, *Bowling for Columbine* broached the themes of guns and violence in the U.S., and *Sicko* then tackled the issue of public health in America. For his next film, Moore chose an even larger theme, namely American capitalism.

Capitalism: A Love Story (2009)

Film scholar Bill Nichols argues that a documentary "may entertain or please, but it does so in relation to a rhetorical or persuasive effort aimed at the existing social world" (69). In the case of *Capitalism: A Love Story*, this point about documentary films intervening in "the existing social world" is particularly relevant to how Moore uses archival footage from his childhood to portray a form of capitalism that is unlike that of the American economy in 2009 when this film was released. Using voice-over narration, Moore tells of how his father was able to pay out their mortgage on their house before Moore started school. To film scholar Kendall R. Phillips, this sequence "provides a different vision of America's golden age, one founded on high taxes, strong unions, and a growing American middle class" (301–02). Moore portrays with nostalgia what historians call the New Deal order saying that "if this was capitalism, I loved it. And so did everyone else" (*Capitalism: A Love Story*).

Moore's use of the word *if* here points to how this era's capitalism is not the capitalism of the 21st century. Jefferson Cowie's argument about the New Deal era (circa mid-1930s to late-1970s) being *The Great Exception*, as the title of one of his books reads, parallels Moore's point here. This period of American history was "a sustained deviation, an extended detour . . . from some of the main contours of American political practice, economic structure, and cultural outlook" (Cowie 9). The capitalism of the New Deal era was an exception to the rule of how American society and its economy worked both before and after this era. Moore's *if* thus suggests that the form of American capitalism he embraces is the kind that is the exception to the rule, a discrete way of saying that capitalism in general is problematic.

This is a strategic choice in terms of how Moore portrays the years of his upbringing as an era of functional capitalism. Indeed, Phillips argues that "Representations of the 1950s typically focus on domestic tranquility, family values, and American ascendancy and are most often used, as Christine Spengler notes, 'to bolster support for socially conservative legislation'" (301–02). In other words, reminiscing about the 1950s is typically associated with a set of values far from Moore's leftist inclinations. But Moore uses this footage from his childhood in the 1950s and early 1960s not as point of nostalgia for a traditional social order in terms of conservative gender roles or suburban law and order. His vision of this era is that of the New Deal order that had a good place in the economy for the industrial working class. Moore thus takes this decade—that is, usually a reference point in conservative discourse as a heyday of American life and culture—and recasts it as a heyday for Moore's leftist vision of American life in economic terms.

This connects with how *Capitalism: A Love Story* embraces Franklin Delano Roosevelt's proposed Second Bill of Rights as what Moore believes should be the road to take for the U.S. in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Presented by Roosevelt in his 11th State of Union Address in 1944, this Second Bill of Rights came from, in Roosevelt's words, "a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence" and thus aimed to provide "The right of every family to a decent home, The right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health" among other goals to secure a good livelihood for Americans (Roosevelt). Roosevelt's vision is a concrete example "of the way America could have been, the road not taken" as Phillips argues (299–300). Like in *Sicko*, Moore does not

"other" himself to stand in staunch opposition to American capitalism. He embraces a form of capitalism that was dominant before Reaganomics emerged in the 1980s, and he uses the icon of FDR to bolster the case for a more leftist vision for the United States.

Moore proclaims that the America of FDR and not that of Reagan should be taken to be the "real" America. Here it is important to note how Thomas Frank embraces the New Deal as one of the three pinnacle points in the history of American populism. In this sense, Moore harks back to an important era in the history of American populism in order to point out a way forward for the U.S.

The film opens with a sequence showing a middle-aged couple who is getting ready to move out of their house that is being foreclosed. Moore's approach to depicting the momentous topic of capitalism thus starts at eye level, showing in a very concrete and relatable manner what capitalism can mean in some instances. This footage shows the desperation that was an important aspect of the financial crisis. Later on, Moore shows how several teenagers at one point were held at a youth care facility in Pennsylvania. The facility kept them there not for pedagogical or psychological reasons, but because the longer the teenagers were in their custody, the more the institution was able to bill the government for their services. Moore uses this extreme case to take issue with the profit motive. Moore does not take issue with the profit motive wholesale, but shows that, at least, this motive cannot wisely be applied to all areas in society. These sequences lead to Moore pointing to how Reagan's presidency was pivotal in changing American capitalism for the worse. Moore thus goes from the concrete level to taking issue with dominant economic discourses at a more general level.

Though Moore is critical of twenty-first century capitalism, he is not one to end a film in a defeatist way. Just before invoking FDR, the film shows how factory workers in Chicago went on strike to take on the Bank of America and their employer to get "paid what they were owed" and won (*Capitalism: A Love Story*). This is dramaturgically important insofar as Moore has devoted most of the film to pointing out the maladies of the current state of the economy. So right before the film ends, Moore gives the viewer a sense of optimism. Moore once said that he does not "want people leaving the theater depressed after my movies. I want them angry. Depressed is a passive emotion. Anger is active" ("Michael Moore's 13 Rules"), suggesting how the narrative structure of *Capitalism: A Love Story* invites its viewers to have that active indignation in them after

they have watched this film. Ending the film in this way is thus directly tied to his political ambitions.

These ambitions are expressed in Moore's style of left-wing patriotism. His rhetoric is his way "to march backward into battle" as intellectual historian Quentin Skinner puts it (295). In other words, Moore knows all too well that his politics are off-center in the American context. He needs to *not* "other" himself from the mainstream of American culture and society. He shows the realities and consequences of socioeconomic marginalization in the U.S. and thus emphasizes that the downtrodden are not only found in the Global South, which was how the New Left saw things according to Frank's analysis. This is Moore showing himself to be part of that "homegrown Left that spoke [an] American vernacular" in Frank's words.

Michael Moore's Americanism is thus an important part of his populism. This is a clear echo of the original Populists' rhetoric and beliefs in the 1890s as is evidenced in the language of the Omaha Platform, the People's Party program from 1892. Nathalie Massip notes how this document stresses the political sovereignty of the people (7) in its talk about "restor[ing] the government of the Republic to the hands of "the plain people," with which class it originated" as the Omaha Platform reads (*National People's Party Platform* 1892). In a similar vein, the Omaha Platform program celebrated the national icon of George Washington and proclaimed loyalty to the U.S. Constitution while also sounding a clear intertextual echo of Lincoln's call for a "government of the people, by the people, for the people" (Massip 7). The Populists wrapped themselves in the metaphorical Stars and Stripes, and later on several American unionists did the same thing. They embraced Americanism as a response to claims of them being anarchists, subversives, or belonging to other maligned groups (Frank, *People* 6). Moore's leftist Americanism is a clear inheritor to this tradition. He embraces Americanism as his way of legitimizing his politics and not othering himself in political discourse. He knows all too well how leftist politics can be othered as un-American and this is one reason why he "march[es] backward into battle" in this way.

In Moore's vision for the United States, this invocation of democratic thought is central to his vision for economic issues. He wants to extend the ideals of democratic government to also apply to the economic sphere: "There seems to be a disconnect," Moore argues, "between our professed love of democracy

and how we're so willing to accept a dictatorship every day we show up to work" (*Capitalism: A Love Story*). Moore's call for another vision of the American economy invokes the principles of democracy—arguably one of the most celebrated aspects of American society—in order to articulate capitalism as a system where the workers lose too much of their freedom when they "show up to work." This aspect is also articulated by the film's poster:

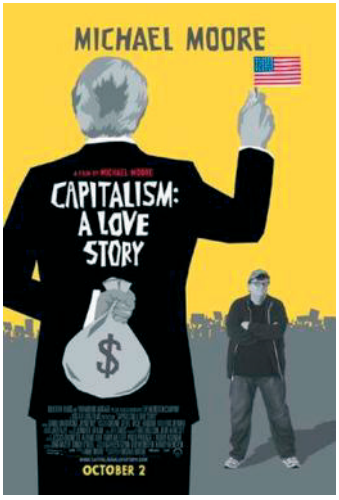

Fig. 2. Poster of Michael Moore's 2009 documentary *Capitalism: A Love Story*.

Like on the poster for *Roger & Me*, Moore, here backed up by protesters, is facing off with an anonymous character. The key point is that this anonymous character in the foreground is holding up the Stars and Stripes with his right hand while holding a bag of money behind his back with his left hand. The poster's message is that this anonymous character celebrates America but keeps the money for himself. This paratext thus flags the question of what economic beliefs can be articulated and promoted while also professing a loyalty to American identity and ideology.

Moore embraces the Stars and Stripes just as much as that anonymous character, but his vision is different. The film itself goes at length to say that twenty-first century capitalism is not in the interests of many Americans. But Moore points to other parts of American history to say that there is a fairer way of organizing the economic that is "American in nature." This is his Americanism and the argument in *Capitalism: A Love Story* thus parallels that of Thomas Frank's *People Without Power*: both texts look to the American past to point out a more leftist way forward for the United States.

Conclusion

Ostiguy argues that "populism involves the creation of a very peculiar kind of *rapport*" (74). Ostiguy refers to politicians, but his argument also applies to Moore's attempts to create a rapport with this audience. Communication scholars Thomas W. Benson and Brian J. Snee place Moore's films in the participatory style of documentary filmmaking "in which the filmmaker appears on screen

and is part of the narrative" pointing to how the "image of Moore in his baseball hat and windbreaker was central to the rhetoric and appeal of his early films" (21). This persona is an important part of Moore's way of creating a rapport with his audience.

There is, of course, a reason behind why Moore has adopted his signature style. In the case of *Roger & Me* it came from a wish to actually stop the deindustrialization of Flint, Michigan (*Roger & Me*, DVD bonus features) and that sort of societal engagement means, to Moore, that there is a style of filmmaking that is more adept for that kind of intervention. This populist style is seen in his on-screen persona, his signature cap, his irreverent humor, and in his way of going from the concrete example to social commentary with a broader scope. His style is populist in the sense that it aims for engaging with a broad public, which, given his Moore's box office success, is to be deemed a success in many ways.

But the political content of Moore's films is also populist in the leftist sense of the word as Thomas Frank outlines it. In the DVD bonus features for *Roger & Me*, Moore paratextually extends the film's political premise to the issue of democratizing the economy. Moore argues that "[i]f we're going to live in a democratic society it should be a democracy in all facets of the society not just in elections, in who you get to vote for. We should have a democratic economy too. An economy that's controlled by the people" (*Roger & Me*, DVD bonus features).

This sounds more or less like a call for a democratic socialism in the sense that democratic principles also should apply to economic issues. But as Frank writes, populism is interested in "reform[ing] capitalism in the interests of the great majority" (*People* 188). Moore's call for a democratization of the economy arguably is more in line with the central tenets of contemporary democratic socialism (e.g., Dragsted 2021) than it is in line with populism's interest in creating another form of capitalism. Moore's argument is, however, reminiscent of how Frank sees the *Port Huron Statement*'s call for "democratic social regulation" of the economy as part of the American tradition of populism. In this sense, Moore again fits the bill of the American populist. Here it is relevant to note how *Sicko* also presents itself as being on the side of the people and being against the pharmaceutical industry, which very much is in line with Frank's characterization of populism as being "for the people rather than for the privileged." In this sense, Moore's politics echoes the American tradition of populism as Frank outlines it in a broader sense.

Though Thomas Frank wishes that his compatriots would only use the term populism to refer to a specific tradition of American leftism, he does acknowledge that this ambition is probably too ambitious. He realizes that he will not be able to change how people use the term (Frank, "Thomas Frank Is Sick of Anti-Populists"). It is therefore crucial to be specific about the way that Moore fits the bill of a populist, given how contested the term is. There is also the issue that populism often is an other-labeling that carries negative connotations (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2) and maybe labelling Moore a populist is to do him a disservice in this sense.

I must therefore emphasize that I do not subscribe to this way of understanding the term populism. If we, like Thomas Frank, see a populist-leftist tradition extending from the 1890s throughout American history, Moore fits that bill in many ways. This contextualist appreciation of Moore's filmmaking is useful in terms of qualifying our understanding how Moore engages with American culture and society. In this way, we get to see just *how* Moore fits into the history of the American tradition of populism.

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MICHAEL MOORE, AMERIČKI POPULIST?

Sažetak

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Članak smješta filmove Michaela Moorea u kontekst tradicije američkoga populizma. Polazeći naročito od argumenta povjesničara Thomasa Franka u djelu *People without Power* kako se populizam može korisno razumjeti kao zasebna američka ljevičarska tradicija, članak propituje kako tri Mooreova filma — *Roger i ja* (*Roger & Me*; 1989.), *Bolesno* (*Sicko*; 2007.) i *Kapitalizam: ljubavna priča* (*Capitalism: A Love Story*; 2009.) — izražavaju političke stavove koji se preklapaju s političkim pozicijama američkoga populizma. Članak također istražuje neke populističke elemente Mooreova stila te smatra kako postoji utemeljeni razlog da se Michael Moore shvati kao američki populist dvadeset i prvoga stoljeća, ali da svaki takav pokušaj mora jasno razgraničiti definicije populizma koje se koriste u izricanju tog kontekstualiziranog argumenta.

Ključne riječi: Michael Moore, populizam, ljevica, američki film, dokumentarni film