

Critically Reapproaching Populisms: The Ideologies of Democracy Movements in Africa

20th March 2025

Presentation at the *The Uses and Abuses of Political Ideas in Africa* Workshop

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The Critically Reapproaching Populisms in Africa Project

Workshop in June 2025

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Nine papers by ten authors located across four continents

This paper is designed as the introductory article to this set of papers

Two focuses and contributions

The ideologies of democracy movements in Africa

Populism and democracy

Our point of entry: a diversity of actors define their cause as 'democracy'

Holding this diversity of actors in focus

Taking their claims about their cause seriously



Past research reads their ideas as liberal democratic

This oversimplifies

Diversity in liberal democratic theory

Democratic theory beyond liberal democratic theory



What are the central ideas animating contemporary democracy movements in Africa?

How do these movements construct and deploy 'democracy' as a signifier?



Africa as a site of radical ideas, not least about democracy

To what extent do their ideas challenge dominant (neo)liberal conceptions of democracy, development, and the role of African states in the global political order?

Contributing to the literature on populism and democracy

An exhausted avenue of research?

Two predominant conceptions of populism and takes on this literature:

1. Ideational: populism as illiberal project
2. Discourse-theoretic: populism as potential source of democratic renewal

Engaging with the discourse-theoretic literature on populism

Democracy movements in Africa populist in the discourse-theoretic conception only

Accepting their reading of the democratic potential of populism, thus defined

Pivoting to:

How do populist movements construct and deploy the concept of democracy?

To early in the project to offer definitive answers

Taking the ideas democracy movements in Africa seriously

Recognising the diversity of their ideas and circumstances

See them as a hitherto overlooked (discourse-theoretic) populisms

Revealing something new about populist imaginaries of democracy

Thank you

A large crowd of people, many with their hands raised, gathered in an outdoor setting. The background shows a brick wall and some buildings under a clear sky. The text is overlaid on the image.

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