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POPULISM AND MUSIC

Melanie Schiller

As a scholar interested in media studies and popular music, how did you approach populism? Is there an author or a publication that particularly inspired you and influenced your perspective on populism?

Much of my work to date has focused on concepts of national identity and nationalism in connection with popular music (especially in post-war Germany). I am therefore rather new to populism studies. Coming from a cultural studies background, I initially felt rather ambivalent toward populism as a concept.

I was familiar with debates over cultural populism in cultural studies and Jim McGuigan's seminal book *Cultural Populism* (1992). In this field, cultural populism refers to an uncritical celebration of popular culture's subversive potential as an anti-elitist culture of the people. Some scholars, such as John Fiske, were criticised for their cultural populism on the grounds that it was ideologically naïve, ignoring larger social, political and economic structural factors. In a way, this form of populism *overstated* popular culture's importance and potential for challenging hegemonic power structures.

I was also familiar with the work of Jan-Werner Müller, who conceptualises populism as 'a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure ... people against elites who are deemed corrupt' (2016: 19–20). Like most theories that deem populism (in one form or another) to be an ideology, Müller's normative understanding of populism is limited to what he terms 'the political world'. Accordingly, it *ignores* the cultural realm entirely.

Hence, neither of these approaches seemed suitable for understanding the important and complex role of popular culture – and music – in contemporary populism. Populist discourses are disseminated and negotiated not just in the political realm, but in popular culture and music too. Populist actors and movements use

popular music to express their politics, some popular music artists also make explicit populist statements, while others make music that implicitly plays into populist narratives and worldviews.

Ultimately, I have found discursive–performative perspectives, for which populism is a discourse and political style, most useful for understanding how populists increasingly perform as celebrities or ‘pop stars’. Indeed, they use popular musical tastes to define the ‘real’ people (as opposed to ‘cultural elites’). But these figures still operate in the narrowly political realm of party politics and politicians. I believe that Ernesto Laclau and Stuart Hall’s concept of articulation is most helpful when it comes to grasping how populism’s rise has precipitated a wider cultural shift in how we understand the world and what is considered sayable, normal or ‘common sense’. Laclau says that ‘the people’ is not a pre-existing category but constituted through representation, which includes (popular) culture and music. In popular music, then, politics and culture are articulated (expressed and connected) and accepted definitions of ‘the people’ are negotiated.

Political and economic perspectives on populism are dominant, while insights from other fields are almost ignored. How can cultural studies contribute to our understanding of populism in your opinion?

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field. Through theoretically, politically and empirically engaged analyses of culture, it seeks to understand everyday texts and practices in contemporary society. Although cultural studies scholars concentrate on contemporary culture’s political dynamics, they also consider its historical foundations, characteristics, conflicts and contingencies. Hence, cultural studies attends to power relations in society as they are negotiated in (popular) cultures. Culture – the constant process of generating meanings from social experiences – is fundamental to social identities (understandings of who ‘we’ are) and processes of exclusion (who ‘they’ are). According to Stuart Hall (1998), popular culture is where collective social understandings are created, attempts to win people to particular perspectives on the world are mounted, and struggles for and against the culture of the powerful play out. In short: hegemony arises and is secured, partly, in popular culture.

Contemporary populism, especially the populist radical right, draws heavily on (popular) culture in the ongoing ‘war of positions’ over what is deemed ‘common sense’ in society (i.e. hegemony) and to constitute a particular ‘people’ in opposition to its ‘other’. For instance, after the 2014 EU election, Mattias Karlsson of the populist radical-right Sweden Democrats, declared that: ‘The main conflict is ... between conservative patriots and cosmopolitan cultural radicals. The big and decisive battle regarding the survival of our civilisations, our cultures and our nations has reached a new, more intensive and decisive phase’ (cf. Tamas 2021). Elsewhere, he expands that he aims to bring about a conservative cultural revolution that would undo the supposedly questioning, relativising and deconstructing climate of the post-1969

culture in Sweden (SVT 2021). It would reinstate an essentialist understanding of cultural identities, encompassing the nation (articulated in histories and traditions of Swedishness), gender roles and social relationships.

Clearly, the Sweden Democrats' populist radical right project is profoundly cultural. Indeed, they consider culture an important bearer of ideals, a crucial part of life and society and primary to politics. 'Culture influences politics more than the other way around', Karlsson argues (SVT 2021). Consequently, the Sweden Democrats (SD) are heavily invested in cultural policies, questions of a national cultural canon and cultural production, including popular music. Many SD MPs are musicians; the party leader, Jimmie Åkesson, plays in a rock band that releases music, videos and live DVDs; regularly performs at party events such as the annual party summer festival; sells merchandise; and organises meet & greets and autograph sessions with fans. Cultural studies has a long tradition of analysing how insurgent subcultures relate to dominant cultures and reappropriate cultural codes to inscribe them with new meanings. Analysing populism from a cultural studies perspective shows how the music of the Sweden Democrats, for instance, is symptomatic of their broader attempt to redefine Swedish culture and rearticulate it in terms of the populist radical right. But it also allows us to better understand how populist discourses struggle for hegemony by bringing about wider cultural shifts in society. Whereas populism studies often focuses on the realm of party politics and voter mobilisation, populist discourses aim to alter the common frameworks through which societies make sense of the world.

Populism and popular music culture are intertwined in contemporary Europe. For example, folk singer Andreas Gabalier has repeatedly expressed sympathies for the populist far-right Freedom Party of Austria. In his songs, Gabalier confronts the 'political correctness dictated by the elite', acting as a warrior for free speech in representation of a silent majority. Can you give us some examples of the links between populism and popular music, and tell us how populist actors can benefit from it?

Andreas Gabalier, the widely popular, self-declared Austrian 'Volks Rock'n'Roller', is an example of what my colleague Mario Dunkel and I term 'culture of populism' (Dunkel and Schiller, forthcoming). Although Gabalier claims to be apolitical and to make music for entertainment only, he has also repeatedly positioned himself as representative of 'the people'. Questioning liberal democracy, he has defended 'traditional' social values, national identity and his *Heimat* from supposed threats. His song 'A Meinung haben' (Having an opinion, 2015) probably exemplifies this most clearly. In our article, Dunkel, Anna Schwenck and I (Dunkel, Schiller and Schwenck, 2021) discuss how the song was released as a protest song of sorts after Gabalier refused to sing the new, gender-inclusive version of the Austrian national anthem. After receiving heavy criticism, Gabalier claimed victimhood and mobilised the populist notion of a 'dictatorship of opinion', which he, heroically, would resist as a lone and brave (hyper-masculine) fighter against suppression by elites. The song

'A Meinung haben' articulates several populist tropes in the form of a successful pop song on chart-topping albums in Austria and Germany. We argue that Gabalier's songs – whether they are explicit works such as this or more indirect and implicit – exemplify how populist discursive struggles for cultural hegemony work at the level of representation, myths, signs, emotions and affect. The example of Gabalier shows how popular music can create populist subject positions and lead people to identify with populist narratives in the form of widely disseminated, accessible and popular cultural works, which are not necessarily linked to party politics or 'the political world' in direct ways. It should be noted, though, that Gabalier has indeed expressed sympathies for the Freedom Party of Austria and FPÖ politicians have been keen to be associated with Gabalier's popularity.

You studied in particular the case of the rockabilly musician Peter Jezewski, who openly declared his political association with the populist radical-right party Sweden Democrats. Starting from Jezewski's example, can you tell us in what ways popular music is able to express and spread the political message of the radical right?

Peter Jezewski in Sweden is another interesting example of how popular music plays a role in the articulation of populist discourses and performative construction of the 'people'/'elite' antagonism. Jezewski is a well-known popular musician and singer, who rose to fame in the 1970s and 1980s with his popular rockabilly band The Boppers, which had a few hits at the time. In recent years, however, Jezewski, has gained media attention largely for his association with the Sweden Democrats rather than his music. In 2016, the Swedish media reported that he performed at the Sweden Democrat-organised annual summer festival. This led a number of venues to cancel gigs with him, for they refused to collaborate with an artist associated with the SD or feared related protests. In the wake of this minor, self-inflicted scandal, Jezewski, like Gabalier, presented himself as the victim of a systematic silencing campaign by a dictatorship of opinion, a normal guy being 'punished' for representing 'the people'. At the same time, Jezewski claims that he simply wants to play his Rock'n'Roll music and has no political intentions. Given the financial hardship Jezewski purportedly incurred because of the supposed public 'boycott' of his music, the Sweden Democrats' leader called on his social media followers to buy Jezewski's most popular solo single in support, resulting in the 20-year-old song 'Jeannie's coming back' briefly topping the Swedish iTunes charts. Since then, Jezewski has played regularly at SD events and even ran (unsuccessfully) as an SD candidate in a local election.

Jzewski is interesting in that he brings together different musical and performative elements that are not populist per se, but strongly resonate with populist discourses and narratives that feature an underdog representing 'the people'. Jezewski's music thrives on nostalgia, especially for southern-US and rural-inspired Rock'n'Roll and Rockabilly of the 1950s and 1960s. It also extends to country music. Indeed, on his tours Jezewski regularly covers the music of Johnny Cash, for instance. His music and persona combine nostalgia for a particular white, masculine

and working-class rebel culture – centred on the leather-clad guy sporting a pompadour – with nationalism and a typically Swedish rural subculture known as ‘raggare’. This low-brow retro-culture celebrates and cultivates a love for classic US cars, along with heavy drinking and the flaunting of masculinity and traditional gender roles. Given that ‘raggare’ are typically rural and deemed somewhat ‘backward’ or generally of low social status, Jezewski’s combination of these elements aligns perfectly with the Sweden Democrats’ rhetoric of representing the underdog from the Swedish ‘heartland’ (as opposed to the urban ‘elite’). Jezewski combines a subcultural ‘raggare’ style with the notion of populist rebellion (i.e. cultural revolution, as Karlsson had it). After a terrorist attack in Stockholm in 2017, this combination culminated in Jezewski’s song ‘My Land’ (2018): a melodramatic anthem expressing love for his country and asserting the beauty of the Swedish landscape and ‘his people’, performed in the style of ‘raggare’ authenticity.

You argue that radical-right populism intersects with ‘popular cultural retromania’. In particular you analyse a phenomenon called ‘Swedish fashwave’, an audio-visual genre that combines music with radical-right messages. Can the populist radical right be understood as a cultural and aesthetic movement, and how does this work?

The cases of Andreas Gabalier and Peter Jezewski indicate how populist radical-right discourses are articulated with a nostalgic retro-culture and style in popular music culture. Another example of this populist retromania is a genre that, in Sweden, is associated with another – arguably more extreme – populist radical-right party: the Alternativ för Sverige (AfS), established in 2018. The AfS is more open about its associations with the international alt-right ‘movement’ and its cultural aesthetic is heavily inspired by that of US white supremacy. For instance, it includes the common use of popular memes such as Pepe the Frog or the ‘OK’ hand gesture. Musically, AfS fans are invested in fashwave. This musical genre, which emerged online, combines the retro-cultural and post-ironic aesthetic of other popular genres such as synthwave and vaporwave with populist radical (and extreme) right content. Songs including ‘E X A K T W A V E’, ‘S W E X I T W A V E’ or ‘K A S S E L W A V E – Can’t Hassel The Kassel – Alternativ för Sverige’ (named after prominent AfS politicians, political agendas, and inside jokes) express the cultural practices in populist radical right’s participatory culture. Although they are produced by AfS fans and shared online, these songs are also played at official AfS party events and election rallies. The songs and the accompanying videos are inspired by 1980s and 1990s popular culture and play on the ironic appreciation of outdated aesthetics and the implicit utopianism of technology during those decades. This specific combination of retro-culture with populist radical-right messages creates a space of collective identification and a specific way of ‘making sense of the world’ for those involved in the culture. Such music, based on memes, post-ironic humour and a shared set of cultural and aesthetic codes, hence not only creates an ‘inside group’ who ‘get’ it, but also effectively rearticulates the culturally dominant retro-trend of the past decade in populist radical-right terms.

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