

# 2

## PLAYING “ITALIANNES” IN POPULAR MUSIC

National populism and music in contemporary Italy

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### Introduction

This chapter discusses popular music and cultural practices as vectors for the articulation of national populism in the contemporary Italian context. Drawing on the introduction to this volume, our empirical research aims to explore the ways in which popular music functions as a medium for the mainstreaming of populism in Italy. We begin with an analysis of the Multiple Opportunity Structures (MOS) of the country. These are the various frameworks – institutional, political, cultural, and commercial – that have a bearing on the link between populism and popular music in Italy, whether directly or indirectly. We then move to an illustration of our empirical findings. This begins with an examination of the ways in which populist messages are socially diffused, legitimised, and made popular within the country through popular music. We then focus on how popular music that contains populist elements is received by individual voters, who constitute the potential electoral base for populist parties. Following this, we move to look at the exploitation of popular music and references by populist politicians keen to define their own political-cultural identity whilst appealing to specific demographics. The conclusion summarises our findings and contextualises them by highlighting certain particularities of the Italian case. To address the above questions, we use three different empirical approaches: musicological group analysis, sociological reception analysis via interviews, and data mining for selected keywords on the web.

Sociocultural approaches to the study of populism identify the differentiation between so-called high and low culture as one of its predominant features (Ostiguy 2018). Culture here comprises both a politico-cultural (implying, for the low end of the spectrum, emotional investment in a leader and a refusal of

technocracy) and a sociocultural dimension, which is key for the purposes of this chapter. Populism, according to Pierre Ostiguy (2020, 39), is an “affectual narrative [. . .], the antagonistic appropriation for political, mobilizational purposes of an ‘unpresentable Other,’ itself historically created in the process of a specific ‘proper’ civilizational project.” This framing of populist antagonism appears similar to Cas Mudde’s ideational conceptualisation of populism (Mudde 2007), but differs from it in one key respect: instead of positing the people as ‘pure,’ as Mudde does, Ostiguy identifies in populist appeals the celebration (and politicisation) of popular impurity, so to speak – because it is this impurity that makes the people genuine, authentic. Sociocultural appeals (i.e., the sociocultural dimension as theorised by Ostiguy) are key to the processes of populist identification and mobilisation:

the use of informal, locally-anchored, language, the exaggeration of “typical” displays, the body language, are all key, recognizable, telling elements of populism socioculturally. And this use, often quite transgressive, is always directed antagonistically at an Other, manifestly not of the “national pleb.”

*(Ostiguy 2020, 31)*

Analyses of populist phenomena and processes often overlook culture and cultural practices. The mechanisms that lead to a discursive homogenisation of the people, and to antagonistic attitudes towards elites are, more often than not, scrutinised at the level of the individual (in variables such as distrust of political institutions and representative democracy, and other so-called populist attitudes such as hostility towards migrants, cf. Rooduijn et al. 2017). Pippa Inglehart and Ronald Norris’ famous “cultural backlash” thesis (Inglehart and Norris 2016) sees the revival of nativist and conservative attitudes as a key factor in the rise of global populism, whilst others have highlighted the political saliency of the GAL-TAN divide in such developments (Green-Alternative-Libertarian versus Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist, a dimension which is increasingly different from the old left-right conflict on redistribution. See Emanuele et al. 2020). However, equating culture with attitudes misses the anthropological point of the concept of culture as a “whole and distinctive way of life” (Williams in Barker 2001). As such, this chapter reflects on music and populism in Italy by examining taste and other sociocultural markers so as to interrogate the role played by cultural production and consumption in the emergence and reproduction of populist phenomena.

Italy currently plays host to right-wing, left-wing (hybrid) populisms (Zulianello 2021). Our study focuses on the main political actors in Italy at the time of conducting this research, namely the right-wing League and the ideologically hybrid – but often grouped in the inclusionary populist family – Five Star Movement (M5S).

## Multiple opportunity structures for the relationship between popular music and populism in Italy

### *Popular music in Italy*

Italy offers an extremely interesting case for studying the ways in which popular music can contribute to the spread of populist ideologies, and how it can be incorporated into populist strategies. Populism is as varied as it is central to recent and contemporary Italian politics. Furthermore, as we will detail below, the general landscape of Italian popular music lends itself to several reflections for our purposes. This is due not only to its centrality within patterns of consumption, but also to the many different and longstanding links between the Italian music scene and the country's politics.

According to the IFPI's (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry) 2019 Global Music Report, a study of the nineteen largest national music markets worldwide, 59% of the Italian population claim to be "music fans," two points above the global average. Indeed, Italians spend more than sixteen hours per week listening to music on average. In terms of genre, their preference is for international pop (63%, in line with the global average), then Italian pop (61%), rock (54%, in line with the global average), and *cantautori* (singer-songwriters, listened to by 49% of Italians, over double the global average and particularly well represented in the 35-and-above demographic). Although on-demand listening is widespread, radio remains the most popular means of listening to music (94% of the sample, the second-highest national average amongst the countries covered in the report). The emergence of highly popular radio stations such as *Radio Italia – Only Italian Music* – has significantly increased the amount of Italian music played on the radio, after a period during which English-language pop music was favoured (Tomatis 2019). This is all consistent with the significant and relatively intergenerational popularity enjoyed by Italian pop music amongst Italian listeners, and makes Italian-language pop particularly important to an understanding of how political messages are reproduced through this specific form of popular culture.

It is impossible to analyse the Italian popular music scene without mentioning the Sanremo Festival. The first edition of the *Festival della Canzone Italiana di Sanremo* (popularly referred to as simply Sanremo) was held in 1951, with the first televised edition following in 1955. It is generally agreed (Agostini 2013) that Sanremo has actively contributed, and in fact has been critical, to the very definition of *canzone italiana* (literally: Italian song), thus creating a sort of canon of Italian popular music – an exemplary case of an "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), albeit one that has been subject to continuous transformation over the decades. Indeed, as the official name of the festival shows, and in the words of the *Radiocorriere* (the official magazine of the RAI, the Italian public broadcasting company), Sanremo was created with the sole purpose of defending the "original elements of Italian songs" from an influx of "Afro-American and Iberoamerican sounds" (Campus 2015, 21).

The songs of Sanremo have actively shaped and become part of what is known as a national-popular repertoire. This repertoire has long been equated with low culture, particularly in leftist critiques, in ways that echo Adorno’s famous reflections on the inherently homogenising and authoritarian effects of popular culture (Dei 2016). Umberto Eco described Sanremo songs as “gastronomic song [. . .] supposed to be background music” (Eco 1964, 284), but “[also] one of the most efficient means for the ideological coercion of citizens” (Eco 1964, 278). Meanwhile, Stephen Gundle, in his influential book on the Communist Party and mass culture, defined Sanremo as “a central element of that conservative mass culture that was the real carrier of the Italian cultural unification” (1995, 10). Gundle contends that although the Communists paradoxically won the battle for hegemony in high culture (that is, within universities and other intellectual milieus), they lost the same in low culture (in the mass culture industries, crucially TV and cinema); the Berlusconi era demonstrated this particularly clearly (Dei 2011).

Following a period of declining popularity during the hyper-politicised 1970s (Borgna 1986), when Italy’s music scene was shaped by more progressive cantautori, the early 1980s restored Sanremo as *the* Italian music event (Tomatis 2019). Politics was far from absent, however, and in fact the entire history of the festival has been marked by political controversy (Campus 2015). Several parliamentary debates have been held concerning Sanremo, produced as it is by the public broadcasting company RAI, which maintains relatively close links to governmental and political interests (Hallin and Mancini 2012; Campus 2015). As early as the festival’s second edition, the two winning songs, both performed by Nilla Pizzi, touched on politically sensitive issues: nationalism/irredentism in “Vola colomba” (“Fly, dove”), in reference to the question of Trieste<sup>1</sup>, and a (not so subtle) satirical critique of the ruling Christian Democracy party in “Papaveri e papere” (“Poppies and ducks”). The singer Adriano Celentano provoked the ire of conservatives in 1961 with a ‘scandalous’ (sexually explicit by the standards of the time) performance of “24.000 baci” (“24,000 kisses”). However, he then triggered strong critiques from progressives in 1969 when he sang “Chi non lavora non fa l’amore” (“Those who don’t work don’t make love”) during the peak of the workers’ strikes. Direct interventions have also been a recurrent feature from politicians seeking to contest, amongst other things, the politically charged speeches of guest stars (as, for instance, in the case of left-leaning artists such as Roberto Benigni or Jovanotti), the selection of singers, or the legitimacy of the voting system (Magaudda 2020).

### *Populism in Italy*

Populist movements in Italy exist at various points on the exclusionary-inclusionary scale (Mudde and Rovira 2013). Certainly, the 2018 national elections proved that populism in the country could no longer be considered a fringe phenomenon. Up until the Global Financial Crisis of 2008–2009, the country was in

some ways a precursor to the boom in populism across Europe, especially its neoliberal and nativist-regionalist variants (Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the Northern League, rebranded as Lega in 2017, respectively; see Passarelli and Tuorto 2019). Indeed, populism has been an enduring phenomenon since the collapse of the so-called First Republic in 1992 (Anselmi and Blokker 2020). However, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, and like other Southern European countries (Font et al. 2021), Italy has also witnessed the rise of an inclusionary form of populism, albeit an ideologically polyvalent one (Pirro 2018): the Five Star Movement (M5S). The M5S has been categorised as a "movement party" (Della Porta et al. 2017) due to its weak organisational structure, in which both centralising-charismatic and decentralising-participative characteristics have long coexisted (Caiani et al. 2021). The party was founded in 2009, and was led for nearly a decade by the comedian Beppe Grillo. Traditionally marked by vehement anti-establishment rhetoric and, as mentioned, a consistent refusal of any ideological label, the party under its current leader Giuseppe Conte has, since 2022, been trying to qualify its anti-establishment positions and align itself on the left of the political spectrum. The M5S made unexpectedly huge gains in the 2013 general election, winning 26% of the vote. The party framed the country's problems as derived from a fracture between 'honest people' and political and economic 'castes,' which then enabled it to attract disillusioned voters from the left and the right. The centre-left Democratic Party and the Northern League suffered particularly from this strategy, as both were marred by corruption scandals at the time. However, the Northern League was reinvigorated by the leadership of Matteo Salvini, who took advantage of the so-called migration crisis (widely identified in the literature as one of the drivers of the populist radical right vote in Europe (Caiani and Graziano 2019)) not only to strengthen the party's traditional anti-immigrant and xenophobic message, but also to reshape its strong regionalist identity (Passarelli and Tuorto 2019).

Indeed, Salvini's idea to cut "Northern" from the party's name so as to appeal to the entire country was remarkably successful. In the 2018 general election, the League won an unprecedented 17% of the national vote, and obtained electorally significant percentages in all Italian regions whilst comfortably maintaining its stronghold in Northern Italy. For its part, the M5S secured an astonishing 32% of the vote under the leadership of Luigi Di Maio, thus becoming the largest party in terms of electoral support and a real political hegemon in Southern Italy. The two populist parties, after complex negotiations, managed to form a coalition government (calling itself the Government of Change) led by the then practically unknown academic and jurist Giuseppe Conte. The Government of Change's policies were defined by a pronounced contrast with the EU, particularly on budgetary and migratory issues (Marangoni and Verzichelli 2019). Indeed, Euroscepticism has been identified as the real glue of the coalition (Caiani and Padoan 2021). Its political agenda was broadly marked by a sort of division

of competencies (Vittori 2020) between the M5S, which focused on typically left-wing issues such as labour market reforms to protect workers in precarious sectors, the introduction of new social assistance schemes, and anti-corruption reforms, whilst the League concentrated on lowering taxes for the self-employed, pension reforms, aggressive law and order policies, and opposing immigration.<sup>2</sup>

It was precisely this latter issue that, having achieved an unquestionable centrality in the public discourse, allowed Salvini to lead the League to 33% of the vote in the 2019 European elections. The M5S, meanwhile, suffered real losses – in particular to the League – and fell to 17%. This shift in power convinced Salvini to break from his coalition ally in August 2019 and target early elections, though the M5S managed to form a new government – led again by Giuseppe Conte – with the Democratic Party, along with other minor centrist and leftist parliamentary groups. Most of the history of the so-called Conte II government was dominated by the Covid-19 crisis. This served to strengthen Conte’s position as prime minister, and he enjoyed consistently high levels of support at this time. The Conte II government was also decisive for the strategy (and identity) of the M5S: having once fiercely refused any electoral alliance or identification with both the left and the right, the M5S slowly but surely came to occupy the left of Italian politics, whilst also undergoing dramatic changes to its organisation and leadership, now fully under Conte (Padoan 2022).

We have decided, in this chapter, not to discuss the right-wing nationalist Fratelli d’Italia (Brothers of Italy) party, which takes its name from the opening lyrics of the national anthem. Fratelli d’Italia is currently the largest party in Italy (as of 2022’s parliamentary elections), and the party of the current prime minister Giorgia Meloni. Indeed, when we conducted our research, the party had not been electorally successful like the Five Star Movement and the League had been. Furthermore, FdI is the direct heir of a post-fascist party. Whilst some scholars consider it to belong to the populist radical right (Bobba and Roncarolo 2018), others rightly emphasise how the FdI’s anti-establishment rhetoric is much less prominent than its more traditionally authoritarian, conservative, and nationalist focus (Albanese et al. 2019).

To summarise the above, populism has been a central phenomenon in Italian politics for the last thirty years. What is more, major populist actors such as Berlusconi and Grillo are tightly bound up with the popular cultural sphere. Indeed, both of them are products – and, in the case of Berlusconi, one of the foremost entrepreneurs – of the Italian media and cultural industry. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that both have made full use of popular music imagery (Berlusconi publicly singing *chansons françaises*, as he had during his youth, to relaunch his self-made-man myth (see cesargdp 2007) and events (Grillo’s several appearances at the Sanremo festival (see *comunitàqueeniana* 2020; and *Sword730Pe* 2012)) to define their public personas. Overall, one can conclude that the Italian context is highly conducive to interactions between populism and popular music.

## Empirical analysis

As mentioned above, the first step in our analysis is to look at cultural productions. To what extent are populist messages, tropes, and imagery present within contemporary Italian popular music? To what extent do songs that, *prima facie*, promote populist messages, lend themselves to be effective vehicles of populist worldviews? To explore these questions, we conducted musicological group analysis sessions (see this volume's introduction for details on the method) on a selection of popular Italian songs that have emerged as particularly relevant with respect to populism. Musicological group analysis (MGA; Doehring 2019) works in sessions (of roughly two hours each), and involves three to five participants listening to a given song multiple times.<sup>3</sup> Participants first listen to the song under discussion without being given its title, the artist, or the year, so as not to prejudice the discussion. They are then asked to describe what they have heard and to give their opinion in as much detail as possible, then to offer an interpretation that others can take up and comment on. The goal of each MGA session is to collect a spectrum of each song's possible affordances (DeNora 2000; see below). Participants are also asked to note down any association that comes to mind (from adjectives to landscapes, cultural connections such as other songs, movies, and books, or emotions), as well as to identify potential audiences and cultural, social, or even strategic political appropriations that the song may be likely to trigger.

In our MGA sessions, we did not explicitly seek or limit our search to straightforwardly populist claims, as if we were focusing only on party manifestos or political communications. Rather, our objective was to understand the extent to which this contemporary Italian popular music repertoire might provide populist affordances for both listeners and political leaders. We understand affordance to refer to the complex relationship between humans and human-produced things (tools, technologies, social media, music), between practices of reappropriation and cognitive processes of reification (DeNora 2000). Applying the concept of affordance to music studies implies assessing that “music [. . .] can be invoked as an ally for a variety of world-making activities, it is a workspace for semiotic activity, a resource for doing, being, and naming the aspects of social reality, including the realities of subjectivity and self” (DeNora 2000, 40). However, “materials are by no means empty semiotic spaces” (40): some songs afford more than others in terms of being recognisable as populist carriers, or for populist reappropriation.

The purpose of each of the MGA sessions was then to define, through the active involvement of the participants and the collective and dialectical elaboration of concepts, categories, and intuitions, the different messages, interpretations, potential uses, and exploitations of the piece under examination, as well as its potential audiences.

As for the songs analysed, we looked at the following: Emma Marrone's “Non è l'inferno” (“This is not hell”), 2012 Sanremo winner; rappers J-Ax and Fedez's big hit “Senza pagare” (“Without paying”), 2017; Rocco Hunt's “Nu juorno buono”

(“A good new day”), 2014 Sanremo winner; Venetian rock band Rumatera’s “La grande V” (“The big V”), 2011 (plausibly linked to the League’s discourse); and right-wing songwriter Giuseppe Povia’s iconic “Chi comanda il mondo?” (“Who controls the world?”), 2016.

The songs by Emma Marrone, J-Ax and Fedez, and Rocco Hunt were selected following a content and visual analysis of 190 popular songs and their videos from 2009 to 2018. These were the twenty most downloaded songs, plus the top three songs from Sanremo, per year (for details on this analysis, see Caiani and Padoan 2023). In this preliminary phase, we selected approximately thirty songs that, according to our definition of populism, seemed to have some potential as carriers of populist messages. From these thirty songs, we chose for our musicological group analysis three songs that were extremely popular in the country, and belong to the repertoires of some of the most famous Italian musicians of the last decade. To this sample we then added the aforementioned songs by Rumatera and Povia. The band Rumatera plays parody pop-rock in a Venetian dialect; its repertoire, although not outwardly ideological, is particularly interesting for its sarcastic celebration of regional identity in a region considered the electoral stronghold of the League. As for Povia (2006’s Sanremo winner), his songs have increasingly come to promote populist messages and reflect the anti-democratic, authoritarian, and xenophobic tendencies of exclusionary populism in Italy, whilst casting the European Union as a threat to the Italian people. More recently, Povia has become one of the most prominent public figures to support the anti-vaccine movement in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Povia has in recent years been creating his own niche as a relatively popular political influencer, and boasts over 300,000 followers on his Facebook page.

Povia’s song “Chi comanda il mondo?” (“Who controls the world?”) was largely seen by the MGA participants to contain “plenty” of anti-EU and anti-globalisation references. They described the song as “well-produced and quite trendy – featuring rap verses within a rock structure – not something you would hear in neo-fascist milieus.” However, many participants also considered it “poisonous, sometimes scary,” “particularly the lullaby at the beginning, perhaps referring to his previous well-known songs for children – it is a kind of esoteric imagery.” They identified xenophobic and antisemitic references, evident in lyrics that denounce a “tower of Babel responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus in Israel,” and that are aimed at listeners with a knowledge of and sympathy for conspiracy theories (Giuseppe Povia 2015).

The participants of our MGAs described Povia as “a fanatic, evidently [. . .] but someone who gives the impression of believing in what he sings”; “it is surely not popular, it is something for people who have some political interest, looking for political answers: I would define it as a clickbait song.” They continued: “When he sings ‘bitch currency,’ referring to the Euro, he whispers . . . and in the video with a megaphone, he obviously positions himself as a ‘politically incorrect artist.’” One felt that whilst Povia’s audience “may be quite significant in number, in my opinion



they are much more of an extremist political community than a music fandom.” This depiction is fairly in line with how anti-vaccine movements are often portrayed – and, indeed, as we will detail below, what a Povia concert is actually like. In this case, populism does not seem the most appropriate category for the emerging imagery.

Although Povia does sometimes adopt one of populism’s main attributes (that is, its reference to the people), his tone in his public performances is much more indicative of the enlightened minority trope. We attended two of Povia’s concerts in 2021: in Bologna (August) and in Vittorio Veneto, Treviso (November). Indeed, both concerts were the closing events for two anti-vaccine rallies, with varying numbers of attendees (less than one hundred in Bologna, nearly 400 in Vittorio Veneto). The rallies consisted of appearances from a dozen different orators (activists, journalists, health experts). As Povia opined during his performance in Bologna: “I am the only songwriter singing about social issues. . . in the seventies, if you were dedicated to songs about love, you would have been dubbed a fascist!” (our translation). This is a minority struggling for their conception of freedom, the keyword in both Povia’s performances and discography. During the demonstrations, the people were often portrayed as naturally free actors whose right it is to rebel to improve their living situation. In contrast to the so-called enlightened minority, however, other people were described as ignorant and in need of guidance. The stand adopted by Povia and *his* people implied that they saw themselves as those in receipt of the truth, and not so much representatives of a ‘true people’ often associated with submissive herd behaviour.

Each of Povia’s songs was typically preceded by statements such as: “I submitted this song to the Sanremo festival but they rejected it! Now you’ll see why.” Extreme libertarianism merged with conservatism: “they won’t touch our children! We have the right to choose for them!” Indeed, it is no coincidence that – despite some very minor opportunities such as sporadic appearances in local festivals – Povia has not become the organic musical mascot of a populist party such as the League. As we will detail below, the League’s strategy is to appropriate a more popular (that is, well-known) repertoire and shape it towards its political purposes. Povia’s *weltanschauung* seems better captured by Amlinger and Nachtwey’s (2022) concept of “libertarian authoritarianism” than by the concept of populism. Amlinger and Nachwey argue that the core values of libertarian-authoritarian movements are sovereignty, self-determination, and fundamental scepticism about authority (all of which are easily traceable in Povia’s speeches and songs). According to Amlinger and Nachwey, these movements are led by “thinkers who see themselves as heroic figures in a conflict of truth, supposedly ready to accept sacrifices for the common good” – again, fully in line with Povia’s persona.

In the other songs examined in our musicological group analysis sessions, participants often pulled out concepts such as: national identity (Italianness, or *Italianità* – the extent to which something is compatible or represents a stereotyped view of what is ‘typically Italian’), nostalgia, hedonistic values, an individualist rather than collective approach to politics, and authenticity (in which,

for example, the singer is a self-made man with a strong personality, and does not follow others).

Emma Marrone’s “Non è l’inferno” (2012) was seen by participants as typically San Remo Festival style, because of its “engaged and highly rhetorical lyrics” and because the “melody and the singing style [seemed] emotional and reminiscent of traditional melodic Italian popular music.” Indeed, Marrone won Sanremo with “Non è l’inferno” in 2012, after coming second in 2011 with “Arriverà” (“It will come,” a popular melodic love song). Marrone is a pop-rock singer who rose to fame through TV talent shows. The lyrics of “Non è l’inferno” take the form of a letter written by an elderly father worried about his son’s future. In our MGA the song was labelled variously as ‘pathetic/mushy,’ ‘ingenuous,’ ‘sincere,’ and as addressing “precariousness and hope: a rock ballad from a great performer.” Interestingly, Emma Marrone – who could hardly be considered a politically engaged singer given her back catalogue – recently expressed her support for feminist and pro-migrant campaigns, thus attracting criticism from the League’s supporters and certain public figures. Participants of our MGA underlined some ideologically charged words as “life,” “blood,” “country,” “God,” “faith,” “father,” and “I believe in the country. . .” Moreover, they described “Non è l’inferno” as containing “quasi-militaristic imagery” and as being “reactionary,” but also as articulating a “social critique.” The song’s combination of melody and lyrics was seen as targeting a (stereo)typical Sanremo audience. Above all, its Italianness (its proximity to stereotypical portrayals of Italian national identity) was perceived differently according to the centrality assigned to the song’s social message: those who disliked the song described it as “reactionary-populist,” because of its references to traditional values and its popular sound, whilst those who were sympathetic to the song considered it “interesting,” “surprising,” and an “effective social critique.” Overall, “Non è l’inferno” can be said to play with nationalist and populist themes. The song’s structure, Marrone’s performance, and the official video (with its portraits of elderly people) all emphasise Italianness, merging family, Catholic identity, and a mistrust of politicians enjoying privileges. The suffering people that “Non è l’inferno” refers to are the pious, humble, working classes that deserve help (‘deservingness’ being a key frame adopted by right-wing populists in their welfare-related proposals: see Rathgeb 2021). At the same time, the father writing the letter that constitutes the song’s lyrics is a war veteran disappointed by his country and its rulers. This seems close to a stylised ‘American populist’ frame, which draws on conservative imagery but points out how conservative values have been betrayed by cynical elites, thereby potentially “questioning if adhering to such values is really worth it,” as one MGA participant put it.

Many of these reflections also apply to Rocco Hunt’s “Nu juorno buono” (2014). Also a Sanremo winner (Hunt was awarded the Emerging Artists Prize in 2014), the song is a mainstream rap piece delivered in Neapolitan dialect that celebrates everyday life in working-class Neapolitan neighbourhoods. Despite

being a rap song, “Nu juorno buono” is sufficiently melodic to appeal to a broad Sanremo public, whilst fulfilling the requirements for radio play. According to our MGA, it is also “reassuring” in terms of its lyrics, eliciting “hope” through a sort of “non-divisive, ‘light’ social critique.” The usage of Neapolitan dialect contributes to the song’s being “neither leftist, nor rightist.” As one participant put it, the song also “mobilises territorial identities [. . .] there is a difference to Northern dialects, which immediately make me think of the League.” The singer’s persona is also important for this “reassuring” – politically engaged but non-conflictual – affect: “anyone could like him, a fresh-faced [acqua e sapone], somewhat nerdy guy singing about local pride, unity and hope.” Many of the participants in our MGA session on “Nu juorno buono” also associated the song with the M5S, though less for its anti-establishment characteristics than the “kindness revolution” that the party repeatedly declared itself in favour of. At the same time, it is worth highlighting that when Hunt expressed a political opinion in one of the (few) interviews that he has given, he repeatedly described himself as “absolutely apolitical,” and denounced “politicians” for “overpromising” and “failing to solve the Southern question” (Caiani and Padoan 2023). One could in fact argue that, no doubt in spite of Hunt’s intentions, even this apparent neutrality is likely to be associated with the rhetoric of the M5S. The lack of any explicit endorsements means such opinions are entirely consistent with the M5S’s image and proposals, as was indeed noted in our MGA session.

Another song examined through MGA was “Senza pagare” (2017) by J-Ax and Fedez. Both rappers are famous: the former has a long career that began in the nineties, whilst the latter is one of Italy’s largest influencers (with over 13 million Instagram followers) and one half of a popular commercial brand (the so-called Ferragnez) with his wife Chiara Ferragni (a fashion blogger/entrepreneur with over 27 million Instagram followers). Both J-Ax and Fedez have publicly endorsed the M5S, with Fedez having even written the party’s anthem for its 2014 electoral campaign. “Senza pagare,” an extremely popular song (with over 90 million YouTube views), celebrates the supposedly humble origins of both singers who are now able to gain access to highly rarefied milieus thanks to their hard-won status – they “enter without paying,” as we heard in the chorus. In our MGA, “Senza pagare” was interpreted as “celebrating a revolutionary act which isn’t revolutionary at all.” Its sound is “emotive, the minor chords that aim straight at the heart are prevalent”: it is a “motivational song,” with a clear appeal to group chanting: it “makes you feel powerful.” It was also described as “typical of J-Ax and Fedez’s repertoire,” much of which are songs whose social critique fades away with the chorus: “moments of transgression” are completely overturned by catchy, entertaining, carefree, and light-hearted melodies. The participants argued that “Senza pagare” encourages identification amongst “lower-middle class people, I mean, not particularly well-off but that can afford a night of excess.” Taken as a whole, the song (and accompanying video – see AxEFedezVEVO 2017) is a “justification of the social status achieved by the artists: they seem to be telling

us ‘we worked a lot for this, so it is well deserved, and we can afford to be rude.’” One way of linking these appraisals to the concept of populism is, following Ostiguy, to consider populism as *mainly* a symbolic – thus primarily cultural – revenge of the Low. “Senza pagare” fits this schema by playing with the figure of the social climber and, most importantly, challenging (or mocking) forms of ‘proper’ behaviour as opposed to supposedly authentic popular manners, cultural practices, and references. Like populism, however, the song does not question the root causes of social inequality.

An anti-bourgeois inspiration was also detected in our MGA session on Rumatera’s 2011 song “La Grande V” (“The Big V,” in reference to the Veneto region). Unlike the other songs and artists discussed here, neither “La Grande V” nor Rumatera are particularly well-known in Italy. The group does, however, enjoy significant support in Veneto,<sup>4</sup> the electoral stronghold of the League and traditionally the site of Venetian regional identity. In “La Grande V,” according to one participant of our MGA:

There is quite a tidy rock-metal sound, which merges perfectly with the guttural voices to describe how Venetian identity is depicted: harsh, rude, yet still spontaneous and warm. It is not the same warm-hearted hospitality you find in Southern Italy. . . it is warm because it is spontaneous. It is not only a call to ‘accept who you are’: it is a call to celebrate how other people describe you, and what in fact you are no longer. . . because such ruralist imagery does not really exist anymore (see the official video).

*(Rumatera 2011)*

This is a perfect example of how the concept of the heartland applies to our study. As Paul Taggart (2012) argues:

populism always draws on an implicit or explicit heartland – a version of the past that celebrates a hypothetical, uncomplicated, and non-political territory of the imagination. From the imagination of this ‘place,’ it tends to draw its values. And, it is from this territory that it draws its own vision of its natural constituency – unified, diligent, and ordinary.

*(Taggart 2012, 1)*

Our MGA participants did not consider the song divisive, despite its obvious identitarian potential. “A non-Venetian guy would probably have fun in a concert, would even develop a good impression of Venetian people,” because, they felt, such an impression was wholly consistent with existing stereotypes about Venetians. At the same time, this participant stated that “I feel a sort of repulsion towards this way of portraying Venetian identity, even if I had fun at their concerts [. . .] it really is a band that invites the audience into singalongs whilst drinking beer.” This underscores the enormous proto-political potential of such popular cultural

productions: as Dahlgren has explored, cultural media afford “transitory glimpses, preliminary meanings, multiple frameworks, explanations, and narrative structures that may coalesce as political comprehension” (2009, 33).

As our MGAs demonstrated, and comparing Povia’s “Chi comanda il mondo?” to the other songs analysed, popular cultural productions seem much more effective at spreading specific worldviews and values if they are not perceived to be overtly political or appropriated for political purposes. These messages become populist when they trace a boundary between an identity group defined territorially, or even ethnically, and an elite. This constitutes inclusionary populism when the elite being targeted is defined in terms of political or economic power, as Hunt tends to do, and exclusionary populism when (as we see in Rumatera’s music) the implicit target is a cultural elite, at odds with the brash, masculine imagery associated with the people (the sociocultural, High versus Low dimension, as theorised by Ostiguy). It must also be noted that political-cultural structures of opportunity are at work here too: the ‘raw Venetians’ celebrated by Rumatera have historically so much been associated with the League that alternative (for instance, left-wing) territorial mobilizations of that sub-national identity becomes unlikely. One thing that is clear is that, to drive popular culture in a political direction, history matters.

### **Concertgoers: “I like him because he got what he wanted”**

Populist phenomena entail a process of identification. This can operate vertically, for instance with a leader or party, or horizontally, with the people that an individual feels that they belong with. Both vertical and horizontal identification are key to understanding how music fandom – and, increasingly, political affiliation – work, as scholarship on “political fandoms” highlights (Erikson 2008). If “politics, like popular culture, is about creating an ‘audience’” (Street 1997, 60), then the significant overlap between political and cultural fan communities ties in with the “emotional constitution of electorates that involves the development and maintenance of affective bonds between voters, candidates, and parties” (van Zoonen 2005, 66). We will discuss this in greater depth here.

Between April and November 2020, we conducted twenty individual, in-depth interviews with people who had attended concerts by relevant and well-known Italian popular artists. The artists were selected for their proximity to populism, either because they had publicly endorsed specific populist parties (J-Ax and Fedez, and the Neapolitan rapper Lucariello), or were widely associated with populist parties directly (Davide Van De Sfroos) or indirectly (the Venetian-rock band Rumatera). We have also included artists – the rappers Ghali and Fabri Fibra – whose back catalogues seemed well-suited to carrying populist messages and tropes in our preliminary analysis of popular songs from the 2009–2018 period (see previous section). We recruited our twenty interviewees (balanced in terms of gender, with three per artist apart from Rumatera, for whom there were only two), via posts on

Facebook fan pages and fan groups. As for their age, most of the fans of the rap artists in our sample (Ghali, Fabri Fibra, Fedez, J-Ax, Lucariello) were between 16 and 20, with only two fans of J-Ax and Fedez aged 25 and 40, respectively. Those recruited from Rumatera’s and Davide Van De Sfroos’ fans communities were (unsurprisingly, particularly in the case of Van De Sfroos) older, aged between 30 and 55 years old. We were generally able to recruit interviewees from various Italian macro-regions (Central North and South), except in the case of more locally-oriented artists (Lucariello, Rumatera, and Van De Sfroos, whose fan communities are based in Campania, Veneto, and Lombardy, respectively). Five of our ten interviewees older than 19 had some university education, but this dropped to two amongst Van De Sfroos’ fans. During the interviews we asked about the following: 1) The main reasons for their passion for their specific singer/band; 2) their ideological and emotional dimensions; 3) the concert experience (in for example the space of interaction with other concertgoers, the body, their feelings during and after the event, etc.); and 4) their opinions about the political position of their singer/band in the public sphere.

One of our first questions was how interested – if at all – our interviewees were in Italian political life. Interestingly, none of the interviewees declared a particular interest in politics. Nor did any of them report that their fandom was a result of the political position of the artist or band discussed. In fact, most interviewees were hardly ever aware of their artist’s politics, nor were they able to (or wished to) associate their artist/band with a specific party or ideology. Fans of certain artists (in particular J-Ax, Fedez, and Ghali) often made statements such as “I listen to them for pure entertainment. . . these are commercial hits. I don’t believe in this way of spreading political messages.” However, some of Fedez’s fans argued that “he’s not a typically politically engaged singer, he doesn’t position himself as ‘the expert,’ and still he expresses his own opinion. I appreciate this, and in this way he’s even more effective. However, in general, too much politics is boring.” Such an opinion seems particularly relevant nowadays, when a distrust of political institutions and greater “anti-partisanship” are on the rise (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020).

The role of the artist as a non-expert who nevertheless engages with public issues was generally praised, as long as this did not imply becoming “political” or “partisan.” It seemed enough that an artist had something “frank” to say: more than mere authenticity, we detected here a view of the artist as truth-teller, and truth-telling has indeed been identified as a key component of successful populist political communication (Sorensen 2021). However, the interviewees also described the values and imagery that they associate with – and that made them appreciate – their artist. These included a do-it-yourself, individualistic attitude, particularly in the case of the rap artists. These artists – all male – were seen by our interviewees as self-made men who have managed to succeed through sheer determination, despite socially difficult backgrounds. More generally, these artists were seen as positive examples, a source of inspiration more than someone to identify with, although in some

cases – particularly amongst fans of Fabri Fibra and Lucariello – strong mechanisms of identification were detectable.

Lucariello is against the Camorra [i.e., the Italian Mafia in some regions], and he is someone who made it. The key message he transmitted? Just as he made it, we can make it. Through music, through football. . . whatever. It's a source of energy and optimism. He taught me to believe in something.

Our interviewees portrayed a social context in which collective action is almost invariably considered “useless,” even “deleterious.” Their reasoning was that:

you have to fight, like Fabri Fibra, your own solitary battle. You identify with Fibra because, like him, you lack parental guidance, you have issues with your brothers and sisters, you have problems with girls and difficulty finding durable friendships. . . they despise any group [*collettivo*] because they don't trust the *collettivo*.

Furthermore, it was felt that “being part of a group implies following a leader, denying the expression of your own ideas. . . out of fear of being excluded or derided.” However, several interviewees valued the experience of going to concerts precisely because it allowed them to realise that there are many other “excluded people like me.” If populism entails the construction of a people through a process of identification, specifically *horizontal* identification emerged strongly from our interviews. This allows for the coexistence of individualist attitudes, and for a feeling of collective belonging that is not suffocating. What was completely lacking, however, was any sense of collective action as a valuable tool for change, whether political or individual. In fact, as far as the concertgoers are concerned, the aforementioned processes of identification may perhaps favour the spread of political distrust and a collective awareness of social exclusion, which was previously lived as an individual experience (on this, see Gerbaudo 2022). However, the belief in the uselessness of collective action, and the absence of any antagonism that pits the people against an elite makes tracing any parallels between this group of listeners and populism as a political phenomenon unwise.

Gender is also a major variable, and has been identified as a key dynamic in (right-wing) populist phenomena (Donà 2020). Commenting on criticisms of Fabri Fibra's crude lyrics, sexist language, and references to harassment and rape, a female interviewee said that “it is just his language, the language of the character he plays. Or he appears to be a misogynist because he needs a rhyme. He knows how people think because he comes from modest beginnings.” For one male interviewee:

it is similar to De André's song about a female forcing her suitor to kill his mother<sup>5</sup>. . . I mean, many artists have sung about toxic relationships, about

psychological violence against females. . . but there is psychological violence against males, too.

Again, these claims fail to take into account structural power relations. When discussing Rumatera’s imagery, both male and female interviewees converged on the idea of (and identified with) a sort of “rural crassness” that “allows girls to be rude, to have fun by dismissing gender roles and expectations,” thus fully accepting sexist jokes and jargon. This reasoning led several interviewees to describe political correctness as a “major problem” or as “censorship,” a discursive terrain that is notoriously fertile ground for populism (Moffitt 2016). Perhaps more importantly, and unsurprisingly, fans of Fabri Fibra and Rumatera tended to reproduce and reify a cultural understanding of the people and the popular as the realm of masculine coarseness – considered valuable as a mark of authenticity – as well as to denounce feminist critiques as being “far from reality” and obscuring “psychological violence against males.” This line of argument is also typical of the populist radical right’s gender discourse (Kantola and Lombardo 2020).

The final dimension identified as highly significant, particularly for fans of dialect artists such as Lucariello (Naples), Davide Van De Sfroos (Lombardy), and Rumatera (Veneto), was the artist’s region. Certain interviewees considered the use of dialect to be “key,” a “crucial and necessary aspect” for their devotion to these artists, especially Lucariello and Rumatera. For Lucariello’s fans, dialect is “the language we normally use, and it is a Neapolitan marker, a Southern Italy marker. . . it helps make us proud in spite of all the social problems we have.” Rumatera’s fans, by contrast, emphasised the need to address *cultural* (instead of primarily *socioeconomic*) exclusion:

If you don’t understand Venetian you miss out on a lot of things, a lot of jokes . . . it is obviously a key aspect in understanding why Rumatera are appreciated. Furthermore, Venetian is not like the Roman, Florentine, or Neapolitan accents that you can hear on TV. All of them are considered normal, our accent and our language are not, so it is a form of making our culture known, even in a parodic and self-satirising way.

As a female interviewee put it, “I am sympathetic towards the League, and Rumatera are not League supporters, they just want to have fun, but they celebrate our culture and I love this aspect.” In contrast, as one of Van De Sfroos’ fans argued: “I do not listen to him because he sings in dialect.” They went on: “I mean, he’s a storyteller offering a humble person’s point of view: so the use of dialect, the way humble people express themselves, is obvious”; “yes, there are some Lombardian fanatics linking him to the Northern League because of the dialect, but they are a minority amongst the fans; it is a characteristic marker of Van De Sfroos, but there is much more than this.”



In sum, the findings of our interviews are only partially relevant to an understanding of (populist) politics and its relationship to popular music in Italy. Different audiences – as well as different populist parties, as we will see in the next section – articulate their own vision of what constitutes ‘the people’ for them, each of which relies on some sense of authenticity. This resonates with some of the tenets of social identification theory (Sindic and Condor 2014); for our purposes, this relates to the reproduction and consolidation of populism in contemporary Italy through the mutual reinforcement of processes that constitute strong in-group identities against an out-group enemy. However, at the level of the individual, fans of populist artists – those that we identified above as potential carriers of populist messages – only rarely politicise their favourite songs, preferring instead to conceptualise the listening experience as intimate and private. Fans also assign the role of truth-teller to their favourite artist, one capable of unveiling injustices and articulating grievances, but again this goes no further than purely individual and individualistic solutions. Their output may contribute to the spread of populist tropes, even elevating them to the status of common sense, and the experience of attending their concerts may help fans to realise that they are not alone in suffering. But political (populist) articulations require populist entrepreneurs, who would take the raw matter of cultural material as a starting block and build on it. However, as we will see in the next section, one major populist entrepreneur – Matteo Salvini – does not so much invest in any specifically populist content within popular music as he builds on its definitional characteristic: that it is widely known and, as such, tacitly shared by all Italians. As we saw in the concert experience, it is popular music’s very ‘sharedness’ (or, when drawing dividing lines, the absence of sharing) that seems key.

### **The interactions between populist parties and the Italian pop music scene**

There are several ways in which the popular music sphere and its multiple facets – the cultural productions *per se*, the public persona of popular stars, and the strategic uses made of music by politicians – can contribute to mainstreaming populism. This section will focus primarily on “celebrities in politics” (Street 2004). We will examine, especially in relation to the leader of the League, Matteo Salvini, the deliberate use of cultural productions (that is, popular music) and practices to construct and communicate certain messages to potential sympathisers. This may involve using concepts and tropes borrowed from popular culture (a culture familiar to all), or using music to build an in-group-out-group dynamic, such as between the people on the one hand, and the supposedly left-wing, intellectual, elitist singers, on the other.

The 2019 edition of the Sanremo festival was particularly interesting for the purposes of this chapter (for an analysis of Sanremo 2019, see Magaudda, 2020). It was marked by critiques from then 5SM leader Luigi Di Maio of the jury’s “elitism,”

as opposed to the “popular vote” which often awards different artists, and Matteo Salvini’s thinly veiled xenophobia directed towards the Italo-Egyptian rapper Mahmood, that year’s winner. In his tweet commenting on Mahmood’s triumph, Salvini ironically asked: “#Mahmood. . . . . mmhhh. . . . . The most beautiful Italian song?!? I would have voted for #Ultimo, what do you think? #Sanremo2019” (Ultimo is a young singer fully in line with traditional ideas of the melodic Italian song) (Salvini 2019b). This triggered numerous xenophobic comments from his followers – arguably because of the singer’s Arabic name – even though Salvini presented his position as merely a defence of Italian traditions, including in the popular music sphere (Mahmood’s song was quite innovative in terms of sound for Sanremo’s standards, and includes some lyrics in Arabic). Di Maio, instead, wrote in his official Facebook profile:

The song I like most about Sanremo is this one and I hoped it would win. I’ve never been a fan of Cricicchi, but I’m listening to this song endlessly on Spotify. I really like it a lot. [. . .] I see that there is a lot of debate about the winner of Sanremo because the jury, composed of ‘experts’ such as the well-known journalist Beppe Severgnini, and the press room have totally overturned the result of the popular vote. The winner was not what the majority of the voters at home wanted, but what the minority of the jury, mostly composed of journalists and radical chic, wanted. [. . .] These are the ones more and more distant from the popular feeling and they have demonstrated it also in this Sanremo Festival. I congratulate Mahmood, Ultimo, and all the others. And I thank Sanremo because this year it made millions of Italians aware of the abysmal distance between the people and the ‘elite’ [. . .].

*(Di Maio 2019)*

This episode can be seen to exemplify the adoption and adaptation of popular music by political actors in Italy and vice versa, which can be linked to the spread of populist political projects in the country. Our analysis of the interactions between populist political parties, their leaders, and popular music was enabled predominantly by a data mining process carried out via Google searches for specific combinations of keywords to cover the period 2010 to 2018. As relevant keywords, we chose: 1) the names of the two most important populist parties in Italy (“Five Star Movement” and “Northern League”) and the word “populism” itself; 2) the names of the current leaders of each main Italian populist party ([Matteo] “Salvini” for the Northern League, and [Luigi] “Di Maio” for the Five Star Movement). Each of these keywords was combined with the words “music” and “singers” for a total of ten Google searches. We limited our data collection by focusing only on the first three results pages from each search.

Moreover, we also included the results from ten additional Google-based searches that focused on the publicly announced political opinions of popular artists that emerged as relevant for the present research following our analysis of

song lyrics, detailed above. We selected the results from the first page of each Google search, from the combination of the following keywords: “politics,” with a politically relevant genre (for example, “trap”), and one of nine politically relevant contemporary popular artists: Fedez, J-Ax, Ligabue, Thegiornalisti, Jovanotti, Gué Pequeno, Ghali, Sfera Ebbasta, and Cesare Cremonini. This data collection strategy delivered a total of 347 web links (of which 163 were relevant to our research question). This allowed us to obtain information that was easily accessible to the general public, and thus, arguably, the kind of information that users would first encounter and use to form opinions. The links that we selected also provided information about certain policy proposals put forward by the League and M5S to the music industry.

As of November 2018, Matteo Salvini’s official Instagram page was only following forty-five other accounts, including popular Italian musicians such as Giorgia, Bianca Atzei, Max Pezzali, Cesare Cremonini, and Vasco Rossi (all very well-known and between the ages of 40 and 60; none are generally considered politically engaged), plus the band Nomadi and Francesco De Gregori, leftist icons from the sixties/seventies. Salvini’s public persona, in terms of music taste, could be described as a form of “spectacular commonness”: this concept, coined to describe some elements of contemporary right-wing populism in Norway, consists of the “endorsement of aesthetic values and tastes associated with cultural expressions of low cultural legitimacy [in order to] be the true values and tastes of ‘the people’” (Naerland 2016, 95). In a recent interview for an Italian journal (2019) Salvini revealed his music tastes to be a list of well-known artists (all were Italian) from the eighties and nineties, a period that corresponds with his youth.<sup>6</sup> The interview is filled with overtly common-sense statements: “I love Bocelli”; “to me, Sanremo is Morandi, Tozzi, Tenco”<sup>7</sup>; “in my Walkman I had Claudio Baglioni<sup>8</sup> when I was 15 years old, for my first love stories.” Salvini further builds this spectacularly common persona when he admits to “not knowing who Achille Lauro [a young trap artist] is: I had to ask my son about him”: one reads this statement as part of a communicative strategy to appear authentic, with overtly outdated tastes and a performative difficulty to keep up with younger generations (whilst managing to flaunt his relationship with his son). Salvini has also repeatedly shown a strong appreciation of Fabrizio De André, arguably the most famous Italian leftist songwriter, and one that the League tried (and failed) to appropriate by pointing to the regionalist focus on Sardinia and Liguria in his repertoire. In a Facebook post on the twentieth anniversary of De André’s death, Salvini wrote “*All’ombra dell’ultimo sole/si era assopito un pescatore . . .* [“A fisherman falls asleep beneath the sunset”; emphasis in original] Goodbye Fabrizio, thank you poet!” (Salvini 2019a): the verse quoted is the beginning of one of De André’s most famous songs, and again the kind of lyrics that many Italians would be familiar with.

The separation of music and politics is one of Salvini’s main discursive and political strategies. As Tim Wall (2003, 47) has correctly stated, “even the argument that

pop music is ‘just entertainment’ is a political position because it seeks to define the role of popular music in society.” This attempt to clearly demarcate music away from politics may be employed to avoid accusations of political extremism, such as when Emma Marrone, who had criticised the League’s immigration policies, was attacked online by militant League supporters when she announced that she was ill: (“the cancer you have is well deserved” (Cursi 2019)): “I like Emma’s songs; I’ll send her a bunch of flowers. Ideas and personal suffering should be kept separate” (*Il Messaggero* 2019). This kind of strategy could be considered a form of consensus seeking, and has been consistently practiced by Salvini in other occasions when he publicly argued with popular leftist singers (Caiani and Padoan 2023: 153–154). Salvini also uses producerist (Rathgeb 2021) and anti-intellectual arguments to delegitimise political opposition, as well as to reproduce and reinforce the frontier between the people and its out-groups: this is visible in statements such as “May Day is the day of all the workers, not just the leftist workers, the leftist unions or the leftist singers” (*Open Online* 2019), in reference to the annual May Day Concert organised by the trade unions in Rome, or “Trump’s lesson, the lesson from the free vote of Americans, is that you can win against everybody, against bankers, lobbyists, journalists, singers” (*Rai News* 2016).

In contrast to Salvini, the main figures of the M5S do not engage in public debates with popular artists. In particular, Luigi Di Maio (incumbent at the time of our research) was much more scrupulous than Salvini vis-à-vis the world of popular music. In line with the collegial and less personal image that the M5S wants to portray, in marked distinction to Salvini’s League, there are no direct polemics between Di Maio and figures from the world of show business. In this sense, Di Maio’s Facebook post on Mahmood’s Sanremo victory is an exception. Nevertheless, that post still made clear that the leader of the M5S opted to politicise the singer’s triumph much more explicitly, by directly evoking the contradistinction between the people on one side and the media and cultural elite on the other (since Mahmood was chosen by the jury, not the popular vote). Furthermore, and again in contrast to the League, the M5S enjoyed several endorsements from famous Italian popular musicians (particularly during the 2013–18 period). These were typically leftist singers (e.g., songwriters from the seventies, eighties, and nineties) who had come to feel betrayed by the institutional Italian left. Whilst many of these endorsements were withdrawn once Grillo’s party embraced the League to form the so-called yellow-green government in 2018, it is worth noting that the M5S never mentioned these endorsements in its official communications, arguably to maintain its much-flaunted distance from such apparently unserious debates and focus instead exclusively on corruption. However, several of the media outlets unofficially working as propaganda organs for the M5S did celebrate the extent to which certain artists were “brave enough” to “challenge the media’s single choir” and support the party (*Il Mattino* 2014).

As John Street (2014) argues, celebrity politics can refer either to the increasing political relevance of major popular artists in the public debate, or to the

exploitation, for political purposes, of the realm of popular culture by politicians (see also, on Italy, Campus 2020). In the first case, the media tends to pay more attention to the statements and opinions of popular artists, neither of which are necessarily reflected in their work. Popular artists thus use their privileged position within the media system to act as leaders of public opinion, sometimes presenting themselves as alternatives to professional politicians, whilst increasing their own visibility. In the second case, we can observe how politicians might act in a populist way, according to an understanding of populism as either a strategy of (direct and unmediated) mobilisation (Weyland 2001) or as a way of establishing a connection with a people by performing supposedly low socio-cultural practices (Ostiguy 2018). This section has concentrated on this second understanding, that is, how populist politicians enter into allegedly unserious public debates that are not necessarily related to institutional politics. Rather, they do this to increase their visibility and circulate specific ideas in popular, fairly open, and innocent ways, so as to reach a broader audience and shape, produce, and politically exploit what Gramsci calls “common sense” (Caiani and Padoan 2021). As we shall argue in the conclusion, the different approaches of Salvini and Di Maio to dealing with popular music culture reflect their different constructions of ‘the people.’

## Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the nexus between popular music and populism in the Italian context, a paradigmatic case in Europe for the study of populism’s success and diffusion in the social and political spheres.

As we have sought to illustrate, one of the most important means through which popular music lends or, following DeNora, affords itself to the adoption and spread of populist ideologies in Italy is through the identification and, often, political appropriation of a supposed ‘Italianness’ in the national repertoire. Framing a song as Italian, a trend often (albeit not exclusively) associated with the Sanremo tradition, can either prevent the listener from recognising it as explicitly political or partisan, or allow for multiple (and diverging) political affordances. Our MGAs revealed Rocco Hunt’s “Nu juorno buono” as an example of the former, and Emma Marrone’s “Non è l’inferno” can be said to exemplify the latter, because of that song’s contrast between a conservative idiolect and its call for social justice. The consequences of Hunt and Marrone’s populist affordances are similar, as in both cases there is the construction of a broad and fairly ambiguous ‘us’ which the listener may identify with, bypassing ideological and partisan divides. In fact, as Andrew Arato states (2013, 160), central to populism is the intensity of the antagonism that it summons, implicitly or explicitly; this “compensates for the vagueness of [populist] ideology.” Broadly speaking, therefore, this is what “the concept of populism entails in a popular culture context,” to quote this volume’s main research question: well-known and ideologically ambiguous

cultural repertoire, that are syncretic and open to multiple affordances, are used to build a frontier either against socioeconomic elites (in the case of inclusionary populism) or those who do not share the same supposedly traditional cultural references (people excluded from the category of ‘cultural Italians,’ in the case of exclusionary populism).

A song such as Povia’s “Chi comanda il mondo?”, which fits Mudde’s description of populism as an ideology perfectly, was considered in our MGA session to address a fairly limited ‘people’ – a minority at the fringe of the political spectrum – and, as such, to have little real reach beyond that circle. In contrast to Povia, participants in our MGA were quick to associate Rumatera’s “La Grande V” – a parodic song that plays with a territorial identity almost synonymous with the League (in this, there is also a contrast to be drawn with “Nu juorno buono”) – with exclusionary populism, despite the song’s *prima facie* lack of political claims.

As we saw in the previous section, it was the League’s leader, Salvini, who mostly engaged in attempts to appropriate the Sanremo repertoire for political ends. Indeed, he did not stop here, declaring a strong appreciation for many other Italian songwriters, including those with avowedly left-wing convictions. The first strategy – appropriation of the Sanremo repertoire – is quite easy to understand: Salvini positioned himself as both a listener like any other, and defender of a specifically Italian musical tradition. The second strategy is subtler: we argue that his provocative, overt appreciation of some *cantautori* would not have been possible without the gradual de-politicisation of this music in the first place. Once divisive, this *cantautori* repertoire has been gradually canonised and transformed into a common cultural heritage: “from Gramsci to UNESCO,” as Fabio Dei puts it (2016). If it is (and it should be) a common heritage, belonging to the people, then preventing someone from listening to and publicly appreciating this music reflects an elitist attitude, one said to be typical of the left. The move away from divisiveness had the unintended consequence of opening up more space for attempts at political appropriation. This is also reflected in Salvini’s twofold communicative strategy in relation to artists that criticise him: Salvini praises their (politically innocuous) music whilst attacking them personally. The more it is depoliticised, therefore, the more popular music appears politically useful for populist operations.

The participants in our MGAs mostly detected potentially leftist-populist affordances in the Sanremo songs that they were asked to examine. Why then did the Five Star Movement not use that material? Whilst the League celebrates supposedly common, apolitical, and everyday tastes, the Five Star Movement, we argue, tends to flaunt a ‘rocker’ mentality and imagery. This is intended primarily as a rebuttal of commercialism, and to project an image of the party as ‘inconvenient,’ disturbing, even proudly disruptive. This image fits the dichotomy of low versus high which, according to the sociocultural approach to populism, is the core of the phenomenon and central to its success. As such, the political

appropriation of commercial music would contradict the self-image that the M5S has carefully built for itself.

Finally, we argue that it is precisely because of popular music's inherent ambiguity that the populist direction in which its political affordances can be taken depends very much on the specificity of the intermediation performed on it by political actors. One of this volume's primary interests is, after all, how audience interpretation can drive repertoires and performances in populist directions. As emerged from our research, most of our interviewees (fans and concertgoers of potentially populist artists) rationalised their music tastes by emphasising several elements connected to populist politics: from the positive role of truth-teller assigned to the artist as a public figure to the importance of territorial belonging as a form of mobilisation; from an anti-bourgeois celebration of the low in Ostiguy's sense, to self-identification in a fan community of the unheard and excluded. Even here, however, victimhood and aspirations to social mobility remain strictly at the individual level. To conclude, transforming the populist affordances of contemporary Italian popular music into the active adoption of a populist worldview requires a political elaboration that, only rarely, did our research detect in listeners.

## Notes

- 1 The city of Trieste, central to nationalist discourses (as it was once part of the Austro-Hungarian empire and annexed to Italy in 1918), and its surroundings remained under Allied occupation until 1954, when the Yugoslavian-Italian borders were defined. Trieste went to Italy and most of the Istrian peninsula to Yugoslavia.
- 2 Matteo Salvini acted as Minister of Internal Affairs in the Italian government, called 'the government of change' (2018–2019).
- 3 For the purposes of our research, we added one or two people with a high level of formal musical education to each group. These included conservatory graduates, musicians, and workers in the music industry sector. This made for a higher level of debate, as these participants grasped certain technical aspects constructively and introduced them into the discussion.
- 4 "La Grande V"'s official YouTube video has reached nearly two million views. Rumatera regularly plays well-attended concerts in Veneto.
- 5 The reference here is to "La ballata dell'amore cieco" ("The ballad of blind love"), 1966; see feverpitch84 2010.
- 6 Newspaper article in "La Stampa," 9/02/2019.
- 7 Gianni Morandi and Umberto Tozzi are famous singers from the 1970s/80s who famously won the 1987 Sanremo edition with Enrico Ruggeri for their song "Si può dare di più." Luigi Tenco, a Genoese songwriter, infamously marked the 1967 Sanremo edition by committing suicide after having been excluded from the final.
- 8 A Roman songwriter from the 1980s, well known for his love songs.

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