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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SETTING THE SCENE: FILLING THE GAPS IN POPULISM STUDIES

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ABSTRACT: This article introduces the conceptual and analytical framework for the special issue, which explores the cultural side of populism: the relationships between politics, emotions, music, and subcultures in populist contexts. We highlight the role that cultural and symbolic 'products' (such as music, emotions, narratives, and visual symbols) play in the emergence and spread of populism. First, we explore the opportunities afforded by understanding the concept of populism from a cultural/symbolic point of view, reaching beyond the traditional party politics literature to which it is usually confined. Second, we suggest different ways in which populism has been articulated in various European countries (e.g. popular cultures, subcultures) since the economic crisis of 2008, emphasizing music, narratives, visuals, and emotions as means of the populist symbolic construction of the political and social reality. Third, from a social movement perspective, we reflect on the mechanisms (cognitive, emotional, normative) that may help understanding the current populist 'momentum', as well as on the methods to empirically grasp them.

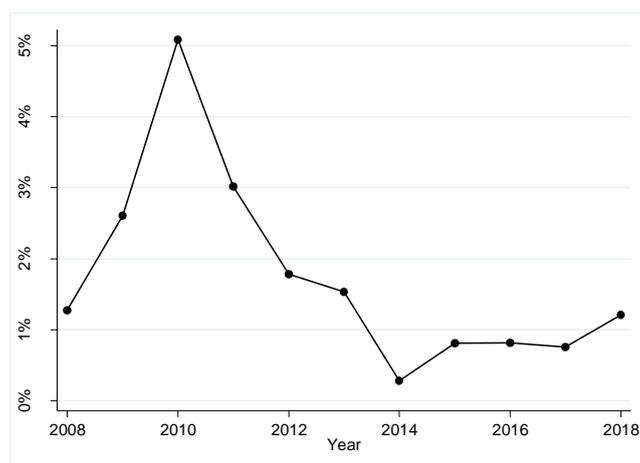
KEYWORDS: Varieties of populism, socio-cultural approach to populism, cultural and symbolic construction of populism, emotions and populism, music and populism

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1. Introduction

This article introduces the conceptual and analytical framework for this special issue on the cultural side of populism, or the links between politics, emotions, cultural repertoires (including music and visuals) and subcultures in populist times. We highlight the roles that cultural and symbolic elements, including a socio-cultural conceptualization of populism, play in the emergence and diffusion of populist appeal. Europe has witnessed an explosion of populist movements and parties especially since the economic crisis of 2008 (Zulianello 2020). Furthermore, their electoral success has increased the relevance of the topic, illustrated by a renewal of intense scholarly attention (Rooduijn 2019) (see Fig.1).

Figure 1 - Percentage of academic books or articles on “populism” and “culture” as a percentage of the total number of publications on populism (2008-2018).



Source: our elaboration based on Google Scholar.

Currently, 66 populist parties across the political spectrum exist in 30 European countries, challenging mainstream parties and changing the usual shape of many European party systems (Caiani and Graziano 2019) (Table 1). Beyond Europe, the current ‘populist family’ includes Trump in the US, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Kast in Chile, the current Argentine presidential ticket Fernández-Fernández, the Mexican president López Obrador, as well as Modi in India, and the former Thai prime minister Shinawatra, among others.

Table 1 – Populist parties in Europe by year of foundation

	<i>Left-wing Populisms</i>	<i>Right-wing Populisms</i>	<i>Total</i>
Before 1994	1	22	23
1995-2008	3	26	29
2008-2017	6	7	13
All parties	10	55	65

Source: Caiani and Graziano 2019 (30 countries: All EU countries, plus the United Kingdom, Norway and Switzerland).

Two decades ago populism was considered a marginal force, attracting the votes of only 7% of Europeans; currently (i.e. in the last national elections) about 25% of European citizens voted for populist parties or leaders. Populist parties have more than tripled their support in Europe since the end of the 1990s, securing sufficient votes to put their leaders into governmental positions in nine countries. In January 2019, populist parties were in government on their own or as part of coalition governments in Austria, Finland, Italy, Greece, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland, and provided external support to the government in Spain.

Populism has also become an increasingly diversified phenomenon in Europe with the emergence and consolidation of left-wing populist parties (traditionally a Latin American characteristic) –Syriza, Podemos, La France Insoumise, and Zivi Zid, for example –in addition to their right-wing counterparts (more typical for the continent).

The 2014 (and 2019, to an extent) European elections clearly displayed the advance of the populist radical right across Europe: about 6.8% of Europeans voted for radical right populist parties, awarding Eurosceptic populist forces 51 members of Parliament (Mudde 2016) in the context of low voter turnout, an East-West divide, and a challenging economic situation.

Therefore, the explosion in populism studies is justified, but most scholarly work has concentrated thus far on how structural, political, immigration-related, or economic factors explain the success of the phenomenon, neglecting relevant cultural dimensions (Dunkel et al. 2018)¹. The economic and financial crisis of 2008, coupled with the 2015

¹ This special issue is related to a broader comparative project, including Italy, Austria, Hungary, Sweden and Germany, led by Professor Mario Dunkel, at the University of Oldenburg, on “Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe” (Volkswagenstiftung n. of project Ref.: 94 754-1, PI University of Oldenburg, School of Linguistics and Cultural Studies, Institute for Music). The partners are: the University of Oldenburg (Mario Dunkel and Anna Schwenck); the University of Music and Performing Arts at Graz (André Doebling and Kai Ginkel); the University of Groningen (Melanie Schiller); the Scuola Normale Superiore (Manuela Caiani and Enrico Padoan); the Budapest University of Technology and Economics (Emília Barna and Ágnes Patakfalvi-Czirják).

refugee crisis, certainly provided a specific ‘window of opportunity’ for the emergence (or re-emergence) of populist political actors in Europe, who capitalized on citizens’ discontent (Kriesi and Pappas 2015). Furthermore, these two crises acted as catalysts of a more profound political crisis of legitimacy that had earlier origins. Underlying political turmoil, such as increasing distrust of political institutions and parties and the redefinition of Western political and party systems offered fertile ground for the consolidation of many European populist parties (Mair 2013; Hernández and Kriesi 2015). Without denying the importance of these political, economic, and migration factors (Inglehart and Norris 2016) to understanding the phenomenon (for an overview, see Caiani and Graziano 2019), we argue that ‘popular cultures’ play a role in the formation, reproduction, and increasing diffusion of populist messages (Dunkel et al. 2018). Popular cultures, including “soap operas, pop music, and comics”, can be understood as “distinctive way of life”, “signifying practices” (Storey 2006, 2). Therefore, cultural and symbolic aspects (such as narratives, emotions, visual elements, and music) should be considered to better understand the emergence, success, and developments of various populisms in European democracies and beyond. The function that *music*, in particular, can play in the increasing success of populist movements appears a matter worth exploring, since music is everywhere in daily life (DeNora 2000) and is one of the most important European cultural ‘products’ (Dunkel et al. 2018).

This special issue aims to understand the concept of populism from a cultural/symbolic standpoint and reflect on its conceptual ‘usability’ beyond the traditional political parties and party politics literature to which it is usually related. This is particularly relevant since ‘old and new political parties have been labelled as populist, but may be perceived very differently in terms of both their electoral appeal and political trajectories’ (Caiani and Graziano 2019, 1142). Although research on populism has mainly focused on (predominantly radical right) political parties -- and often on the most successful ones, ‘leaving aside highly important developments within non-party organizations and sub-cultures’ (Mudde 2007, 5) -- *empirically*, this special issue includes, instead, non-party organizations and fringe radical groups, from both the right and the left.

This introduction aims to theoretically clarify different ways in which populism has been articulated in various European countries (and beyond) since the economic crisis. To be sure, the crises have acted as external shocks to many party systems, either giving birth to new political parties or consolidating pre-existing ones; however, we start from the assumption that these changes can only be supported by a culturally/symbolically favourable milieu that is constructed, communicated, and reproduced. Music, narratives, emotions, subcultures and visual elements are interpreted here as the means of this reproduction and symbolic construction (i.e. a situation of crisis, Moffitt, 2015) of

the political and social reality, which can help the populist message spread widely (Dunkel et al. 2018). In general we argue that to understand the reasons behind the electoral success of populist parties, it is essential to understand which ‘mechanisms’ led voters to increasingly reward these parties (Graziano 2018, 15).

Finally, from a social movement perspective, we investigate the connections between populism and the political and cultural specificities of national contexts, which may determine the development, trajectories, and fortunes of different populisms. In this sense, we emphasize the agency of populist actors and the importance of their symbolic construction of social and political reality. Indeed, populism’s and populists’ successes are often produced and reproduced through symbolic constructs by organizational leadership, which provides the necessary background within which individual activists can locate their actions (Gamson 1988; Snow and Benford 1988). As is the case for any collective actor, populist organizations have to mobilise individuals, providing members and potential followers with rationales for participation and support. In order to convince individuals to act, ‘frames’ and cognitive schemes must generalize a certain problem, showing the connections with other events or with the condition of other social groups; and also demonstrate the relevance of a given problem to individual life experiences. Along with the critique of dominant representations of order and of social patterns, interpretative frames and (emergent) symbols must therefore produce new definitions of the foundations of collective solidarity, to transform actors’ identity in a way which favours action (see also Caiani and della Porta 2011). In doing so, cultural products, such as music, may allow for the definition of the self and the opponents (Tilly 2003), addressing what are usually considered the non-rational aspects of politics. This is what this introduction and the special issue explore.

2. Populism/populisms: causes, definition, and the cultural dimension

The Causes

The recent rise of populism in Europe has been associated with political (e.g. Mair 2013), economic (e.g. Roberts 2017) and migration (e.g. Inglehart and Norris 2016) crises. These explanations have stressed the negative consequences of economic globalization, in terms of the mobilization of the ‘losers’, as well as ethnic competition (Rydgren, 2005), political discontent toward liberal democracies that have emphasized constitutional counterweights over electoral accountability (Mény and Surel 2002), and also a mix of modernization crisis, insecurity and authoritarian legacy (Mudde 2007).

While grievances can, of course, bolster populism, in this special issue we place more emphasis on the capacity of collective actors, such as populist organizations, to adapt and ‘to take advantage of the available opportunities’ (Rydgren 2003, 49), namely contextual resources (as well as constraints) – constructing, modifying and reproducing them.

In fact, the empirical link between the objective ‘critical’ situations of a country (such as poverty or immigration waves) and the success of populism has found only partial and selective confirmation. For example, some studies have found that voters’ preferences for populist parties have little to do with their objective economic situation (Mols and Jetten 2016). Similarly, Vadlammanati and Kelly (2017, 30) use panel data from 27 OECD countries from 1990 to 2014 and find “no direct effect of refugee flows in explaining electoral support for populist-right parties”. While the relationship between a crisis of political legitimacy and the rise of populism is stronger and more widely accepted in academic debates (see Graziano 2018), the causal mechanisms for transforming political disaffection into votes for populist parties nevertheless remains less clear. The literature on party-voter linkages, for example, suffers from a ‘programmatically bias’ (i.e., a tendency to look at concrete party programmatic proposals as the main drivers of voting choices), thereby neglecting other possible linkages and vehicles, including *cultural*, *symbolic*, *emotional* and even *ludic/musical* forms of creation and reproduction of affective bonds with voters.

We can categorize the abundant literature on populism into those studies focusing on the *definition* of populism and those looking at the *causes* explaining its rise, diffusion, and consolidation. In the next sections, we will briefly discuss why, in our view, disregarding emotions and culture, including music, in either the definition or the causes of populism may obscure the phenomenon.

Definition

There is still no agreed-upon definition of ‘populism’, though some common features include people-centrism, anti-elitism, and charismatic leadership (Stavrakakis 2017). Populism has been variously defined as: a “thin ideology” (Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008) that pits “‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of general will of the people” (Mudde 2004); a political discourse using a specific rhetoric (e.g., Hawkins 2009; Aslanidis 2016); a political strategy based on a form of organization characterized by strong and personalistic leadership (e.g., Weyland 2001); or, finally, a political logic articulating various demands through “empty signifiers” in order to create antagonism between “the People”, embodied by a leader,

and “institutions” (Laclau 2005). These definitions have been the basis for the empirical delimitation of the phenomenon and consequently research in recent decades, influencing measures, indicators, and approaches (Caiani 2020).

None of these definitions refers explicitly to any kind of emotional or cultural constitutive features of populism, although many authors do deal indirectly with them in their work. Betz (1994, 4), by defining populism as a political “rhetoric” marked by the “unscrupulous use and instrumentalization of diffuse public sentiments of anxiety and disenchantment”, suggests at least two connections between populism and emotion: First, populism is about the politicization of “diffuse public sentiments”, and populist leaders exploit and fuel such sentiments. Second, the normativity of this definition may inspire negative emotions in the reader (and betrays the author’s negative orientation toward populist phenomena). Populism is almost equated to demagoguery: populist leaders are “unscrupulous” because they are calculated and irresponsible regarding the consequences of their “instrumentalization”. Populism tends to trigger reactive and counter-reactive emotions, including within the academic community that studies it, as illustrated by the normatively loaded definitions and perspectives (populism as ‘bad’ or ‘good’ for democracy). For instance, Ostiguy (2019) argues that Laclau’s approach (2005) tends to equate *populism* with *politics* and to portray the latter in a normatively positive light, in contrast to scholars who follow the ‘ideological’ approach to populist phenomena (e.g., Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008), or those who focus on the (detrimental) consequences of the latter for liberal democratic institutions (e.g., Weyland 2001; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Other perspectives, such as seminal Latin American works on the rise of populisms during the 1950s (Germani 1965; Cardoso and Faletto 1969), or scholars who define populism as a “political style” (Moffitt 2016; Ostiguy 2018), probably offer more balanced normative evaluations.

As Ostiguy (2018, 75) defines it in his ‘socio-cultural approach’, populism is an “affectual narrative [...], it is the antagonistic appropriation for political, mobilizational purposes of an ‘unpresentable Other’, itself historically created in the process of a specific ‘proper’ civilizational project”. Populist leaders thus establish an emotional connection with their ‘People’ through the politicization of social-cultural markers like those emphasized by Bourdieu. Populist leaders claim to represent an *authentic* People. This authenticity however is socially and politically constructed, albeit relying on concrete raw materials, and it include ways of interpreting the social reality, such as the Gramscian *folklore*, but also tastes, aesthetics, and even cultural production. A socio-cultural approach to populism may therefore highlight some mechanisms which link the leaders’ message to the peoples’ (i.e. voters’) support: i Populist leaders exalt and exploit folkloristic aspects in order to appear reliable and trustworthy to their People. The latter feel

“reassured” because their leader is someone who really understands and cares for them, because he is like them.

According to Gramsci, folklore is a “conception of the whole world and of the life”, which is “implicit within certain social strata, in contraposition (again, implicitly, even mechanically) to the official *Weltanschauung*” (Gramsci 1975, 2311). Gramsci also sometimes uses *folklore* to refer to the concept of *popular culture*, although “culture” in Gramscian terms must be understood neither in anthropological sense (as a “whole and distinctive way of life”: e.g. Williams 1981; Barker 2001), nor (exclusively) in terms of cultural representations and productions, including music. Folklore or popular culture, like all “cultures” in the Gramscian sense, are not “distinctive”, but rather in constant transformation (Crehan 2011). Crucially, they are not systematic, particularly in their “popular” form, because “by definition, the people (the sum total of the instrumental and subaltern classes of every form of society that has so far existed) cannot possess conceptions which are elaborated, systematic and politically organized” (Gramsci 1985, 189). Gramsci, as an intellectual and political activist and leader, does not advocate any “populist” project, stressing instead the contradictory characteristics of folklore, which may include both progressive and reactionary aspects.²

Two further points are germane to the current debate on populism: First, folklore, popular culture, and those raw materials exploited by populist entrepreneurs for political purposes, are not coherent because they are *ad hoc* and unsystematic – even naive – reactions to the official culture imposed by the hegemonic classes. They are thus a space of instinctive resistance against the forms in which social domination expresses itself. In this, folklore, popular culture, or ‘raw material’ seem to stand one step causally before the emergence of “unsatisfied demands”, which, in Laclau’s thinking (2005), populist logic articulates to challenge dominant institutions. Second, in order for Gramsci’s intellectuals to transform popular incoherence into a coherent project, they must *feel* the “raw oppression” of the subordinated:

[I]f the relationship between intellectuals and people-nation, between the leaders and the led, the rulers and the ruled, is provided by an organic cohesion in which feeling-passion becomes understanding and thence knowledge (not mechanically but in a way that is alive), then and only then is the relationship one of representation
(quoted from Crehan 2011, 276).

² In fact, Gramsci often stressed the “folkloristic” aspects of fascism.

On the one hand, the *cognitive effects of emotions* are stressed (“passion becomes understanding and thence knowledge”) (see Section 3). On the other hand, this sentence reinforces the position of authors (e.g. Ostiguy 2018) who consider the “passionate” relationship between ‘the People’ and a ‘leader’ to be a *constitutive, definitional* feature of populism.

“Ideological” and “minimal” definitions of populism (e.g. Mudde 2007) have some virtues, mostly related to their operationalization of the concept for empirical research. However, they run the risk of equating populism with an instrumental manipulation of the masses. This is quite a common normative view on populism amongst scholars (Stavrakakis 2018), although it can be applied to many projects that seek electoral consensus in representative democracies. Furthermore, “minimal” definitions, because they rely on very broad minimum requisites, may lead to the inclusion of “misleading positives” (i.e. to consider “populist” someone who is evidently very far from being it: Ostiguy 2018, 91). Instead, socio-culturally oriented approaches to populist phenomena contribute to “filling out” the meaning of the concept and avoiding conceptual stretching.

Varieties of Populism

An emerging academic debate recognizes the importance of ‘varieties of populism’ for understanding different causes behind the phenomenon and effects on citizens’ political behaviour and values (Caiani 2019; Ivaldi, Lanzone and Woods, 2017; Mudde 2016; Pappas 2016). Differentiation occurs along the ideological components of these parties (i.e. left wing or right wing) attached to the ‘thin’ populist ideology. Whereas left-wing populisms identify the ‘people’ in socio-economic terms, such as the working class exploited by the bourgeois elite, right-wing populisms refer to the ethnic nation. Right-wing populist parties tend to mobilise along ethno-nationalistic issues, while left-wing populist parties generally mobilise along the economic/inequality cleavage (Rodrik 2018).

More recently, comparative studies have drawn a distinction between inclusionary and exclusionary populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013), which partly overlaps with the more traditional categorization based on the three dimensions of material, political, and symbolic. A populist group is inclusionary or exclusionary based on the distribution of resources among social groups, the appeal to forms of political mobilisation that go beyond representative democratic channels, and the boundaries of the notion of ‘people’ (Font et al. 2019). However, the boundaries between these two types of populisms (i.e. left wing and right wing) are rarely clear in reality (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017), and ‘hybrid types’ of populism and difficulties in conceptualization abound

(Zulianello 2020). Populism is thus a “chameleonic” category (Taggart 2000), since it appears in different ideological forms.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the differences between left-wing and right-wing populisms would derive instead from the kind of “pieces of popular culture” that are selected and ‘owned’ by populist projects, suggesting a key to understanding the phenomenon at stake. “Popular culture” or *folklore* is often the basis of the populist discursive toolbox, as well as “pieces of knowledge” that influence cognitive processes for developing political opinions; however, the components may be (both collectively and individually) internally contradictory. Populism is intrinsically ambiguous because the populist leader, instead of attaching populism to thicker ideologies (Mudde 2004), picks up unsystematic and contradictory sets of conceptions. Thus, instead of integrating elements within folklore into systematic and coherent discourses and policy proposals (i.e., an “ideology”, like Gramsci’s Marxist intellectuals), populist leaders merely select single “pieces of the popular culture” and juxtapose and then add them to their anti-establishment discourse.

Thus, each populist phenomenon, taken individually, may be “chameleonic” and depends upon timing and the leader’s inflection. We also argue that the stronger the emotional bond between the leader and her People, the greater the leader’s the room of manoeuvre for increasing and maintaining deeper contradictions within her political discourse; the emotional investment of the People is higher. Indeed, what is the concept of “party identification” or “party loyalty” other than “affective orientation to an important group object” (Barbalet 2006, 37)? Populist leaders, then, act in perennial equilibrium between two opposing tendencies: they must avoid excessive contradictions (see Laclau 2005), and thus exclude from their discursive practices some pieces of popular culture, often by dismissing them as covert pieces of the official culture. At the same time, an excessive coherence would lead them to act as Gramscian intellectuals. In this latter situation, populist leaders would develop their own ideology. Populism cannot be read as an “ideology”; instead, it is the *negation of ideological politics*. Caruso (this volume) points precisely at the transition of Podemos from a populist party to a leftist party, something that is clearly visible in its cultural references.

3. Populism and emotions

Most of the academic research on the determinants of populism’s success deals with the concept of “crisis”. Research emphasizing the so-called GAL-TAN dimension (Hausermann and Kriesi 2015), focuses mainly on the refugee crisis as facilitating the rise of right-

wing populist parties; other research tends to reflect on the causes of the phenomenon in terms of “demand-side” and “supply-side” explanations (e.g. Van der Brug and Fenema 2007; Muis and Immerzel 2017). “Populist demand” comes from voters, as indicated by political attitudes or socio-structural factors (Akkerman et al. 2014; Rooduijn 2017); external or internal factors can supply populism, ranging from party system dynamics like programmatic de-polarization, the institutional framework, the “tabloidization” of mass media, to the platforms of populist parties, their programmatic proposals, and their organizational resources (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016; della Porta, Andretta, Fernandes, O’Connor, Romanos, Vogiatzoglou 2017).

Attending to the role of emotions (in politics and populism, see Marcus 2000; Arian-Maldonado 2017) and culture (symbolic, discursive, musical) would enrich the understanding of the determinants and mechanisms of populist success. Moffitt (2015) posits, “populist actors actively perform and perpetuate a sense of crisis, rather than simply reacting to external crisis” (Moffitt 2016, 7). While one impulse is to argue that crisis conditions encourage “emotional” responses, it would reproduce the false dichotomy between “emotions” and “reason”: an epistemic filter that has inspired many political scientists and sociologists attracted by the paradigm of the hard sciences (Calhoun 2001).

In political science and sociology, emotions have long been treated as a ‘black box’ (Stets and Turner 2006) or ‘noise’ –irrational factors intervening in social and political actions, which are difficult to measure (e.g. in classical studies on collective action, Le Bon 2004; Hoffer 2002). However, these epistemological assumptions have been thoroughly and convincingly criticized: emotions have *cognitive, evaluative, motivational, and sensitive* functions (Ben-Ze’ev 2000) in political behaviour. According to Maiz (2011, 46), emotions play a central role in the cognitive process because they act as shortcuts for processing large amounts of information, allowing a person to act more efficiently (and thus rationally). Our own reasoning relies on emotions, either directly, because emotions or moods influence our priorities (often through unconscious processes, Marcus 2000; Franks 2006) and the selection of information, or indirectly, because our reasoning depends on memory, which is, again, strongly shaped by emotions (Richard and Gross 2000). Furthermore, emotions are intertwined with judgements (i.e., values and beliefs), in the sense that the former emerge once an object or event has been appraised in a particular situation. Furthermore, values and beliefs, as socio-cultural products, determine our emotional reactions to events, even imposing which kind of emotions are considered legitimate (Peterson 2006). Emotions, as social movement scholars suggest, also play strong mobilizing or demobilizing motivational functions (della Porta and Diani

2006). Separating “mind” and “body” is widely considered erroneous by scholars in political psychology (see also Bonansinga in this special issue).

Nevertheless, this dichotomy has persisted: treating the “crowd” as irrational and dangerous led scholars sympathetic to progressive social movements in the 1960s to focus on “rational” collective actors using resource mobilization strategies and political opportunities (Goodwin et al. 2001). On the other hand, rational-choice theorists focused on (strictly defined) individual interests as the only factors with which to deal with the paradox of collective action (Olson 1965). Even scholars following framing/constructivist perspectives (and who therefore attribute a value to narratives and discourses) tended to initially understand “frames” as purely cognitive (i.e., rational) tools and to rely on interested-related conceptualizations and explanations (Goodwin et al. 2001). More generally, emotions have been treated as “pathologies” that can endanger political stability (e.g. Habermas 1996; Pellizzoni 2001) in the form of populism.

However, politics (and theories) devoid of emotion risk neglecting the “dissensus and conflict as inherent to politics” (Maíz 2011, 61), irreducible dimensions that Mouffe (2000) counts as constitutive of democracy. Aslanidis and Rovira (2016) fully capture how ‘avoiding populism’ may be conducive to restrictions in terms of democratic decisions (emphasis ours):

‘Soft’ constraints [to populist governments], such as membership in a liberal political union, do not necessarily protect citizens against [illiberal] developments. On the contrary, [restricting] the policy discretion of a given country [...] can function as ‘hard’ and efficient deterrents of populist radicalism.

Although the sociology of emotions as a research field has been growing since the late 1970s (Stets and Turner 2006), scholars have only recently brought emotions back into the analysis of social and political movements, power relations, and institutions (Goodwin et al. 2001; Holmes 2004; Ost 2004; Marcus 2000; Berezin 2002; Kemper 2001). This turn is particularly fruitful for the study of populism, since it is precisely on ‘mobilizing’ emotions that populist actors and leaders concentrate.

Populism has been repeatedly and convincingly linked to emotions like hope, anger, and resentment (e.g., Wagner 2014; Rico et al. 2017; Wirz 2018; Salmela and Von Scheve 2018). However, there have been few empirical studies that systematically explore this nexus to date³. Salmela and Von Scheve (2018, 449) try to identify the different emotions which lead to right- and left-wing populism: repressed shame, resentment, anger and

³ One innovative project at the University of Amsterdam, *HotPoliticsLab* (www.hotpolitics.eu) uses qualitative and quantitative data to explore the role of emotions, personality, and languages in politics.

hate at generic others in the case of the former; acknowledged shame, indignation, but also joy and pride for the latter. More generally, ‘anger’ has been demonstrated to be a strong mobilizing feeling (e.g., Stein 2001; Valentino et al. 2011; Searles and Ridout 2011). Salmela and Von Scheve (2018) elaborated the concept of “emotional opportunity structure” (EOS), which refers to the consideration of how structural factors interact with (individual and collective) emotions to set the terrain for populist entrepreneurs, who, in turn, exploit such “opportunities of the context” – or how populist leaders and parties draw on cultural aspects and shape them to assure their electoral success. An EOS can be understood as “macrosocial eliciting conditions for certain emotions and [hindering] the generation of other emotions” (Salmela and Von Scheve 2018, 438). This analytical lens is extremely helpful for responding to the call for an emotional sociology: namely “a sociology that recognizes the ubiquity of emotions, moods, and affect in social life and which treats emotions as potential causal mechanisms, or components of such mechanisms, and not simply as epiphenomena or dependent variables” (Goodwin and Pfaff 2001, 283).

Contextual emotional opportunities are therefore exploited in different ways by different varieties of populism. Indeed, ‘conditions’ refers not solely to structural factors because they are also “constituted and maintained by social and cultural processes that render (certain) emotions more visible, desirable, and acceptable than others” (2018, 439; see also Peterson 2006). Being aware of the variation in the “acceptability” of certain emotions, depending on cultural contexts, is a useful starting point for a complex evaluation of the factors that make populist “waves” either likely or unlikely because it integrates different explanatory factors while considering social and cultural specificities. In addition, this paradigm allows us not only to understand the opportunities for the emergence of populist parties, but also the demarcation between populist and extremist projects. The latter tend to cultivate invisible, undesirable and unacceptable emotions, and to reproduce them through identifying (and often self-isolating) subcultures (but see Bulli’s and Adami’s papers in this special issue which explore attempts to “achieve[...] social acceptability” by right-wing extremist groups⁴). Populism instead seems to focus on assigning visibility and acceptability to certain negative emotions that are both mounting due to exogenous shocks and reproduced endogenously by the populist discourse itself. “You are not racist, you are just enraged, and for good reasons” is a well-known League appeal in Italy. This slogan differs from that of Casapound (an

⁴See also Teitelbaum (2017), who shows how right-wing extremism in Sweden gradually abandoned Nazi rock music subculture to present itself as “rational”. Similarly, McAllister (2001) argues that some American animalist movements present themselves as “rational” rather than “paternalistic” or “compassionate”.

Italian far-right organization) during the last Italian national elections (“If you don’t love us, now you can choose not to vote for us”).

An understanding of emotions as components of causal mechanisms shaping social and political processes, by either assuring stability or pushing for changes within the polity, can contribute to a better understanding of populist emergence⁵.

4. Populism, music and popular culture and subcultures

The cognitive and motivational roles of emotions in politics dovetail with the relationship between populism and cultural production (in particular popular culture and music). As Street (2014, 892) posits, music has a “well-documented communicative capacity to generate a sense of community, articulate ideas, and communicate emotional insights”, all elements important to any emergent social movement.

Although not heretofore investigated in the context of political participation, music has been shown to play different functions in politics and political participation. Social movement scholars have underlined that music disseminates and reinforces a shared ideology and becomes an impetus for political mobilization (Della Porta and Diani 2006), and cultural rituals (including music) are effective in reinforcing collective identities and social bonds (Summers-Effler 2006). Music with explicit political content (music as “protest”, “propaganda”, or “resistance”, Street 2014, 886) is the most self-evident connection between politics and music. There are multiple angles through which to explore this connection. Music as “protest” has been linked to collective action and contentious social movements (Rosenthal and Flacks 2012; Way 2016; Bianchi 2018). Music can serve several different purposes within protest (Danaher 2010): it can reinforce collective identity among participants by eliciting shared emotions and helping the elaboration and diffusion of a common political message; it can be used to recruit new activists, as it offers an attractive and less ideologically based form of political identification and participation (see also Bulli’s contribution in this special issue); finally, it can contribute to

⁵ For instance, it helps to understand the apparent contradiction between some accounts that link right-wing populism and fear/anxiety (the former is the instrumental exploitation of the latter, Betz 1994) and others that highlight how populism is more likely to elicit “anger” than “fear” (Rico et al. 2017; Wirz 2018). Fear is linked to uncertainty (Albertson and Gadarian 2015): it favours conformism (Skitka et al. 2004) and increases risk-aversion (Lerner and Keltner 2001), conservatism and utilitarianism. It has been identified as a major driver for increasing consensus in political communication studies, particularly when an actor is perceived to “own” the issue and have a credible answer for it through “law and order” appeals (Albertson and Gadarian 2015).

defining the ‘social movement culture’, even in an exclusionary way, as it does within specific “subcultures” (della Porta and Diani 2006). In this latter case, the prefix “sub” has to be considered both as “subterranean” and “subaltern” compared to ‘hegemonic culture’; or, as in our post-modern times, as a “style which marks not the politicization of youth but the aestheticization of politics [...]. Style is on the surface, subcultures are mainstream, high culture is a subculture and fashion is retro” (Barker, 2001: 194). Youth movements and several oppositional countercultures provide examples of how individual lifestyles may take on an antagonistic character. The emergence of punk at the end of the 1970s had elements that could be reduced to fashion, but it also possessed a powerful symbolic antagonism toward the consolidated canons of decorum and good taste. In other cases, collective action in lifestyles has been concerned with the defence of values and traditions (ibid, della Porta and Diani 2006: 50).

Musicological studies (e.g., Way 2016) and sociology (e.g., Duncombe and Bleiker 2015) agree that music has the potential to shape political identities and the narratives that sustain them. With regard to populism, Dunkel et al. stress that music, understood as a cultural practice, can influence the “the construction of ethnicity, nationality, (collective) identity, self-expression, spatial belonging, and authenticity”, therefore influencing a specific understanding of “the people” and their antagonists (2018, 1). In fact, music can also, sometimes decisively, contribute to the dissemination of knowledge produced by a movement (della Porta and Pavan, 2017), and it is often a substantial part of such knowledge. For instance, it has been argued that folk songs associated with the American Civil Rights movement not only accompanied it and spread its message, but also became *the* movement, particularly to the eyes and ears of engaged foreign citizens (Eyerman and Jamison, 1998). Furthermore, music can be a “resistance to power” (Street, 2014) – power in authoritarian contexts, as well as traditional mainstream power.

Therefore, paying attention on whether and how in different countries populist movements and leaders rely on “the affective power of popular culture, and particularly music” (Dunkel et al. 2018), can be a crucial fact to be explored. In the case of populist appeal, unlike protest and propaganda music, which is usually composed and played with deliberate political purposes, music changes its political meaning depending on the manner and the context of its playing, singing, and listening (music and its meaning-making is a relational phenomenon, according to the most recent musicological strain, Doehring et al. 2016). This is particularly relevant with regards to populism and populist movements which can appropriate non-political songs for political purposes, or appropriate political songs and use them for different political purposes; take, for instance,

the use of Giuseppe Verdi's "*Va' Pensiero*"⁶ by the Northern League as the national anthem of "Padania", which identified the Northern Italian geographically and ethnically distinct from the rest of Italy. In these cases, a complex mediation and re-signification of music (and musicians/artists) by political actors and by "those who sing or hear them" (Street 2014, 888) is undertaken for political purposes (Street 2014).

In this sense, popular culture – and popular music in particular – plays an important role in the fight for cultural hegemony, as they are "site(s) where [the] struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged [...] it is the arena of consent and resistance" (Hall 1981, 239). Popular music is "at the heart of people's most profound social occasions and experiences" (Dunkel et al. 2018) and is therefore particularly efficient as an arena of 'consent', since it appears 'authentic' while it is shaped by a cultural industry (Wall 2003). Popular songs can easily be re-signified in almost any political direction, as illustrated by the popular Pete Seeger folk song "If I had a hammer", which was translated, reproduced, and popularized in different contexts in the 1960s, either as an innocent hit by the Italian teen-idol Rita Pavone ("*Datemi un Martello*"⁷, Liperi 2011), or as a militant protest song by the Chilean songwriter Victor Jara ("*El martillo*"⁸).

In the words of Kooijman (2013, 184), "the value of popular culture, whatever its textual qualities, is in what audiences *do* with it". Popular culture and music offer an invaluable source of messages, references, and knowledge that can affirm political identities and disseminate political goals, values, and worldviews of actors both from above and from below. Music, and in particular popular music, is said to "create companionship", triggering processes of "collective identification" and has "a unique affective power" that can "stimulate a sense of community-belonging" (Frith 2007, cit. in Dunkel et al 2018).

As Pierre Bourdieu observes, "each society, at each moment, elaborates a body of social problems taken to be legitimate, worthy of being debated, of being made public and sometimes officialized and, in a sense, guaranteed by the state" (1992, 236; cited in della Porta and Diani 2006). For example, typically, on the issue of unemployment, to mention just one topic related to the recent economic crisis often emphasized by populists, mobilization efforts are thwarted by the widespread feeling among the unemployed that their economic difficulties derive from individual failures. A precondition for protest is the shift to a conception of unemployment as a societal problem that requires the public authorities to intervene (della Porta and Diani 2006, 50). Music could play a role in that. In this sense, paying attention to music and popular culture in studying

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwQ7wUhCSGA&app=desktop>

⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_oBxbYaoYk&app=desktop

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRZre6FQ-EM&app=desktop>

populism suggest different ways of linking macro, micro and organizational levels (Bourdieu 1977).

4.1 Which methods?

An approach that takes the cultural side of populism into account has methodological consequences and poses methodological challenges. Several works included in this special issue (see Adami's and Klein's contributions) opted to look at the link between right-wing radicalism (and populism) and its cultural productions by relying on visual and discourse analysis. Visual analysis is still poorly employed in social sciences (Mattoni and Teune 2014) and consists of "the developing concepts and methods used to analyze physical, representational, and public visibility elements that exist" in social movements and other kinds of collective actors (Doerr and Millman 2017). Visual productions such as photos, posters, leaflets and memes tend to communicate by a logic of symbolic association, while texts communicate by a logic of rational argumentation (Müller and Özcan 2007). However, even texts can produce 'images' in the minds of their readers and thus stimulate reasoning through associations and metaphors (Polletta 2006). Analysing visuals means uncovering the relationships between emotions and cognitive aspects of a political phenomenon. In this sense, visual communication is efficacious (e.g. for populist actors to reproduce their message) and its widespread use could encourage specific emotions conducive to the spread of populism.

Visual analysis is often combined with discourse and frame analysis, since discourse analysis contributes to uncovering how particular texts either reproduce or challenge established definitions and understandings of social reality and considers the social context of reception/consumption of the text, while frame analysis investigates how cultural productions, such as texts, music and images, elicit emotions and provide motivations for individual or collective action (Lindekilde 2014). More specifically, discourse analysis is concerned with the examination of meaning and context, so speeches and texts – populist or otherwise – are interpreted not as 'neutral' tools for communication, but as able to shape and reproduce social meanings and forms of knowledge. The social science literature on frames (and narratives) has taken two different approaches (Johnston and Noakes 2005). With a focus on individual cognitive processes, some authors have analysed the ways in which people try to make sense of what happens by framing events into familiar categories (Gamson 1988). Other scholars have investigated the meso-organizational level, considering the instrumental dimension of the symbolic construction of reality by collective entrepreneurs (Snow and Benford 1988). Both traditions can be useful in the understanding of varieties of populism in Europe. In this special issue, different contributions focus on the organizational level and empirically address the

question of the conceptualization of populism in different types of organizations by investigating the frames produced in their discourses. By talking about frames and narratives rather than ideology, we may address broad discursive variations among different populist groups in different European countries and link ideas, actions, and events (Snow and Byrd 2007; see also Aslanidis in this issue).

5. The special issue

This special issue addresses all the cultural and symbolic elements of politics and populism mentioned above, including music, emotions, narratives, discourses and frames, and visual symbols repertoires from popular culture, bringing together contributions that explore their empirical manifestations in several European countries and beyond (see Dessì's contribution).

Each contribution is a stand-alone article in which the author has selected one or more key elements of the analytical framework and applied it to their selected countries and populist political actors. This special issue aims to combine an analytical perspective with an empirical focus on current populism(s) in Europe and their cultural aspects. It consists of twelve contributions and a research note.

Ostiguy's article introduces what he terms a socio-cultural approach to populism, emphasizing how it can elucidate key features of the phenomenon, such as the 'passionate' dynamics of the relationship between the leader and the People, by highlighting performative aspects that have to do with contextual cultural repertoires. Aslanidis's theoretical contribution advocates for studying grassroots social movements as the primary location where culture interacts with populist mobilization, thus understanding populism as a discursive mode of political identification. Bonansinga's article, also theoretical in focus, stresses the inaccuracy of the dichotomy between emotions and reason (in populism) and discusses how structural processes have created particular affective states of grievances that are sympathetic to populist appeals. Similarly, by adopting a Laclauian framework, Eklundh finds that normative biases that are implicit in the contrast between the emotions and reason "more often than not [serve] to sediment exclusionary practices against newcomers and challengers of the status quo".

Other authors engaged in empirical research. Magaudda's contribution uses the lens of narratives and frames to discuss empirically the role of digital media in modifying the ways populism and music are linked together, by focusing on the Italy's traditional annual pop music event, the San Remo Festival. Caruso's article focusing on Spain and Podemos shows how the use and appropriation of different music genres by the political

party is linked to the institutional transformation of the party from emergence to success and consolidation in power.

Bulli's and Klein's articles (as well as Adami's research note) pay attention to specific subcultures or cultural features of right-wing extremism. Bulli, focusing on a comparative case study of Italy and Germany, demonstrates how the cultural-musical production of Italian and German far-right groups and subcultures gradually moved from "hyper-ideologized" products (accessible to few) to "populist" messages that downplay the division between left and right and the most explicitly radical contents. In addition, Bulli highlights the role of music and concerts as a primary resource for membership recruitment. Adami focuses on different types of radical right organizations in Italy (political parties versus political movements) and relies on a visual analysis of posters of various events organized by different radical right actors at the local level. She shows how right-wing extremism uses a populist communicative camouflage to spread radical messages in populist times by presenting themselves as respectable actors in the public sphere. Klein instead focuses on the case of the British National Party and explores how common factual, funny, fallacious, or fabricated information is shared on the Facebook page of the BNP and what kind of reactions and emotions different information tends to elicit among followers and commentators.

Dessi's contribution relies on fieldwork in revolutionary Egypt to show how music was an essential part of the collective identity-building of social movements during the Tahrir Square protests. She shows how the evolution of a musical repertoire played a key role in the different phases of the protests by fostering mobilization.

Westheuser's theoretical article reconstructs populist cultural practices as instances of *symbolic class struggle*, a mode of contention in which cultural objects act as metaphors for social positions. He shows how the demarcations and classifications deployed in the populist symbolic class struggle appropriate repertoires of 'the popular' which originate outside the political field (e.g. in pop music); elements of these repertoires of 'the popular' can also be appropriated for political mobilization because of homologies between the symbolic sphere ('culture'), the field of cultural production, and the political field.

Feo and Lundstedt's article mixes qualitative and quantitative data and provides a comparative analysis of the extent to which feminist messages have been mainstreamed by popular music. Their article draws on the literature on the cultural consequences of social movements to explore if and how the new wave of grassroots feminist activism influenced feminist themes in top-charting mainstream popular music in Denmark and Sweden.

In conclusion, this special issue provides an important contribution to the analysis of contemporary variants of populism (left wing vs. right wing; parties vs. movements; radical-subcultures vs. moderate/mainstream) within the European context and beyond. Furthermore, we highlight the importance of multi-causal analytical frameworks that pay proper attention to the production and re-production of contextual opportunities and organizational resources through symbolic elements such as music.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL, RELATIONAL APPROACH TO POPULISM

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ABSTRACT: The article presents the relational, socio-cultural approach to populism, also referred to by some as “performative”. The approach claims phenomenological validity cross-regionally and is complex enough to provide a theory of populism and its subjective logic, while minimal enough to be used handily by other scholars. Populism is not a set of decontesting ideas or “ideology”, but a way of being and acting in politics, embodying in discourse and praxis the culturally *popular* and “from here”, in an antagonistic and mobilizational way against its opposite, together with personalism as a concrete mode of authority. Defined in the most synthetic way, populism is the flaunting of what I typologically call the “low”. I also argue that civilizational projects of different kinds create a distasteful “unpresentable other”; populists then claim that this Other is nothing less than the true Self of the nation, its “authentic” people, disregarded in that process. Relatedly, the article introduces the general populist scheme of contending forces, present cross-regionally and in left as well as right populisms, with “the people” facing a three-way coalition: a nefarious minority Otherized; global forces strongly playing in favor of it; a government in line with that minority or alliance. Populism extolls the national pleb “as is” and promise to reconcile the nation with itself by making the plebs the whole. The cultural component of populism should be domesticated by political scientists, since it has deep roots in cleavage formation theory, the sociology of distinction, and updated Gramscian and Weberian sociopolitical analyses.

KEYWORDS: Civilizing, Performative, Personalistic Leadership, Political Identification, Political Communication, Populism, The People.

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1. Introduction

This article introduces and summarizes the relational, socio-cultural approach to populism. The specifically populist component of political appeals and performances can hardly be ideological in the conventional sense of either a set of ideas or a set of tightly inter-woven propositions, principles, plans for public policies and ontological world views. Populism, moreover, also presents itself on quite opposite extremes of the political spectrum, particularly in Europe, as well as in more centrist ideological positions, as historically observed in Latin America. This is because populism, in fact, operates somewhere else, as a rhetoric or, more broadly, as a style or mode in politics. Populism is a way of stating certain things, a certain discourse (in the narrow sense of the term), but also and as well a praxis. That is, populism is something that *is done*.

Populism, as a way or a certain style of doing politics, is done for relational purposes, to create a specific kind of bond between the populist leadership and the social sectors he or she is appealing to. But it covers a broad range between, at one extreme, “show business” and the theatricality of public performances to both bond (with certain people) and antagonize (others), thus falling in the field of political communication, and, at the other, the expression of pain, suffering, frustrations, prejudices, social fears or humiliations that often result from social cleavages, thus belonging in the last instance to the field of political sociology. One pole does not invalidate the other; but the first is usually viewed as being more superficial and malleable, while the second is often presented as “deeper” and harder to change. What is relevant here is that the specifically populist dimension is not a set of ideas per se, but a way of both presenting them and relating with a particular public. Populism is thus about *form*—although that form may actually convey much more “content” politically than a typical policy program. While the radical right and the radical left *are* indeed ideologies, populism is a mode of delivery, a “way of being” in public. In the socio-cultural approach, populism is thus understood as a form (a style, a mode of relation)—thus its remarkable polyvalence on the ideological left-right spectrum.

Through a successful populist leader, populism, in its fullest expression, seeks to embody the people, to “make it graphically flesh”. And here “the people” is not an abstract citizenry or some disembodied *volonté générale*, but, importantly, the people as “national pleb”—the two elements, combined, being key.¹ In contrast to classical Marx-

¹ The relation between “the nation”, populism, and nationalism is discussed below. Suffice it to say that populism does not invoke “the pleb” in general (the way Marxism, for example, invokes “the proletariat”), but generally and almost always “the pleb from here”, which in practice is almost always a given “recog-

ism, “the people” as privileged actor is/are not a “proletariat”, defined by relations of production and whose profile amongst nations would be very similar given similar economic conditions, nor is it objectively “the nation” as a whole. Populism is always a part claiming to be the whole.² That is, it is the national pleb claiming to be “the people” (as a whole, or “true whole”). In populist terms, the populists represent the “authentic”³ and “deserving” or “long suffering” “people of the nation”, who have been ignored or taken advantage of by an establishment—not necessarily “the political elite”. For this reason, cross-regionally, populists seek to represent the pleb qua non-elite, and more specifically a “pleb from here”. The socio-cultural element comes in through the graphical display or scenic representation of this “people from here”, treated “painfully” on the public scene as if second class or at least not the way they think they “deserve” to be. 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, manifestedly not of the “national pleb”.

Because of this immanence of the performative component, of the audiovisual nature of relevant first-hand material, and especially furthermore because of how I define “the low” (see below), the *personalized leadership*—not the name, but the leader him/herself—is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of populism. Not surprisingly, we have Perón-ism, Chavismo, Gaitanismo; and online sites on populism always figure these peculiar leaders, from Trump, to Marine Le Pen, to Chavez. If populism is a way of being in public, or more exactly the performance of a way of being in public, this cannot be done without the central actor, whose name, according to Laclau, acts as the essential empty signifier congealing the equivalential chain—and who also happens to have (quite) a voice. The symbol of the left is red, the Socialists used to display a rose, the Green have a color as their symbol, but there is no Peronism without the infinitely displayed pictures of Perón and Evita; Chavez, alive as President, was on every walls of Venezuela; there is no Front National without the Le Pen family; no “Party for Freedom” without platinum blond Geert Wilders, etc. Because I focus not only on discourse

nizably *national*” pleb. In Argentina, as an example, Peronists *always* refer to themselves as “the popular and national camp”.

² A wide range of authors have made that claim, from Laclau (2005) to several of his followers (and especially in Argentina), to non-Laclauians such as Canovan (1999) and Brubaker (2020). That is, “the people” is not only the subalterns, the underdogs, but, in populism, the subalterns *claiming to be* “the whole”, the nation/people as a whole, through what Laclau calls a hegemonic operation. Here, needless to say, the vertical axis disappears, replaced by the claim of *fullness of the community*.

³ By “authentic” I do not mean “pure”, a term of Mudde’s definition of populism. “Authenticity” involves something recognizably “national-and-popular” or more precisely, truly “popularly from here”.

(and platforms) but on ways of being in public, the latter object is impossible to study without such personalized (and generally uncommon) leaderships.⁴ To be sure, the centrality of the leader (as a necessary, but not sufficient condition) does not mean that the political movement or “party” is authoritarian or even top-down. It only means that it is personalistic. In fact, in most Latin American populisms, party discipline and top-down control is *very weak*.

In the socio-cultural approach, depictions are concrete, immanent, almost audio-visual. That is, populism is not apprehended only through “reading” speeches, but by listening to them and by watching the utterer. At its extreme, the primary data for this approach should be audio-visual. In contrast to the orthodoxy of the ideational approach, we study discourse and ideation *inductively*, and treat it in the broader sense of meaning-creating praxes. Methodologically, the case studies can feed on ethnography, field research, discourse analysis, participant observations; the disciplinary tent is also broadened to include in addition to sociology and political science, cultural studies, critical studies and rhetoric.

Despite this flexibility and inductiveness, the socio-cultural approach to populism does introduce, as meta-categories and at a more technical level, a key dimension of differentiation in political appeals and performances that we call the “high” and the “low,” explained below. The resulting high-low dimension in politics is in several instances as structuring and defining politically as the conceptually orthogonal, much-used, and relevant left-right dimension. Therefore, combined, there can be a “low left”, such as for example Hugo Chavez and Chavismo, as there can be a “low right”, such as Donald Trump and his rumbonctious supporters. The same applies in relation to “the high”, with more specifically a “high left”, as with Lionel Jospin, and a “high right”. In Italy, Beppe Grillo and Umberto Bossi (performing in a certain way that he is “from here”) can be understood respectively as low (arguably) “left” and low right. Left-right are important differences politically, but so are high-low differences. In countries like Argentina and perhaps increasingly in Italy, the high-low cleavage may be more determinant for political alliances than the left-right one.

⁴ To be sure, leadership is also very important in non-populist parties, as with Trudeau for the Liberals in Canada, Merkel for the CDU in Germany, Thatcher for the Tories in Britain, etc. But all these parties are much older than those leaders, will continue to exist well after them, and even during their terms such parties stood for relatively clear political principles, platforms and ideologies. In contrast, the PSUV (who even know those acronyms?) is whatever Chavez decided it was; Peronism existed quite well during a large portion of its existence (1955-1973; 1976-1983) without even having a political party. And the PJ has sequentially adopted pretty much every political ideology that exists, while who is its leader is never in doubt.

Like left and right, high and low are typological political categories. Reality, actors, and of course history are in contrast fluid. The same way the left may be partly hegemonic in a polity, then give way to a rightwing reaction as part of certain socio-economic agential transformations, the high can the in same way be hegemonic in a given country, leading to the emergence of a low challenging it politically and even taking power, followed by a polarized political reality or a new hegemony now of the low. Bluntly said, it is not because the typology is well-defined, that reality does not evolve and change. High and low are typological tools for grasping a changing and evolving reality. Finesse therefore lies in the historical analysis itself. The types, on the other hand, must be judged by their theoretical (and social) meaningfulness and by their sociopolitical relevance.

“High” and “low” as political categories, like “left” and “right”, cannot be understood in isolation from each other. Populism is, by definition, I argue, “on the low” (see below), but it is also, more specifically, a *flaunting* of that low, intentionally (and one may add antagonistically), on the public scene. Similarly, the “self-controlled” high, in its adamant anti-populism, almost always expresses fear of the *dérive*, “the drift”, or of *déravage*. To put it in a non-orthodox way, the populist low is always a kind of “joyful desecration of the high”. And it tends to be animated, furthermore, by what I have called elsewhere (2014: 22) a “combative pleasure principle”.

This approach to populism therefore does not downplay the importance of affects in populism. It is particularly well suited to take into account the emotions of the bond and of the interpellation. Culturally, epic poetry as in the case of the speeches of Hugo Chavez, music as with the Peronist march, or folk songs as with the American populist tradition, have always had a central presence in populist phenomena. And this should not come as a surprise, as populism is both expressive (more than ideational) and relational—“constituting” or extolling in many ways a people, at least in terms of identity and identity creation.⁵

This approach is thus relational, between an “asserting” (or “flaunting”) leadership, on the one hand, and on the other, popular sociocultural identities or, if not, popular traits and ways of doing that can then be articulated as political identities. With the emphasis on the informal, culturally-popular, from here, comes also an element of —performed—*closeness*. The informal form stands, in many ways, as (substantive) content for both proximity and for antagonism (to what is). Second, because of the marked contrast with the mostly standard “high” ways of doing politics, populist appeals are transgressive, improper, and antagonistic, in that they are intended to “shock” or pro-

⁵ To be sure, music has been equally important for the left, especially the more radical left, as well as the radical right.

The song is certainly about a macho leader to be imitated, but it is also about the “Peronist guys who united shall triumph”. The General may be a great leader, but he is also a worker—albeit the “first worker”.

Comradship (together with a certain form of “exclusivism”) comes first, together with the typical extolling of the people as they are.⁷ Of equal importance to the lyrics or “discourse” analyzed here, is the *way* in which the Peronist march is always sung: banging all together the sides of the bus while crossing the city, accompanied by huge drums (*bombos*) at rallies, while raising and moving one’s arm with a “V” sign, etc. This performative practice is both expressive *and* ritualized, both chaotic and highly predictable. But in any case, *popolare*, informal, and emotional it is.

Such forms, from a post-Marxist standpoint, are (intelligent) ways to construct hegemony within non-dominant social sectors in society. Gramsci in particular was sensitive to the role of form in the difficulties experienced by communism in Southern Italy. That is, hegemony always extends beyond the political or ideological realm (and presupposes something *anterior* to it), involving social and cultural processes, as Gramsci recognized decades ago.

Because populism is relational and performative, it gets “constituted politically in the act”, itself. In contrast to socialist or liberal beliefs that can exist within the population without a socialist or liberal politician (since these are ideologies), there are not *per se* populist beliefs (although there can be a populist sensibility) and no populism to speak of without the phenomenon itself being practiced. Thus the current trend to study populism from a demand side of “populist beliefs” amongst the voters (Spruyt et al 206), separately from a supply side (of “populist speeches” by political leaders), is problematic. The situation is moreover made more complex, second, in that populism in its *praxis* actually redefines the borders of what is *sayable* and hence doable in politics. The examples are too numerous to list: one may think of Perón taking off his suit and speaking in short sleeves in the 1940s (something then highly inappropriate and which caused scandal); of Chavez singing (form) on his television show and telling G. W. Bush on public television that he is a donkey, a coward, and a drunkard (content); of Trump’s campaign launch speech accusing Mexican illegal immigrants of being drug traffickers and rapists;⁸ of Beppe Grillo’s Vaffanculo; etc. In that sense, populism often

⁷ Note that in contrast to revolutionary socialism, the goal is not to create a “new man” or transform the self; the people, as they concretely are, are simply the best! And the people, here, are certainly not described as “pure”, but simply as “great”.

⁸ The accusation to Mexicans immigrants is of course nativist and not populist. But the provocative, transgressive public style and sheer excess of tracing with pathos murders in the US to such an unlikely cause is, *in form*, populist.

domestically launches a socio-cultural *revolution* about public political manners, about what is sayable in public, about what a statesman is and should be, etc. It is furthermore incorrect to reduce such excentric, provocative, “innovative”, and shocking-to-many behaviour to “national traditions”, as certainly nothing of the style of Chavez had ever existed in Venezuela before him, or of Perón’s in Argentina before him, or (at least in the 20th century) like Trump in the U.S. For better or worst, successful populists often *create* a before and an after, in the way politics is *done*. So in that sense, “doing populism”, with that stylistic rupture—something that always triggers sharp resistance and reactions—*creates* “populism”. It is thus misleading to simply measure “populist political opinions” (as if such things existed, as the core of populism is not at the level of opinion) and match it with political supply. This methodology does not grasp the performative nature and societal effects of populist performance. Certainly, some terrains are more fertile for populism than others, but the so-called supply and so-called demand do not exist separately from one another.

Ideologies, even if “thin”, require a certain level of complexity if they are going to both *decontest* (Freeden, 2003) and provide meaningful answers.⁹ But populism is a *relational* phenomenon, defined by the connection established between the leader and supporters, a relation that displays both a socio-cultural and a politico-cultural component (see below). It is relational *furthermore* in terms of the people-leader’s hostile relation to a “nefarious” Other. It ends up thus being about identity creation and identities, more than about “world views” or “ideologies”.

At the other extreme, populism should not be reduced to simple manipulation or “sheer demagogy” to achieve numbers, as often happens in the so-called strategic approach (e.g. Weyland 2001), where ideas as such appear irrelevant and the leader is everything. I much recognize the centrality of leadership features, but do not treat populism as a merely *top-down* phenomenon, but rather, as a *two-way* phenomenon and process. Oddly enough, the ontologically entirely different, constructivist discursive approach is often guilty of the same thing, assigning an all-powerful role to discursive interpellations on “blank” subjects. In “demagogy” there is something deceptively simple in that the success of the appeals is never fully explained, except either by the followers’ lack of sophistication and/or the leader’s lack of scruples. There is thus a very fine line theoretically between an all-powerful strategic leader who manipulates

⁹ It is difficult to phantom how the three lines of Mudde’s definition can thus be an “ideology”. The thin ideologies of feminism or of ecology are infinitely more complex than that. While analyses of populism abound, populist texts (in the political or social movement arena) are also rare, in contrast, say, to quality feminist texts or ecological publications.

the unarticulated (or “blank”) mass, and an articulated popular demand that is simply “in wait” of its supply.

Finally, I attempt to provide here a normatively neutral definition of populism (and an explanation of its supporters’ logic), relying on the normatively complex concept of the “low” in politics. In the “flaunting of ‘the low,’” there is certainly a subjective, identity-affirming notion of “antagonism,” central in many definitions of populism (including that of Laclau 2005). In Europe, populism has generally had a highly negative normative connotation. It has also, or moreover, been associated with the right. In the Americas—both the US and Latin America—populism has generally carried a positive normative connotation, particularly for left-of-center analysts and scholarly sympathizers of the popular sectors (e.g., O’Donnell 1973; Collier and Collier 1991). In the Americas, populism is a concept associated with socially-democratizing, incorporating, plebeian and anti-elitist defining features. The more recent Laclauian radical-left understanding of populism, linked politically (and historically) to Kirchnerism, Evo Morales’ government and Chavismo, has crossed the Atlantic to Europe with Podemos’ professors, Melanchon’s France Insoumise and the akin Syriza government. Overall, populism is somehow normatively understood as simultaneously characterized by an authoritarian and intolerant drift *and* emancipatory potential (Mouffe 2018). My approach is not indifferent to these key debates, on the contrary; but as a starter, it certainly does not posit that populism is to be expected more on the left or on the right, nor that it has per se either an exclusionary or an incorporating and emancipatory social effect.

The following section introduces this (antagonistic) sociocultural-“performative” approach and its logic through an “affectual narrative” (Weber, 1978: 25). Despite the very local nature and texture of all populisms, they are cross-regionally characterized by a surprisingly similar affectual narrative. The subsequent section—core of the article—introduces and presents the notions of the “high” and the “low,” in politics.

2. The Affectual Narrative and the Populist Schemata

There is something odd about populism: populists claim to represent the authentic people and/or nation, are allergic to foreignizing trends, and affirm to be particularly anchored in their own particular nation. Yet, they tend to trigger the almost unanimous condemnation of the diverse authorized voices of the very nation to which they are so attached. The situation is thus in sharp contrast, say, to Marxists who are attacked and rejected by capital (and its organic intellectuals), and who very much agree with that particular excommunication. Populists in contrast not only disagree with such a disa-

vowal, but turn it around as an indication that they, not those disavowing them, truly *represent* the nation and its people. While there may be irreconcilable antagonism between populists and the anti-populists, both claim to represent what “the people of this nation truly stands for”. Second, despite these grand claims, the ideological elaboration of the populist claims tend to be limited—while awakening strong contrarian passions.

How is one to solve these related puzzles? I wish here to start at the most generic and somewhat abstract level, with what I have called “civilizational projects” and their empirical, concrete relation to the popular sectors. Even one of the most radical of such projects, the republican project of Third Republic France, inspired by the discourse of the French Revolution, has often in practice been a project of *instituteurs*, of school masters “educating the peasants”. Clearly more classist have been the oligarchical liberal projects of South America in the late 19th century, whether in Chile, Argentina or Brazil. Such projects, despite their sinuous historical progression, have had “right”, but also often “might”, on their side—as in the full capture of the state apparatus. The more “right” and “moral appropriateness” have been stringently emphasized (always with the help of might), the more a sort of “unpresentable Other” as a result has emerged or been created. The democratic and racially-blind project of US liberalism had its unpresentables in the redneck Confederate Southerners. The open-minded, inclusive republican project in France has its unpresentable Other in the not soft-spoken “racist” or xenophobic *laissés pour compte*.¹⁰ The proper, “Europeanized”, socially-mobile Argentine of the Alberdi/ Sarmiento civilizational project had its unpresentable Other in the allegedly more “brutish”, less educated, darker skinned, and socially not mobile “*cabecita negra*” (“little black head”) or even in the 1940s union-affiliated worker who did not mind breaking with left parties (of cadres) in order to support a Coronel with “fascist” sympathies (but who improved conditions of living). The Erdogan project has been the underside of the historical Kemalist project in Turkey. A similar list¹¹, for any country that has experienced populism, can arguably be drawn up.

Such “civilizational projects” possess remarkably varied content. They are as variegated, depending on the society, as liberalism, multi-culturalism, adapting to the ways and manners of the First World or the West, orthodox “textbook” economics, European integration, racial integration, colonial France’s “*mission civilisatrice*”, etc. And reac-

¹⁰ There is no reason for an ENAP graduate, in France, to be xenophobic.

¹¹ Had there been mass politics in 19th century Italy, populist movements based on local dialects would certainly have taken place in reaction to the erudite project of Italian unification. Perhaps *brigantaggio* could also be read through these lens.

tively, the content of populism will therefore not be the same in France, the US South, Venezuela, Southeastern Europe, or the Philippines. The key point here, however, is that such civilizational projects will *invariably* create what I call an “Unpresentable Other”. And this Unpresentable Other usually provokes shame or embarrassment on the part of “decent” (*gente decente*), “politically correct” (in the US), “proper” or “well-educated” people.

In that light, populism, independently of continents, can analytically be understood as an antagonistic appropriation, for political, mobilizational purposes, of an “*unpresentable Other*”—itself historically created in the process of a specific “proper” civilizational project. The political entrepreneurs *flaunting this Other*, in turn, claim to be speaking in the name of a “repressed truth” (especially in Europe) or of “previously excluded social sectors” (more often in Latin America) or the “silent majority” (in the US). The populist casts that so-called “unpresentable Other” to which he is appealing as both *damaged* and “swept under the rug” by official discourse and policies. Populists present themselves as fetching such people from “under the rug” and bringing them to the political fore in a loud, perhaps ugly (or at best, oddly “exotic”) but definitely “proud” way. In that sense, populism is clearly performative.

The last step in this affectual and sociocultural narrative is what I call the final inversion: the so-called Unpresentable Other is presented to be not some Other, but in fact the “truest” (“too long forgotten”) Self of the nation, of “the people.” That is, the Nation and its people is not what “they” tried to transform it into, but “the remainder” (and in many way more “originary”)¹²: us. If they take power and achieve political dominance, populists cast the previous “civilizers” as a minority who never understood the sensibility and interests of the “vast majority of our people”, presented as socioculturally distinct. In that case, the ex “civilizers” have lost the battle for hegemony. Thus the inversion: the old Representatives were not representative; and the Other is no Other, but our truest Self.

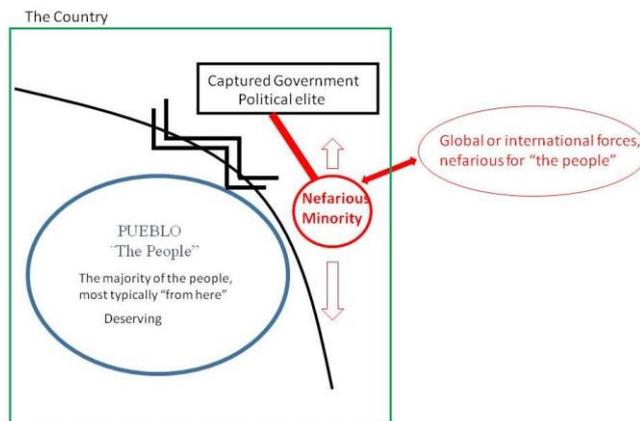
The populist leader generally claims—politically incorrectly and often vulgarly and with “bad manners”—to be the “fighting hero” of that (truly) authentic, *laissé pour compte*, people. Because of what has been stated, populism is thus almost always *transgressive*: of the “proper” way of doing politics, of proper public behavior, or of what can or “should” be publicly said. This transgression (“in bad taste”), as with the biting insults of Hugo Chávez, the utterly incorrect Bossi or Berlusconi, the extravagance of Huey Long, can be appreciatively received in certain sectors. Some of these

¹² It is not surprising in that light that most populisms acquire a nativist form, independently of questions of immigration, so-called cultural “anxieties”, etc. That nativism, however, is not originary but reactive, linked *constitutively* to the “civilizing” project.

transgressions, when by a male politician, figure as “manly,” with quite “home grown” elements. Since populism claims to speak on behalf of a “truth” or a “reality” that is not accepted in the more official, larger circles of the world, and of private praxes that are not deemed proper in official politics but that are quite “typical of the reality from here”, if there is thus not some kind of “scandal,” whether in terms of policy practices, public behavior, positions championed, or mode of addressing adversaries, then one is not really looking at a case of populism. When it has the wind in its sails, populism is the celebratory desecration of the “high.”

Finally, and simply, there is a kind of populist schemata of the *forces en présence*, that seems to be universally present across world regions and countries, *as well as* across the political spectrum, left to right (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Populist Scheme (cross-regionally)



Source: Author's Elaboration

The main actor (perceived by populists as already existing, but in fact politically to be constituted) is of course “the people”, *el pueblo, il popolo, le peuple*. By definition, this is the majority of the people of this society. The diagnosis is there are a large number of individuals/people from “the people”, usually the most “typically from here,” whose voice is not being heard, and whose interests are not being safeguarded. They are also not given the “due recognition” they “deserve”, whether as downtrodden indigenous in Bolivia, long-time Frenchmen in France, or hard-working (white) Americans in the US.

“The people” faces unfortunately a *three-way* coalition: a key, nefarious, and re-sented minority –the Social Other– at odds with “the people”; hostile (and very power-

ful) global/international forces, playing in favor of the former; and a government or political elite incomprehensibly in line with that minority or with that “alliance”. The nefarious minority, first—of the three, generally the object of greatest hatred—is *not necessarily* the social elite, and even less so the famed political elite of Mudde and others. That nefarious minority can be the oligarchy, the illegal Mexican immigrants, the financial sector, an ethnic but powerful minority, the liberal elites of the Coasts, the Jews, the “White Turks”, white colonizers or black minorities, depending on the casting of the social antagonism (see also Brubaker 2020).¹³ Usually, that “nefarious minority” has a direct or indirect link with the civilizational project referred to above: whether it is multi-culturalism, liberalism, the *mission civilizatrice*, or else.

Synchronically, in the populist script there is always, second, a set of global or international forces (allied with the nefarious minority within the country), whose role for the people is clearly negative. This can be imperialism and its alliance with the local oligarchy; it can be globalism in its alliance with financial capital *and* immigration and refugees (as stated by Marine Le Pen in her double prong); it can be “countries taking advantage of us”, as Trump states; Soviet infiltration for McCarthy; European colonialism; and now perhaps the technocrats of the EU in Brussels; etc.

In populist diagnoses, the problem could have remained strictly one of social antagonism if “our” government and most of the political elite (even crossing the left-right divide), third, had not taken the “wrong” side. To reverse this disgraceful situation, politics and the control of the state thus become indispensable tools. The focus of populism’s analysts on the political elite, however, is partly misguided: sometimes the “political class” is, indeed, the nefarious minority in question and is understood in terms its unwarranted social privilege; but most of the times the political elite is mainly “guilty” of not taking the side of “the people”.

Provocatively “speaking the truth” in public, agitation, and mobilizing are the *only* populist remedies. Agitation, indignation, provocations become ontologically indispensable in populism, since willful political action is absolutely “all there is.”¹⁴ Once in power, it is striking in contrast how the language of “love” towards their own followers

¹³ Not for this do I distance myself from the vertical axis that is key in populism (in contrast to nationalism), as De Cleen and Stavrakakis have forcefully written. Even when the nefarious minority is objectively situated “below” or at “the margins”, as stated by Brubaker, there remains for those sympathetic to populism a certain sense of unacceptable “victimhood”, of being “left behind”, of not being given the recognition they/we rightfully deserve *because* of the alliance of the political elite with the minority and allied global forces at “our” expense.

¹⁴ This is probably why post-fundamental Laclau equates populism with *politics*. Lenin, independently of his professed Marxism, may have been in *What is to be done?* the first “populist” theoretician (something Laclau seems to have grasped).

becomes central and omnipresent.¹⁵

In the following section, we turn to the more technical and central notions of “the high” and “the low” in politics, at the core of the approach I present.

3. The High and the Low in Politics

The high-low axis in politics has to do with ways of *being* and *acting* in politics. The “high-low” axis is, in that sense, “cultural” and very concrete—perhaps more concrete actually than left and right. High and low have to do with ways of *relating* to people; as such, they go beyond “discourses” as words. They include levels of language, accent, body language, public gestures, and ways of dressing. As a way of relating to people, they *also* encompass the *way of making decisions*, in politics. These different traits may arguably be more difficult to *credibly* change than left-right positioning. High and low are in many ways about private expressions in the public sphere, or the publicization of the private man. This is why, particularly in the case of low ways and manners expressed in an impudent or imprudent way in a public sphere hegemonized by the high, the low is often about transgression. But at the very same time, the high and the low involves “public performance”. Whether it is credible “show business” or the tailored expression of the “true self” is mostly irrelevant.¹⁶ What matters is that in relation to already existing social-cultural identities, high and low ways of being allow the voter to recognize a politician as credibly “one of ours.” High and low are thus not superficially or faddishly about style, but connect deeply with a society’s history, existing group differences, identities, and resentments. In some instances, as in Argentina or Turkey, they even “stylishly” express deep-seated cleavages.

Conceptually and at the theoretical level, the high-low axis consists of *two* related sub-dimensions or components: the *social-cultural* and the *political-cultural*. The latter is “cultural” in the same sense that one can speak of certain political sub-cultures. The former is cultural in a more sociological way, in the sense which sociologist Bourdieu (1979) writes about cultural capital, when it comes to “distinction.” Both are empirically as well as theoretically correlated. Their angle one to the other—borrowing from the idiom of statistics—is sharper than that between the main two well-established dimensions of the left-right axis (the “valoric” and the “socioeconomic” issues). The high-low

¹⁵ In Latin America, this is remarkable in the discourse of Evita, of Chávez, and in campaign ads of Cristina Kirchner.

¹⁶ And with exceptions, the two may not be as far apart as one would theoretically say. It is doubtful, for example, if Donald Trump in private is less (or more) of a bully than he is in his public performance.

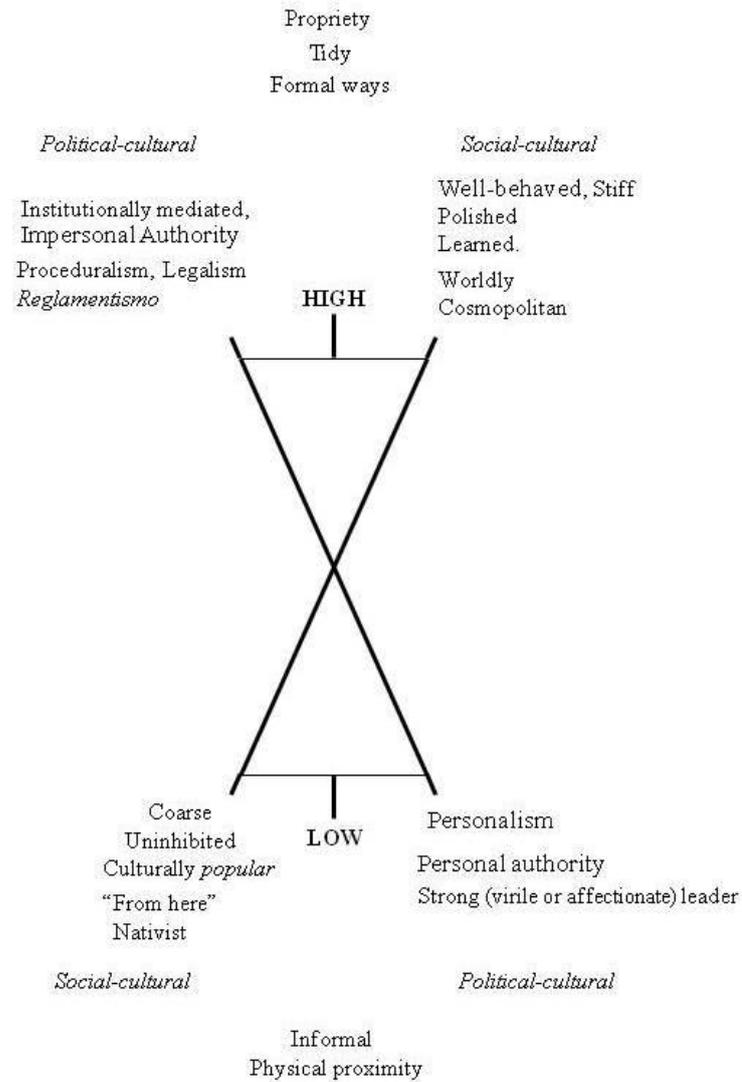
axis thus appears more unequivocally unidimensional (in a Downsian way), than the left-right dimension.

A last preliminary clarification, regarding terminology: since our approach is basically relational, we prefer to talk about *appeals*, in politics. It should be stated, first, that appeals have a substantial emotional side, in that they trigger affects and at times identification. Second and in contrast with a pure post-foundationalist ontology, identities cannot be entirely reduced causally to circulating discourses. There is in my view a subjectivity, however dislocated, that must be interpreted. More precisely, there is not a radical original absence, but sets of *experiences*, involving very real sensations (pain, hunger, feelings of contempt, vulnerability, etc.), which must be interpreted and for which certain interpellations are more *apt to resonate* than others. There is something sociologically and historically “already there” that insures that all discourses and interpellations cannot be blindly interchangeable. The struggle for hegemony moreover involves already-constituted subjects, capable of being drawn to different interpellations which resonate more (or less) with their experience. I thus ontologically posit a subject with a “space” between sociological and discursive determinations. A complex process occurs between the felt experience of the person and interpellations that name it, at the level of identity creation. Successful populisms are particularly effective at presenting interpellations in which the (sedimented) “identity of the popular” achieves some recognition. My ontology therefore includes *actors*, not only discourses.

Turning from post-structuralists to rationalist scholars who may equate appeals (as discussed above) with demagoguery, appeals in politics equally apply to the left-right dimension. From a rationalist standpoint, an appeal in politics is simply a way in which a politician or a party attempts, usually consciously, to *woo* supporters. Programmatic appeals or platforms are thus *also* appeals in that same generic sense. In contrast to a Downsian perspective assuming already-fixed and already-constituted voter preferences, appeals may reflect, but can also bring to life, preferences and liking/dislikes. Furthermore, new appeals and “images” can unsettle and modify already-constituted identities: for example, a person may have considered herself a leftist, but when faced with the style and performance of Hugo Chavez, react by going to the anti-populist camp.

If populism is the (antagonistic, mobilizing) flaunting of the “low,” we had now better define what is the “low,” in politics (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Constitutive Dimensions of High-Low Appeals in Politics



Source: Author's Elaboration

The Socio-Cultural Component

The first and perhaps main component of the high-low axis is the *social-cultural* appeal (or performance) in politics. This component encompasses manners, demeanors, ways of speaking and dressing, vocabulary, and tastes displayed in public. On the high, people publicly present themselves as well-behaved, proper, composed, and perhaps even bookish. Politicians on the high are often “well-mannered”, “self-restrained”, perhaps even polished, in public self-presentation. Negatively, they can appear as stiff, rigid, serious, colorless, somewhat distant, or even boring. The “technocratic look” such as that produced by the French *grandes écoles* is clearly on the high. On the low, people frequently use slang or folksy expressions and metaphors, are more demonstrative in their bodily or facial expressions as well as in their demeanor, and display more raw, culturally popular tastes.¹⁷ Politicians on the low are capable of being more uninhibited in public and are also more apt to use coarse or popular language. To the observers on the high, they often appear as more “colorful” and in more extreme cases, somewhat grotesque.

It cannot be stressed enough that the “low” in politics is *not* synonymous with poor people or lower social strata. In the US, Donald Trump was immensely richer than Barack Obama, but Obama was clearly much more “high.” The same applied in Italy between Monti (and even more so, Veltroni), on the high, and Berlusconi, on the millionaire low. Even in the electorate, levels of wealth and high-low positioning can in no way be equated.

This social-cultural component is, in fact, a politicization of the social markers emphasized in the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu in his classic social theory work on taste and aesthetics (1979). From a different theoretical, although equally sociological perspective, it is a politicization of the—empirically quite similar—differences in concrete manners, at the core of Norbert Elias’s work (1982). Bourdieu sees cultural capital as a “legitimate” form of distinction or credential, and a marker of respectability. Elias’s historical sociology was concerned about a long-term process of “civilization” in manners. Nonetheless, for both sociologists, one pole of the spectrum is a kind of propriety (and even distinction or refinement) that is legitimate by prevailing international standards.

¹⁸

Although sociocultural differences or contrasts are present in all societies, and are even at times very sharp and recognized as quite meaningful, these differences are

¹⁷ Heavy local accents and expressive body language are all, in a certain way, difficult-to-ignore intrusions of physicality, of the concrete particular body and locality, in social interaction.

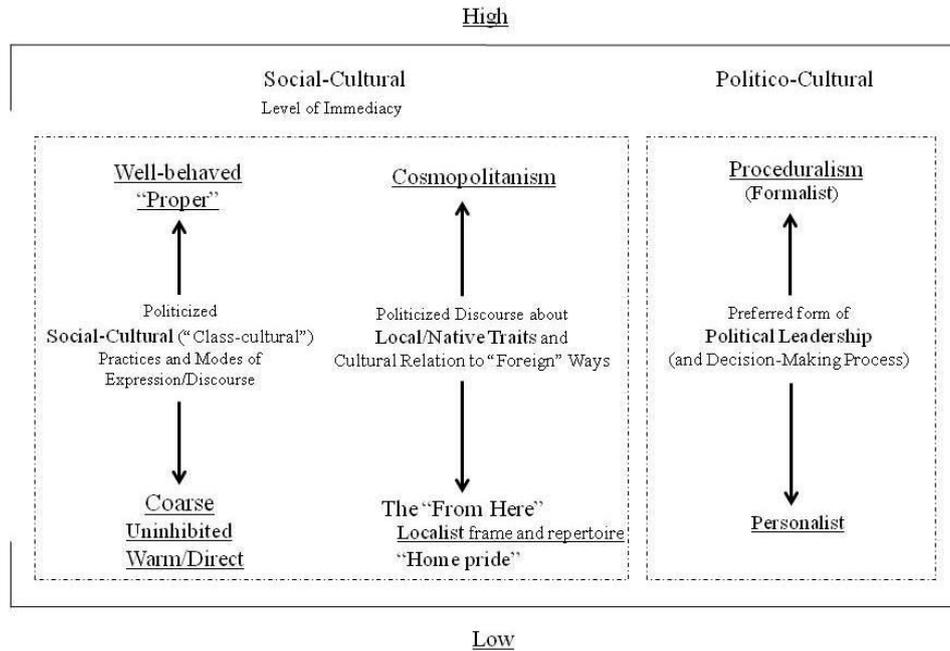
¹⁸ It is indifferent that Bourdieu views the function of the habitus of distinction negatively, while Elias much approved of the “civilizing process”: of interest here is the spectrum ordering such practices.

usually not *constitutive* of given political identities and often remain largely outside the political arena. For instance, while heavy drinking and loud singing at the pub is part of a stereotyped British working-class identity, it is not specifically associated with the Labour Party or its leaders. But in some cases, sociocultural differences or contrasts *do* become politicized. That is, manners, publicized tastes, language, and modes of public behavior do become associated with, and even defining of, political identities. In such cases, *social* identities with their many cultural attributes interact with *political* identities. While to be sure everything in the social world is in the last instance constructed, those social identities are much more sedimentated than more obviously constructed political identities. We cannot therefore put at the same level of “constructedness” the *popular* and the *pueblo*: traits of the popular can be sociologically observed, while “the people” is more obviously a political discursive operation (which, however, cannot refer to just *anything*).

Appeals on the high-low dimension are not *only* differences in style, although they certainly are that. They are public manifestations of recognizably social aspects of the self (and desires) in society, manifestations that contribute to creating a social sense of trust based on assumed sameness or coded understanding. And quantitatively, politicians as well as parties (that share certain practices) can be ranked ordinally on the high-low axis, within a society.

Within the social-cultural dimension, one must *also* clearly include the more “native” or “from here” versus cosmopolitanism, as shown in Figure 2 and, especially, 3. Certainly, on the more “raw,” culturally-popular pole, the *specific* expressions, practices, and repertoires characterizing the sociocultural component can only be taken from a very particular, culturally bounded and locally developed, repertoire (even though the general themes may be quite common). On the other hand, the appearance, deportment, and mode of discourse of political elites generally share commonalities. We thus bring in a second element within the social-cultural dimension of Figure 2 and now shown in detail in Figure 3: the axis or scale between cosmopolitanism and the “from here”. This element figures prominently in populist movements, cross-regionally. Identification with “the heartland,” as stated by Taggart (2000) and in contrast to more impersonal international cultural ways, is indeed a recurrent element of populism.

Figure 3 – Characteristics and Components of the High and Low in Politics



Source: Author's Elaboration

As Canovan (1999: 3–5) amongst others has highlighted, “the people” as a collective has more than one meaning: it can refer to the popular sectors, the plebs, the political subaltern, or it can be the people of a *specific* national community, like “the people of England” –at times with tropes of the heartland. The *llaneros* in Venezuela, the hardworking farmers and ranchers of the US heartland, that is, the “typical” and culturally-recognizable working people *from here* are *always* at the core of the “true people” imaginary of the populists. Both aspects belong to the sociocultural dimension.

Considering the—political and conceptual— debates raging in Europe on the relation between populism and nationalism, summarily clarifying one’s analytic position is indispensable. Indeed, the “from here” could be equated with nativism, which in turn can become equated with right-wing nationalism, in turn becoming synonymous with the common usage of populism in Europe. However, the constitutive component of the “from here” *in no way* entails xenophobic rightwing nativism as, contingently, articulated in Europe. In Argentina for example, nationalist Peronist populism, strongly em-

phasizing a certain “from here”, discursively embraces lower-class Bolivian and Paraguayan immigration, as such immigrants are also considered “from here” (Latin American brothers, like us), in contrast to a Muslim or Canadian immigrant. Second, in Latin America, the emphasis on the “from here” has been archetypical of *leftwing* populism and nationalism, in opposition to “foreignizing”, right-wing, “neoliberal” elites, Bolivia being the most extreme example. One must therefore distinguish what is contingently articulated in Europe from the more generic conceptual understanding of populism.

This being said, there is no doubt that populism goes with “the people from here”, not just with the underdogs *in general*—and not just because most political struggles occur within countries, rather than transnationally. The famed expression “national and popular” is thus not merely coincidental. While the concepts nationalism and populism indeed should not be conflated (see De Cleen and Stravakakis 2017), Brubaker (2020) is correct that:

appeals to ‘the people’ are at once vertical (against those on top) and horizontal (against outside forces or groups) and, further, ...vertical and horizontal appeals are constitutively intertwined, such that ‘the elite’ is represented a both on top and outside (2020:46).

Ostiguy and Casullo (2017)’s images of “punching upward and outward”, or “downward and outward”, capture the same idea. In other words, the horizontal and vertical are not just contingently articulated, but rather constitutively compounded. “The people” is thus also a large group different from other peoples and implying some sense of solidarity. As such, as Laclau would also have it with hegemony, “the people” are both the pleb *and* the bounded, distinct community.¹⁹ Inequality and difference are indeed both constitutive components of “the/a people”. Populism is the hyping up of both components (the “culturally popular” “from here”), against the self-assured “civilizers” and cosmopolitans on the high. Nationalism, in contrast, does not involve this *internal* fracture or “the double reference to part and whole” (Brubaker 2020:50).²⁰

What all poles of our low dimension (Figure 3) share in common is greater emphasis on immediacy (both in discourse and practices), in a more concrete, earthy, and cultur-

¹⁹ In psychoanalytic terms, nationalism provokes *jouissance* by promising national greatness; populism provokes *jouissance* by promising the reconciliation of the nation with itself (by making the plebs the whole, “the reconciled community”) *and* by extolling the non-elite.

²⁰ My only difference with Brubaker is that “the people” polysemically boils down to two acceptations, not three. The people are: the non-elite *and* the demos *of* a bounded community. This distinct, bounded community is obviously made up of individuals or people who, in turn (in democratic times) may want to act as citizens (or demos) and be collectively sovereign.

ally localist (“from here”) way, while the reverse is true of abstracting mediation. The high, in contrast, tends to justify its concerns in more abstract terms and to convey them through more “universalizing,” less culturally localized language. Since the emphasis here really concerns localist traits and cultural practices (more than the nation per se, as in nationalism), one could in fact well imagine a regionalist populism (e.g., in Texas or in Italy’s constitutive regions).

The Political-Cultural Component

The second component of the high-low dimension in politics is *political-cultural*. This component is about forms or style of political leadership and preferred (or advocated) modes of decision-making in the polity. Leadership mode is indeed one of our defining criteria for populism (and non-populism). On the high, there is a claim to favor formal, impersonal, legalistic, institutionally-mediated models of authority. On the low, political appeals emphasize very personalistic, strong (often male) leadership.²¹ Personalistic (and, at the Weberian extreme, charismatic) versus procedural authority (akin to Weber’s legal-rationalism) is a good synthesis of this polarity. The high generally claims to represent procedural “normalcy” (at least as a goal to be achieved) in the conduct of public life, along with formal and generalizable procedures in public administration. The personalist pole generally claims to be much closer to “the people”, to “love them”, and to represent them better than those advocating a more impersonal, procedural, proper model of authority.

Political science has devoted much attention to this “procedural”, institutionalist component, almost always normatively favoring the high pole. This attention is not surprising, considering Dahl’s well-known two orthogonal features of (popular) participation and willful acceptance of opposition—the forte of populism and of *liberal* democracy, respectively. There indeed is a strong mobilizational component in the practices of populism (at least in Latin America). Respect for rules, division of powers, and the autonomy of state bodies are meanwhile central in liberal democracy. In most instances of populism in power, cross-regionally, those institutional limitations are explicitly perceived by populist leaders as undesirably limiting popular sovereignty and the people’s will.

Liberals are quick normatively and politically to label populist leaders “authoritarians”. The label is misleading; “plebescitarian” is much more accurate in the case of the

²¹ The characterization of “strong” is *not* to be equated with “authoritarian,” even if politicians on the high often attempt to make that equation for politically motivated purposes. There is also a strong, affectionate, “caring”, female gendered version of that personalistic form of leadership, which can certainly be quite combative, from Evita Peron to Sarah Palin’s “grizzly moms.”

populist logic (Barr 2009: 35-36; 38-39). But for liberalism, there is a small step between majoritarianism and authoritarianism. The same accusation was leveled by liberals against socialism a century ago (e.g. Berlin 1958). The liberal institutional architecture often figures as (and often is) an *obstacle* to popular will and to the redemptive expectations associated with the transformative populist projects. But hostility or indifference to a liberal institutional architecture is not unique to populism. What in that regard is unique to populism is “an appeal . . . proclaiming the *vox populi* . . . [through] vivid [leaders] who can make politics personal and immediate, instead of being remote and bureaucratic” (Canovan, 1999: 14). In its strongest expression, Hugo Chávez claimed: “I am not myself anymore, I am *not* an individual: I am a people!”

Turning from political theory to discourse, a central element on the populist low is, as often stated in Latin America, the valuation of (strong, personalistic) leaders “with balls.” “Balls” are, indeed, a nodal point in populism! However, while the language of populism is at times steeped in a certain form of popular masculinity, “ballsyness” is clearly not restricted to men, including in Latin America,²² but corresponds to daring “people’s fighting heroes.” In brief, on the political-cultural dimension, the low entails a preference for decisive action often at the expense of some “formalities”; while the high values the “niceties” that accompany the rule of law.

Populist personalized leadership, as a form of rapport, of performed representation, and of problem solving, is a *way to shorten the distance between the legitimate authority and the people*. The polar conceptual opposite of personalized populist linkage is Weberian bureaucracy: impersonal, “fair” in the sense of universal and “the same for everyone,” procedural, and overall cold, distant, and not especially friendly.” Thus regarding personalistic authority, while liberals generally fear an authoritarian slippery slope, they miss the performed shortening of distance (and especially with the popular sectors) that is a key element of populist leadership.

Consequently, the most extreme form of populist representation (performed, but also experienced) and linkage is *fusion*, i.e., a “fusion” between the leader and the masses. While it sounds ominously fascist, it is also characteristic of some rock concerts. The positive, understudied, flip side of the populist *fusional* discourse, when in power, is that it often explicitly is a discourse of love. But since fascism claims the same fusion, with its “Fuhrer principle” and mass rallies, it certainly briefly bears the question of the relationship of populism to fascism. Differences are important and highly significant.

²² Evita Perón, for example, had “much more balls” than most populist male leaders. At the same time, highly personalistic female leaderships have, alternatively, empirically achieved a semi-direct relationship with the people, through very intense public display of affection, love, and nurturing—traditionally quite gendered. If the high tends to be “gender neutral,” the low generally accentuates gendered traits.

First, populism always empirically base its legitimacy through the frequent counting of votes—thus “proving” that the populist leader is “what the people want.” Fascism (a regime type) ends elections once it wins them; populism appears to *multiply them* and often supplements them with referendums.²³ Second, fascism governs in a disciplined manner, from the state down. Populism is much more ambivalent: though it often uses the state apparatus with little *délicatesse*, it also fosters a myriad of not overly coordinated movements, organizations, circles, with a grassroots component. Third, fascism is more prone to extol the nation (or even “the race”) and its leader, while populism extols the people (of that nation) and its leader.

In brief, the politico-cultural component of the low, personalization, is about lack of *formal* institutionalization, a trait central to many political scientists’ definitions of populism (e.g. Weyland, 2001), at the same time very much a style of mass politics (Knight, 1998; Moffitt 2016).

Underlying Commonality and Definition

What do these three components of the high-low axis—that is, the coarser culturally-*popular*, the “from here”, and personalization—have in common? It is, quite simply, the *level of sublimation* and of suppression judged ideal in the exercise of leadership and authority, as well as public behavior.

On identification and desires in politics, a notable trait of politics on the “low” is its more performative, frequent “soap-opera” aspect. Laclau goes too far in casting the leader as an *empty* signifier, condensing our desire for plenitude. His or her signification is not “empty”, while is at times wildly polysemic. For example, the concrete Carlos Menem publicly fulfilled—crassly, but with gusto—many (traditional popular-sector masculine) manly myths. That is, as Laclau also noticed (2005: 58-59), the leader is both *like me* (a “me” with no cultural titles) *and* an *ego ideal*—but one that is accessible and understandable. In populism, those fantasies are coarser *and* display an antagonistic dimension—a flaunting. Populism is thus a kind of personal (on the part of the leader) and collective (on the part of the movement) narcissistic *affirmation*, with “the middle finger” defiantly raised to the well-brought-up, the proper, the accepted truths and ways associated with diverse world elites. It is a flaunting of “our” low, in politics.

In summary and overall, populism, defined, is the antagonistic, mobilizational flaunting in politics of the culturally popular²⁴ and “from here”, and of personalism as a mode

²³ For example, in Venezuela during the fourteen years of Chavez’s rule, there were *ten* major national elections or referendums, where the official side could have lost (and did loose in one instance).

²⁴ “Popular” not as “widespread in the population,” but culturally *popular*, *populaire*, *popolare*, of “the popular sectors,” of “regular folks.”

of decision-making. The culturally popular and the native act as emblematic of what has been “disregarded”²⁵ in the polity, while personalism is both a mode of identification and of fixing this “disregard”. Defined in the most synthetic way, populism is the antagonistic, mobilizational flaunting of the “low.”

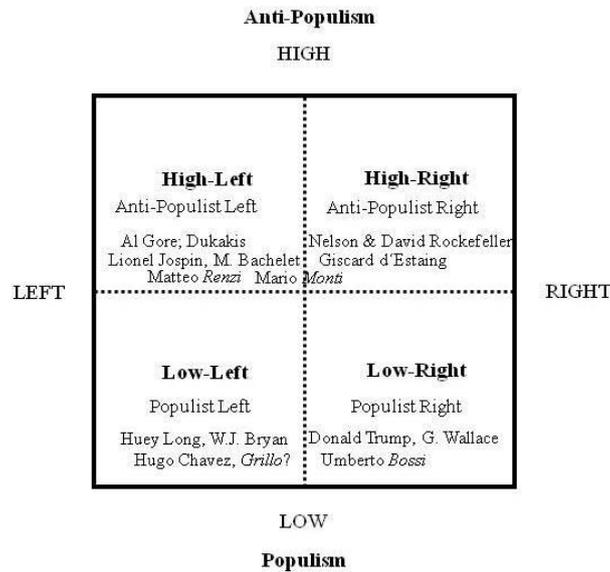
4. Populism and A Two-Dimensional Political Space

Both the left-right and high-low axes are actually, theoretically and empirically, orthogonal to one another (Ostiguy 2009, 2017).²⁶ *Together*, they form—when both present in politics—a two-dimensional political space of appeals, in which we can locate actors, parties, and politicians (ibid). This basic political space is illustrated in Figure 4. Such Cartesian location, furthermore, has significant consequences in the sociologically-differentiated reception of political appeals and in the social composition of the vote (Ostiguy 1998).

²⁵ The accurate term is, in French, *laissé pour compte*, translating roughly as overlooked, neglected, not taken into account, ignored, left by the wayside.

²⁶ One advantage of the political space delineated in Figure 4 is that *any* combination is not only possible, as is also the case in spaces configured by non-orthogonal axes, but (in contrast to Kitschelt’s spaces) *equally* possible, in any given one society.

Figure 4 – A Two-Dimensional Political Space



Source: Author's Elaboration

5. Conclusion

This article did not attempt to answer the important question of “what triggers, and when” populism. In the literature hypotheses have come and went. The objective was more narrow, but not for this more modest. The goal was to provide an understanding of populism that is thick enough to make sense of it in and of itself. This understanding goes (much) beyond the three lines of “the pure people versus the corrupt elite, and the Rousseauian expression of the general will,” which is not really a theory of populism, nor quite makes it as the definition of an ideology, however thin. Why this thin conceptualization has spread like wildfire in Europe remains to me somewhat mysterious. Methodologically, furthermore, any ideational analysis must be inductive and strive to constantly refresh itself, in that regard—to avoid top-down coding as self-referential.

In my view, there can be *no* populism without presence of the *popolare*.²⁷ There are many ways, and several facets of the *popolare*, for turning “the” *popolare* into a *popolo* as a useful category in actual politics, and to give it a *particular meaning* through—non-neutral ideologically—political discourses. Since “the people” *does* have a pleb component, it cannot be sociologically entirely neutral, or even less so, be made up mostly of the well-to-do, the social elites, the rich, etc. But what and who this *popolo* is is very much, as discourse-theoretical analysis has it, a product of discursive operations. What discursively defines a *popolo* (the dependent variable of the analysis) is the outcome not only of varying vertical axes, but also, given the *popolo*’s particularity, of an inside-outside axis. Classical Marxism had the analytical advantage of providing a clear foundational anchor in the relations of production and the social transformations provoked by capitalism. “The people”, however, is *not* a class, and it may not even be a “class alliance” (to use that older language). It is a political operation, as discourse-theoretical analysis has it, but it is a political operation not done “in the void”, on “blank slates”, having a marked and generally emphasized *social differentiation* component. In that sense, the moralist component of “purity” and “corruption” of the Muddian approach not only is incorrect cross-regionally (Ostiguy 2017), but misses the main boat. Of greater interest is who are the people and who are the people’s antagonists (particularly along the lines of Figure 1). The answer to that question provides furthermore the answer to differentiate left from right populism (Ostiguy and Casullo, 2017).

Disciplinarily, the analysis here lays at the crosspoint of discourse and political sociology. The cultural component of populism is not something political scientists should be indifferent to or find superficial but has deep roots in the sociology of distinction of Bourdieu, in cleavage theory, and, in aggiornando way, in “class” analysis of the Gramscian type and in Weberian types of authority. Most importantly, it is a (non-causal) understanding of populism that unproblematically travels cross-regionally and is therefore not limited to Europe and its world, or to the Americas.

Putting attention as it does to the valuation of the culturally *popular*, the unrefined, le *plouc*, *flaite* and *cholo*—all terms, obviously, “from here”—and of personalization as a mode of authority that makes alternative sense, this understanding of populism takes into account questions of “pride”, “dignity”, lack of recognition, “deservingness”, and

²⁷ It would be a logical mistake, as a rebuttal, to affirm that “all parties with a ‘popular’ electorate [would then be] populist” (De Cleen 2019:23). Communist parties with a strong component of miners and factory workers are not, simply for the fact of this electorate, populist. *However*, to have a *sociological* “pleb” component appears to be yet another necessary, though not sufficient, component of populism. Were sociology entirely absent and all just contingent, we would be equally likely to have a populist movement of rich landowners and bankers as that of manual laborers.

many other key emotions very much present in the (dynamic) evolution of public social life.

The approach is therefore not “culturalist”, but sociocultural and, at its core, relational. What leads to the emergence of populism in politics is left for other analyses, and can be quite context- or region- specific. Certainly, the decline of mass parties, particularly in Europe, has given great emphasis to the rise of more personalist figures of identification, particularly on the low. In Latin America however, the hyper-personalization of politics under classic populism and mass party creation went hand in hand.

Ending as we started with the category of populism, most publications defining populism have hitherto taken for granted that populism is a nominal category. That is, a “referent” (a politician, a statement, a party, a regime) is either populist or it is not. Even if we could *all* agree on a common definition of populism, it still remains unclear why a nominal category would be the most useful kind. We *do* need nominal categories to semantically know what we are talking about, when using a word in a sentence. When it comes to comparing observations (including about discourses) or even more so, to measurement, an advantage of understanding populism as a function of the use and degree of the “low” in politics is that it allows *ordinal* categories.²⁸ To put it differently, it permits us to locate our objects spatially, on a scale. We routinely do the same with left and right.

Ordinality is particularly useful both for politics and political analyses. Whether it is for high and low, populism and anti-populism, or left and right, it is often indispensable to be able to refer to a “left-of-center” or an “extreme left”; or to the “extreme right” and the role of the “center.” There also exist “outflanking on the low”; high-low political polarizations; or high-low party convergences in choosing a candidate. The panorama becomes particularly rich if the two orthogonal ordinalities are combined. This bi-dimensional space, to be sure, is only productive and relevant in certain countries and at certain times, though its utility would seem to be spreading. But is Matteo Salvini more right or more low? Is the French Socialist Party more high or more left? Answers to those questions are not only academic, but have sociological entailments, as seen when observing the resulting social composition and magnitude of the vote.

²⁸ Certainly, scholars in the ideational tradition already do that, routinely. See Jagers and Walgrave (2007) for Belgium, Hawkins (2010) for Venezuela, and Hawkins and Rovira (2017) for Latin America. Any quantitative textual coding, either of the sort pioneered by Hawkins (2010) or the standard content analysis, is bound to provide an ordinal, and even interval, measure of “populist-ness.”

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

MAJOR DIRECTIONS IN POPULISM STUDIES: IS THERE ROOM FOR CULTURE?

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ABSTRACT: The article highlights the absence of a cultural dimension in the academic literature of populism and advocates in favor of studying grassroots social movements as the primary milieu where culture interacts with populist mobilization. Beginning with an original classification of existing schools of thought on populism that uses the historical figure of William Jennings Bryan as a conceptual yardstick, it moves on to lay out a framework for cultural analysis through the lens of collective action frame theory, based on an understanding of populism as a discursive mode of political identification.

KEYWORDS: populism, populist social movements, discourse, culture, collective action framing

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1. Introduction

Up until some years ago, research on populism constituted a rather esoteric and isolated subfield of political science associated with flamboyant presidents in the global periphery or with raucous but politically inconsequential figures in “core” Western nations. The aura of aberrance that accompanied the term had allowed several mainstream scholars to prematurely declare countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, and Spain virtually immune to the populist challenge,

either due to the structural, “centripetal” advantages of their party systems or because of one appeasing feature of their domestic political culture or another.

While this illusion lasted – for roughly twenty-five years after the end of the Cold War – populists were “othered” bimodally, with the Atlantic Ocean erecting an insurmountable border of analytical disunity when it came to grasping the “true” empirical expression of the phenomenon. Specialists of the Western hemisphere heard “populism” and turned to the disturbing electoral advances of the Latin American left, with Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez holding the banner for the “pink tide.” Europeanists responded to the same cue by turning to the opposite side of the political spectrum, putting the fledgling – but still electorally feeble – radical right in Western Europe in their crosshairs, with France’s Jean-Marie Le Pen serving as *bête noire*.

Conceit was replaced by trepidation when the two nations traditionally advertised as stalwart stewards of liberal democracy and role models for the developing world were shaken by major and largely unanticipated populist gains. Donald Trump won the 2016 United States election, and the Brexit referendum upended the political landscape in the United Kingdom, ushering Boris Johnson into power. Moreover, anti-immigrant parties in countries such as Germany, Italy, Spain, France, Sweden, and Austria, greatly improved their electoral fortunes in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis. Adding insult to injury, radical left parties in Greece and Spain made headway during the Eurozone crisis, gnawing further into the ailing liberal consensus among conservatives and social democrats.

Eventually, after enough influential pundits had employed the term “populism” to encapsulate this unprecedented affront to mainstream politics, academics followed suit, thus significantly expanding the concept’s empirical application. All of a sudden, populism researchers gained popularity with academic publishers, journal editors, and lay opinion makers, and the ensuing barrage of scholarly production contributed reams of published material atop an already weighty body of work. Yet, quantity came at the expense of conceptual clarity. Even had the idea of a consensus on populism’s conceptual perimeter not already been *de rigueur* prior to 2015, to try and tame a scholarship running amok to incorporate a flurry of new empirical instances seems today utterly preposterous.

Fresh cohorts of zealous Ph.D. students just beginning to delve into populism’s conceptual depths are understandably throwing up their hands in dismay with this state of affairs. For the reasons just outlined, it would however be dishonest to profess the existence of a concise and universally accepted “authoritative” theory of populism that could alleviate such anxieties. Coming to terms with this absence by attempting at least to clear some of the dust produced by the warring camps in the field seems like a more

viable undertaking. To serve this modest goal, I here suggest that instead of the usual, inductive route followed by most literature reviewers, we take a path of inquiry that is somewhat circuitous but at the same time offers better intuition and a sounder organizing principle, all the while remaining grounded to the concept's historical origins.¹ I thus aim to avoid the danger of falling victim to a circumstantial appreciation of populist dynamics that will expire as soon as the current political setting changes and pundits switch to a different specter of choice *in lieu* of populism.

My deductive approach is based on summoning the figure of William Jennings Bryan to be used as a basis for conceptual work. Revisiting Populism's historical inception in the 1890s, I draw on existing literature to elicit tacit reactions for the widespread conviction that Bryan represents the first and most iconic populist contender. I aim to show that by studying how current schools of thought on populism are forced to cater for this archetypal case we can deduce where these schools stem from, how their epistemologies were shaped to respond to pressing empirical developments, and why they seem to be in such permanent tension with each other.

Providing a useful taxonomy for the academic literature on populism constitutes the first goal of the article. The second is to contribute to a deepening of this literature's analytical potential by promoting cultural approaches to the study of populist mobilization. While not denying the importance of culture at the level of party politics, I contend that scholars should primarily focus on exploring the interplay of populism and culture in the field of social mobilization. Grassroots forms of political contention routinely rely on cultural cues to construct populist collective action frames that will resonate with citizens, a mechanism that practitioners of the field have so far failed to give proper attention. I suggest that by wedding a theory of populism as a discursively constructed mode of political identification with methods from frame analysis as practiced in the field of social movement studies, we can address this lacuna and move toward incorporating culture into the analysis of populist phenomena.

2. Why was William Jennings Bryan a populist?

Despite its etymological roots in Latin, populism is a thoroughly American word, coined in the 1890s as a catchy neologism, a moniker first used for the members and supporters of the United States People's Party in the absence of an official partisan

¹ For recent surveys of the field, see Abromeit (2017); Moffitt (2016), pp. 17-27; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), pp. 2-9; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2018); Rooduijn (2019); Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (2017); Woods (2014).

designation. Derided as a bunch of cranks and radicals by both Democrats and Republicans, the People's Party arose from the experience of the agrarian movement of the Farmers' Alliances in the South and Midwest whose numerous members decided to cease relying on lobbying the two major parties for redress. Based on a radically progressive platform, they opted instead to establish a third party to contest elections at the local, state, and federal level (Goodwyn 1976; Hicks 1931; Hofstadter 1955; Postel 2007).

It has now become commonplace in handbooks and literature reviews to refer to the People's Party as the first populist movement in history, yet researchers rarely go beyond a hurried recognition to delve into the voluminous scholarship on this most fascinating episode. It is only die-hard experts of (capital-P) Populism who can readily summon up the names of the party's first senators or its nominees for the 1892 Presidential election. The one name that instinctively comes to most minds is that of William Jennings Bryan, the archetypal populist orator who was the Democratic candidate for president in 1896 while also enjoying the parallel endorsement of the Populists. Bryan crisscrossed the country to deliver fiery oratories, but his eventual defeat sealed the fate of the People's Party and the wider Populist cause. Nevertheless, his passionate "Cross of Gold" speech at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in July 1896 has gone down in history as perhaps the most representative populist speech ever delivered by a major party presidential nominee.

Interestingly, there are several issues with a knee-jerk association of Populism with the figure of Bryan, especially when taking into account the conceptual dimensions of populism as we understand them today. This bright, eloquent, well-connected, and well-educated Nebraskan – son of a senator and judge – was not the political maverick one would assume. In fact, he was just thirty years old when first elected to the House of Representatives in 1890, and that was not with any obscure political organization but with the oldest political party in the country, the Democratic Party itself. Bryan was subsequently nominated three times for president in 1896, 1900, and 1908, but he lost every time, ultimately serving as President Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of State from 1913 to 1915.

On the other hand, Bryan's Republican nemesis in the first two elections, William McKinley, was a devout Protestant of humble rural origins, the son of a pig-iron manufacturer who never graduated from college. McKinley first campaigned for nomination under the motto "McKinley against the bosses" (Klinghard 2005). He was a resolute advocate of the protective tariff and he proudly proclaimed to have founded his political economy more "upon the everyday experience of the puddler or the potter than the learning of the professor" (quoted in Glad 1964, 23-24). Based on these outward ap-

pearances, one could draw the conclusion that McKinley fits the populist bill better. Yet it is Bryan, the “Great Commoner”, who is most frequently invoked as the earliest and quintessential populist political leader. Technically though, Bryan spent his whole life as a dedicated Democrat. He never enlisted in the People’s Party, the “official” Populists of the era, even after they chose him for their 1896 Presidential ticket. Bryan’s lack of genuine Populist credentials was not lost on his enemies within the People’s Party though, and his nomination in 1896 was only a matter of strategic consideration in the face of the party’s dwindling electoral prospects. Even so, the fateful decision to support the Democratic candidate did not go uncontested, as anti-fusionist Populists angrily branded Bryan “an enemy to the People’s Party” (Argesinger 1974, 199), declaring his platform to be a selective cooptation of their own and his nomination to be a betrayal of Populist ideals. Why, then, do we take for granted that Bryan was the “real” populist and McKinley simply another Republican?

It is this very question that could serve as the basis upon which criteria for a populist litmus test can be articulated, thereby conditioning the inclusion of various parties and leaders into the populist set. Was Bryan a populist or not, and why? If yes, which specific dimensions of our theoretical framework allow us to recognize him as such? If not, how do we justify excluding such a widely perceived ideal-typical case (cf. Goertz 2006)?

Schematically, I suggest grouping plausible answers under three main categories. First, in the same way we would use “Republican” as a partisan label in the American context, we can prioritize a strict requirement for party affiliation and instruct that populist identity is exclusively reserved for People’s Party supporters and those with official positions within its formal apparatus. Secondly, resembling how we generically understand the terms “conservative” or “socialist”, we can expand populism beyond the pre-established confines of the People’s Party to further include politicians and other individuals whose political ideology corresponds to the Populist creed and its policy ramifications. The quest would then revolve around whether Bryan was a genuine populist ideologue at heart, irrespective of his nominal partisan identity. Finally, we can claim that official membership and political ideology are unable to capture the true spectrum of the phenomenon: there was something in Bryan’s outward behavior – his rhetorical tropes, his personal style, his campaign gimmicks, etc. – so resembling of the Populist experience that it warrants adding him to the populist set.

The whole purpose of this admittedly heuristic exercise is to consult existing conceptual declarations with the aim of “brute-forcing” how scholars determine Bryan’s populist status, and then to use these hypothetical answers as a compass for classification

purposes. In the next three sub-sections I will attempt to map out these orienting thoughts onto the existing literature.

2.1 Historicist and Structuralist Interpretations

Devoted historians of the People's Party will claim that the term "Populism" should always retain its capitalization in order to denote historical specificity. Populism existed as a singular, history-bound episode in American politics. It may have had consequences and implications, and subsequent movements may have superficially resembled it one way or another, but Populism reflected a unique worldview that cannot re-emerge outside the specific sociopolitical forces that produced it and determined its political trajectory. Populism was born within the Farmers' Alliances and died when the People's Party folded, and if Bryan deserves the label, it is solely by virtue of his historical role as the champion of the Populist cause in the eyes of American society. It is simply ahistorical, this school of thought maintains, to distill from American Populism such a thing as small-p populism to be affixed to sundry political phenomena in the United States or, worse, around the world. The contemporary application of "populism" is therefore an unacceptable abstraction, a Procrustean attempt by social scientists in pursuit of forced comparative operations.

This strict historicist rationale just summarized above is currently only espoused by a minority of researchers. However, it is not entirely indefensible, in that it is indeed reflective of the epistemological gulf separating the humanities from the comparative social sciences. Its value lies in presenting a cautious reminder of the dangers of haphazardly abstracting social-scientific concepts from rich and complex historical phenomena to then squeeze them into formal models of limited dimensionality.

Somewhat more influential and less draconian is a variant of the same family which contains useful traces of comparative potential. Again dear mostly to historians as well as a few sociologists and political scientists, this conceptual platform acknowledges the primacy of the Populist phenomenon while allowing room for other "populisms" that bear a resemblance to the original movement. On the one hand, close proximity to the main policy planks of the Omaha platform of 1892 can justify including a subsequent political phenomenon into the Populist tradition. On the other hand – and most importantly – the proper socio-historical context must be operative. Such "quasi-populisms" must involve agrarian populations facing hostile socio-structural conditions similar to those of their 1880s-90s American counterparts (the more similar, the better) in the context of a changing socioeconomic environment where industrialization

imposes a power shift away from traditional rural communities. Hence, the Russian Narodniki (Venturi 1960), the German Farmers League (Barkin 1970), the Polish Peasant Movement (Narkiewicz 1976), and the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (Bell 1977), would qualify for the populist family. However, one should not expect to find populism outside rural communities or in places where industrialization has already negated the political relevance of agrarian societies. Given such premises, it becomes unreasonable to insist on the existence of populist forces in modern, fully industrialized societies.²

A similar trail of thought is observed among the first generation of Latin American populism scholars and their few contemporary disciples. Here, however, the argument – though retaining its structural bias – is transformed with respect to the social agent of populist agitation. Certain characteristics of agrarian populism, such as the sensitivity to the disruptive force of industrialization, urbanization, and the general thrust of modernization, remain intact, but the usual victims – the agrarian populations of the hinterland – are substituted for urban dwellers in burgeoning national metropolises. Instead of the People's Party, early populist episodes in South America (basically, Peronism in the 1940s) are promoted to ideal-typical status. With references in functionalist sociology, modernization theory, and mass society theory, populism is seen as the outcome of a situation where certain sectors of society fail to keep up with the impact of rapid industrialization. This asymmetrical development, the "premature emergence of a mass society" (Hennessy 1969, 31), produces fissures in the structure of political representation of societal interests, thus allowing charismatic outsiders to attract the support of an amorphous mass of marginalized and disenfranchised urban citizens. Political leaders whose electoral ascendancy was conditioned by social forces of this nature qualify as populists.

These first three viewpoints, presented loosely above as members of the same school of thought, are characterized by a distinctly structural appreciation of historical progress. The focus is squarely on the macro level, causal factors are prioritized over phenomenological observations, and social stratification becomes the crucible of political behavior. The role of human agency generally takes a back seat: individuals, leaders and led alike, are unable to influence the course of developments, swept away as they are by the inexorable forces of history. Due to their deterministic aura, such epistemological assumptions have always been in tension with an understanding of bottom-up

² Scholars from different schools have tried to retain insights from this literature while avoiding the trap of succumbing to a strict association of populism with agitation amongst farming populations. This is achieved by invoking a downgraded species of "agrarian populism" among a wider family comprising the populist genus (e.g. Canovan 1981; Mudde 2000).

social mobilization as an agentic, rational, and strategic political undertaking that exhibits a rich cultural content (Goodwin and Jasper 1999). They are also fairly at odds with strictly rational-choice models that put the focus on individual ideologico-political attitudes as represented in the arena of electoral competition.

2.2 Institutional Approaches

The second major family of populism theory is less macro-structural in its outlook and somewhat more appreciative of the pull of ideas at the meso and micro level. Based on theories of party system institutionalization, voter representation, cleavage formation, and issue ownership, this school of thought interprets Populism as the programmatic adumbration of a specific political ideology espoused by People's Party activists and politicians like William Jennings Bryan. According to this rationale, Bryan is considered a populist because major planks of his unconventional political platform – the lack of respect for established procedures, the support for an unorthodox monetary policy, the attacks against banking and other business interests, the intention to overhaul the structure of political representation, the obviation of moderate political conduct – would disrupt checks and balances and the rule of law, impairing the health of the American system of government by rupturing the integrity of these most basic institutions of representative democracy.

Using the original Populist experience as a model, institutionalists have inferred a set of core populist ideological dimensions by surveying the area of overlap between the programmatic manifestos of the People's Party and the preferences of its voters. We can thus distill a laundry list of populist traits (see, e.g., Shils 1956 for perhaps the earliest iteration) by which we can then decouple the concept from its historical womb, applying it deductively across time and space to examine populist ideology with respect to political leaders, parties, or even individual voters with little or no organic relation with the original Populists. The choice of traits may vary, but what remains fixed is that populism acquires meaning only when studied as a destabilizing element *vis-à-vis* a certain pillar of institutionalized government, be it a party system, the electoral process, a political regime, an economic order, or a constitutional arrangement. Since populism is a paragon of discontinuity that can only upend, disrupt, and subvert an existing status quo, institutionalist scholars frequently adopt a normative tone in their effort to raise awareness about the deleterious impact of populist agitation on the institutions of liberal democracy.

Presently, there is no general agreement within this school of thought with regards to the exact ideological precepts of populism, its necessary and sufficient dimensions, its fit with democratic norms, and its policy implications. Various elements have been suggested as capturing the “true” essence of populist ideology, ranging from a focus on economic policy (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991), to attitudes toward pluralist institutions (Müller 2016; Urbinati 2019), to the treatment of minorities (Norris and Inglehart 2019). In some cases, populism is framed as comprising an ideological package coherent enough to warrant its study as a mode of political representation or as a type of political regime (see e.g. Caramani 2017; Pappas 2019). Expanding its reach into the demand side, a subgroup specializes in constructing attitudinal indexes to test the prevalence of populist ideology within a given constituency by means of public opinion surveys (e.g. Castanho Silva et al., 2019).

Admittedly, such a wide spectrum of opinion clearly negates any sort of facile abbreviation. The numerous researchers who work within its purview have been able to offer valuable insights into an immense variety of research questions. Unfortunately, their toolset of choice is exclusively tailored to fit political manifestations of the institutionalized type, with the political party or its leader representing the preferred unit of analysis in a context where the electoral cycle monopolizes the setting of the tone for political contestation. Little if any investment is put into understanding how populist mobilization succeeds in capturing hearts and minds, how it combines political claims of a strictly materialistic nature with elements of local culture based on feelings of injustice, or how it infuses the former with a distinctly primal democratic pathos. When ordinary citizens are involved in the analysis, their views are collected as isolated data points for statistical manipulation while their grievances remain demobilized by default. It is only when hierarchical organizations and ballot boxes enter the picture that institutionalists begin to take stock of the populist phenomenon. Inevitably, our scope is limited to populism’s institutional outcomes, diverting analysis away from the study of intermediary mechanisms of populist agitation such as strategic intent, the negotiation of social grievances, processes of identity formation, and the role of culture and emotions.

2.3 Discursive appreciations

As with the second, the third and final major perspective – favored mostly by political scientists and theorists – reiterates that capital-P Populism was just one case within a much larger set of small-p populisms. Important as it was for giving the group a

name, American Populism was not the earliest populist movement, nor was Bryan the first populist to ever win the spotlight, so we cannot therefore limit the concept to the People's Party's members and voters. The focus, however, is not on macro-structural shifts, nor on a purported set of ideological features of Populism and their implications for the institutional framework. It is rather the discursive form that becomes the defining criterion of populist mobilization (Laclau 2005; Panizza 2005). This approach prioritizes the mediating role of language, framing, and narrative, in the process of social construction, while emphasizing the importance of the culturally-bound political vocabulary that populists utilize in their effort to induce mobilization.

In terms of research methods, proponents of this view analyze textual products to decide if a political actor has, out of the myriad ways available to politicize social grievances, opted to construct reality as a dualistic struggle between "the people" – the in-group of choice – and those "elites" who distort the system to advance their narrow interests. The actor who systematically resorts to populist discourse can then be labelled a populist, since the conjuring of this specific socio-political imaginary becomes central for purposes of political mobilization. Hence, it was neither the official endorsement of the People's Party nor his policy proposal that made Bryan a populist, but his decision to base his political project on constructing a catch-all identity of a "people" unjustly stripped of their sovereignty through the deliberate perversion of the system by a self-serving elite of the Eastern Seaboard. Whether he was "truly" a populist or whether he invested in this binary social construction for strategic purposes is an interesting question but at the same time a moot one for purposes of analytical classification.³

This latter point opens up the group to the criticism that behind their nominally discursive and cultural appreciation of the populist phenomenon lies an overly behavioral approach where form is accentuated to the point of discounting valuable observations about populism's organizational, institutional, and ideological implications. Most scholars of the discursive school would respond by at least partly accepting this as a feature rather than a handicap. Deference to the principle of popular sovereignty is acknowledged as the touchstone for the "people's" moral advantage over unscrupulous "elites." But this rudimentary *forma mentis* is not consistent with what many institutionalists see as the marking of a formal political ideology or an otherwise coherent programmatic agenda. The sociopolitical output of populist mobilization is open-

³ Taking the argument a step further, an important subgroup within this camp casts discourse as operating more widely than mere rhetoric, adding elements of style (e.g., gestures, attire, mannerisms, etc.) as important markers of populism (Knight 1998; Moffitt 2016) and thus introducing cultural elements into the analysis.

ended; it refuses to adhere to strict policy norms or to produce patterned outcomes as with an ideologically conscious program of action. Therefore, the continuities that other schools of thought indicate with regards to party organization, institutional breakdown, and so on, are circumstantial artifacts that cannot be allowed definitional status.

To study populism is then to abstract a specific discursive behavior – an antiestablishment discourse in the name of the “people” – and to employ it deductively in search of populist instances around the world, including phenomena that predate the rise of the Farmers’ Alliances in the American context. The flexibility of the populist discursive trope, which, importantly, manifests in grades rather than in an on-off form, allows political and cultural agents (parties, leaders, movements, the media, artists, etc.) to use it in collecting disparate grievances under a single tent. Hence, in disagreement with the historicist or structuralist approach, no specific class or other sociological entity can be prioritized as the main locus of populist mobilization.

3. The regional divide among institutionalists: Europeanists vs Latin Americanists

Classifications rely on perspective. Bryan’s yardstick surely fails to account for every single division produced by the different research agendas out there.⁴ A regionally conscious glance at the literature of the last couple of decades reveals a further cleavage within the institutionalist camp that merits *ad hoc* treatment. The cleavage is between scholars of Latin American politics who study populism as a radical left-wing phenomenon in presidential party systems, and their European peers who evaluate it as an instance of radical right-wing politics in multiparty parliamentary democracies.

First, there is the troubling issue of the unit of analysis. When the word “populism” is uttered in a Latin American context it is hard to avoid conjuring up the image of a flamboyant President (predominantly male), colorful sash hanging from his right shoulder, waving triumphantly to a sea of raving crowds from the balcony of his presidential

⁴ Notably, many important contributions seem to straddle the divides or to mix-and-match elements taken from all three camps, as presented here. For instance, Mudde’s (2004) influential classification of populism under the genus of “thin-centered ideology,” an idea first suggested by Margaret Canovan (2002), belongs ostensibly to the second camp. However, since no clear ideological or programmatic dimensions are actually suggested, and since a “people versus elites” tension over popular sovereignty is posited as constitutive of populism, Mudde’s (2004; 2007) work occupies a spot within the grey zone between the institutional and the discursive. Similarly, Hawkins (2010) adopts a nominally discursive take on populism, but his work is mostly geared towards the analysis of institutional outcomes.

palace. Populism is regarded as a one-man show. The emphasis on the executive is of such paramount importance that it fosters a slew of near-onomatopoeic varieties of the phenomenon: Peronismo, Varguismo, Gaitanismo, Kirchnerismo, Fujimorismo, Chavismo, and so on.

What holds this corpus together is an appreciation of populist mobilization as a strictly top-down phenomenon that inhibits the development of institutionalized party bureaucracies. The spellbinding protagonist bypasses mediating institutions to appeal directly to unorganized, atomized constituencies (de la Torre and Arnson 2013), operating as a master manipulator of diffuse resentment who takes advantage of the electoral process to pursue a personalistic agenda that erodes the proper function of political representation. This perspective colors the Latin American breed of populism with an aura of a “this is not how politics should be done” quality. “Under populism,” Kurt Weyland (2001, 13) states in a widely-cited paper, “the ruler is an individual, that is, a personalistic leader” and “the connection between leader and followers is based mostly on direct, quasi-personal contact, not on organizational intermediation.” Striking a similar note, Levitsky and Loxton (2013, 110) argue that populists are outsiders who “mobilize mass support via anti-establishment appeals” by means of a “personalistic linkage to voters, circumventing parties and other forms of institutional mediation.” The Weberian notion of charismatic – as opposed to rational-legal – authority undergirds the theorization of this linkage: populists, Conniff (2012, 7) declares axiomatically, are “leaders who had charismatic relationships with mass followings and who won elections regularly.” An unmediated, emotional, psychological, quasi-mystical relationship between leader and led is generally regarded as the common core of all populist episodes in Latin American history.

This rationale inevitably renders populist politics incompatible with the representation of societal interests through established institutional structures, a function traditionally assigned to political parties: “By contrast to the strong organization provided by an institutionalized party and the stable connections established by patron-client ties,” Weyland (2001, 13) says, “the relationship between populist leaders and their mass constituency is uninstitutionalized and fluid.” Here lies the analytical cleavage with Europeanists on whose ears this type of statement rings strange, given that they tend to focus *specifically* on the political party as their unit of analysis. Furthermore, the stipulated need for strong and unmediated leadership, “charismatic” or not, seems

at odds with the concrete reality of European populist affairs (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014; Pappas 2016a).⁵

The conceptual divergence becomes starker when the clause of “broad mass support” of an electoral nature is taken seriously enough to become “the *ultima ratio* of [Latin American] populism” (Weyland 2001, 12). Steep levels of electoral backing for the populist agent are not a given in Europe, where the average populist party seldom manages to enlist popular majorities. Passing the five percent mark in national polls usually spells “breakthrough” for a European populist party, allowing practitioners to incorporate the newcomer into their datasets (e.g. Mudde 2007).⁶ So, on the one hand we have images of populist presidents in Latin America who are swept to power on the backs of popular majorities, and on the other, we have experts spending their whole careers laboring over populist parties with meager political influence over European society.

How can we explain the thorough lack of rapport between the two regions? Perhaps cultural or historical factors play their role, but the more obvious culprit is a basic difference in the system of government. In countries with presidential systems, executive power naturally ends up in the hands of a single person. Political parties still matter at the congressional level, but in the eyes of the public, electoral campaigns are fought between presidential contestants. Analysts accustomed to such a setting are understandably prone to associate populism with individual politicians rather than their parties. To take the United States as a clear example, several presidents or presidential candidates have been designated as populists (e.g., Donald Trump, Ronald Reagan, Pat Buchanan, George McGovern, George Wallace, Theodore Roosevelt, Andrew Jackson, and Thomas Jefferson), and scholars have even claimed that the whole character of American politics is fundamentally populist (Hofstadter 1955). However, rarely does anyone go on to brand the Republican or the Democratic Party as such. The two political organizations are conceived as durable institutional and ideological substrates upon which a politician may potentially (and temporarily) erect a populist superstructure, yet

⁵ The usual populist suspects in the very heart of Europe – e.g. the Front National in France, the SVP in Switzerland, the Vlaams Belang in Belgium, the Lega in Italy, or the FPÖ in Austria – have been contesting elections uninterruptedly for the last thirty to forty years, under different leaders. We can hardly refuse to designate these parties as populist merely because they may lack leaders falling within the “great leader” trope. At best, the argument over whether populism requires personalistic leadership is trivial, boiling down to the truism that a party with a popular leader at the helm enjoys better electoral prospects. At worst, the argument is spurious, since no control group is ever employed to test it: personalistic leadership may plausibly benefit all sorts of political campaigning, not just the populist type.

⁶ According to my calculations, the average electoral strength of populist right-wing parties in Mudde (2007) is 12.9%. In an updated version of his dataset, the average drops further to 9.6% (Mudde 2013).

the populist element never seems to become entrenched enough to justify calling the entire party “populist.” European critics therefore charge that the study of populism in the Americas has been forced to fit the institutional structure of the region, thereby distorting the phenomenon’s true proportions. The assertion that populism is “a question of who gains public office and how they govern” (Conniff 2012, 2) hinders comparison with democracies of the parliamentary type where the political party is used as the main unit of analysis.⁷

The conceptual disjunction between Americanists and Europeanists comes starkly to the fore in a recent chapter for *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, where Weyland (2017, 62) stands his analytical ground, and in defiance to the rest of the volume’s authors goes on to claim that “much of Europe’s right-wing radicalism may be a different ‘political animal’ and not fall under populism.” According to this most influential scholar of Latin American populism, archetypal cases in the European literature like the Front National or the Vlaams Belang are too institutionalized and too unsuccessful to pass the bar. Genuine populists are non-ideological actors, notorious for their opportunism, whereas the leaders of European right-wing radicalism, on the contrary, are inflexible and dogmatic, and their personalism is “ideocratic.”

Weyland’s argument rests on criteria I have strongly protested in the previous paragraphs, but this does not mean his final assessment is necessarily incorrect. The knee-jerk identification of every European right-wing radical or extremist as a “populist” is of late receiving justified criticism for indiscriminately lumping together phenomena of a different substance and caliber that should remain analytically separated (e.g., De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Pappas 2016b; Stavrakakis et al. 2017). At the same time, it suggests another dimension of the gulf between European and Latin American scholarship, this time pertaining to populism’s ideological valence. Latin America, the “hotbed” of radical left-wing populism (Castaneda 2006), stands at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum from Europe, the den of radical right-wing populists (Caiani and Císař 2019; Heinisch et al. 2017; Mudde 2007). The reasons here are mostly socio-

⁷ For a thorough analysis of this Americanist “bias”, see Aslanidis (2017). The reluctance to apply the Latin American theoretical paradigm in Europe was revealed during the 2017 French presidential election. Emmanuel Macron donned an outsider persona and mobilized a vehement anti-establishment discourse, winning the Presidency on the basis of a purely uninstitutionalized linkage with voters, since his personalistic electoral vehicle – the *En Marche* party – was still in the cards. During the campaign Macron even acquiesced to being qualified as a populist if that meant “talking to the people in a comprehensible manner without the intermediation of mechanisms,” a behavior he contrasted to that of the demagogue who merely “flatters the people” (Macron 2017). Even though Macron was the one who ticked many of the boxes, it was his far less popular or charismatic foe, Marine Le Pen, that won exclusive coverage as the populist candidate.

historical and ideological. Long-standing socioeconomic inequalities in South American societies have traditionally led to anti-establishment appeals primarily emerging from the left side of the political spectrum. After a brief but important interlude in the early 1990s when “neo-populists” with pro-free-market agendas won power in Argentina, Peru, and Brazil (Roberts 1995; Weyland 1996), the association between populism and left-wing politics re-emerged at the turn of the century, with left-wing populist leaders such as Chavez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia, and Correa in Ecuador breathing new life into the Latin American populist literature.

In Western European circles, the absence of a patterned sequence of anti-establishment challenges to the dominance of Christian-Democratic and Social-Democratic parties in the post-war setting had rendered the concept of populism irrelevant in public and academic discourse, despite the existence of a far right undercurrent in many nations.⁸ When, for instance, Enoch Powell shocked Britain with his “Rivers of Blood” speech in April 1968, no one thought of denouncing him as “a populist”. The terms “racist,” “demagogue,” or “nationalist” captured the substance of his political message well enough at the time. European scholars only began to employ the term reluctantly in the mid-1980s and more fervently after the mid-1990s when burgeoning far right parties such as the *Front National*, the *Republikaner*, and the *FPÖ* received treatment as manifestations of *national-populisme* in France (Taguieff 1984) and *Rechtspopulismus* in Germanic-speaking countries, wedding populism firmly with extremism on the right, thereby sparking a long trail of influential scholarship as such parties began to multiply across the continent (e.g. Betz 1994). The association – undoubtedly influenced by the European trauma of fascism – has since remained a fixture of almost every political formation to the right of mainstream conservatives in European party systems. Thus, when Latin Americanists speak of (left-wing) populism, they invoke a traditionally socioeconomic understanding of left versus right. In the European context, the debate around (right-wing) populism reflects socio-cultural attitudes where xenophobia and nativism overshadow questions on the role of the state in the national economy.

⁸ Greece was an important exception; see the early work by Mouzelis (1978). Green parties challenged the establishment in several Western European countries during the 1970s and early 1980s, but political analysts seldom saw value in emphasizing their populist characteristics, perhaps due to the lack of a proper theoretical framework in Europe at the time.

4. Making room for culture

Having laid out a conceptual grid to describe the main tensions in the literature of populism we can now proceed to contribute to the main topic of this special issue: the field's disappointing attention to cultural aspects of populist mobilization (Caiani and Padoan, this issue). By design, institutionalist and structuralist approaches are rather unconcerned with cultural explorations of political contention. The sole direction offered on that end is through an identification of "right-wing populism" with ultra-nationalist or nativist sentiment that is to be subsequently analyzed through the lens of culture. However, this interpretation frequently misreads the populist call for the restitution of *popular* sovereignty by equating it with a call for *national* sovereignty that may follow an aggressively and primordially cultural – nativist, ethnic, or even racist – logic, thus overlooking the democratic and egalitarian core of the populist plea and its crucial anti-elitist component, and thereby missing the opportunity to study how cultural themes inform it.⁹

Moreover, as I argued earlier, institutionalists on both sides of the Atlantic leave no space for populism as a grassroots phenomenon, a striking omission given that Populism emerged historically as a popular movement to only become institutionalized in the People's Party at a later stage. Social grievances, ideologies, values, cultural norms, and other elements with a potential for politicization, can equally find expression within and without an electoral vehicle, and it is most frequently in the non-institutional domain that culture reverberates the strongest. It is not only culturally rich social movements that are left out when populism becomes anchored to a dominant leader or a political party but also journalism and forms of politically-conscious art. The interesting debates on "media populism" (Mazzoleni 2008), or on the populist literature of Hamlin Garland (Brown 1994), L. Frank Baum (Littlefield 1964), and John Steinbeck (Simkins 2006), or on the populist cinematography of Frank Capra (Phelps 1979), and the influence of Populist poetry on American folk music (Eyerman and Jamison 1998) would be rendered non-sensical in the very fields where we expect culture to play a particularly crucial role.

The discursive school offers a more hospitable venue for introducing culture into the study of populism. Elements of local and national culture pop up regularly in analyses of populist discourse, from the way elites are criticized and often ridiculed as culturally

⁹ Populism and nationalism may at times overlap but that should not allow a haphazard blurring of the lines between them. On the need to retain a distinction between nationalism and populism see De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) as well as Brubaker's (2019) rebuke. Gamper Sachse (2018) analyzes empirically how the two forms of identity construction interact in the case of Catalanian independence.

distant from “ordinary people” for the way they talk, their attire, their stylized table manners, their lavish lifestyles, their culinary tastes, their preference for the “high” arts and so on, to the populist veneration of the folksy ways of the “common man” that symbolize the authenticity and egalitarian ethos of the underdog. While these discursive features are on occasion pertinent for top-down populist projects (see e.g. Moffitt 2016; Ostiguy 2017), it is still the organizational, structural, electoral, and attitudinal dimensions that scholars of party-system populism predominantly seek to dissect in their work, with culture acting as the occasional mediator.

On the contrary, episodes of grassroots populist mobilization, where populism comes in the form of a social movement rather than a hierarchical, electorally-conscious organization, offer us a unique opportunity to study the interaction with cultural social products, given that social movements are pregnant with symbolic meaning as their activists consciously or unconsciously draw from the rich pool of cultural norms and symbolisms in order to mobilize citizens for their causes (Aslanidis 2016a, 2018; Caiani and Císař 2019). The populist movements of the Great Recession in Iceland, Spain, Greece, Israel, and the United States, the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, the Hong Kong Umbrella Revolution, the Yellow Vest movement in France, the Sudanese Revolution, and the recent movements in Lebanon and Iraq, all contain heaps of evidence pointing to the dominant role of culture in the construction of populist identity. Populist culture has been repeatedly forged and enacted in streets and squares by unnamed activists to then remain in abeyance for future generations of grassroots populists once the current agitation subsides. From the messages written on banners and placards, to the chants they compose, the slogans they shout, their flags and even the name they choose for their causes, populist movement entrepreneurs are conscious that the quality of cultural capital invested in their struggle matters greatly in the successful construction of a catch-all narrative to unite “the people” above partisan, ethnic, religious, class, and other divides.

In this sense, scholars interested in culture and populism have much to learn from the vast literature that social movement experts have produced over the past decades. A most promising avenue, commensurate with a discursive take on populism, is the literature on collective action framing, introduced by sociologist David Snow and his associates in the late-1980s. To put this literature to work in the service of populism studies, we must switch to a social movement perspective and define populism as a type of collective action frame, that is, *an action-oriented interpretation of reality that frames popular grievances as the outcome of an unjust erosion of popular sovereignty perpetrated by manipulating elites* (Aslanidis 2016a, 2016b, 2018). Thus, we will be able to assess the significance of culture as a contributing factor in a process of meaning-

making termed “frame alignment” (Snow et al. 1986; Zuo and Benford 1995). Movement activists employ this process to compile building blocks of symbolic matter that allow them to adjust the populist frame of the movement – the *people versus elites* trope – to popular aspirations. How this works is briefly explained in the paragraphs below.

Theories of collective action usually begin with dispelling the misconception that “objective” societal grievances automatically yield a specific political reaction on the part of those affected as macro-structural or overly economic views would hold. Agency, through skill, creativity, and strategy, intervenes to inspire action by constructing and broadcasting a resonant frame that “explains” what is going on out there as the product of specific human forces. Before citizens can be mobilized, grievances need to be emphasized and amplified, their emotive potential leveraged to work alongside cognitive evaluations. To do that, a collective action frame must align its interpretation of the situation with individual orientations, so that “some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and [social movement] activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary” (Snow et al. 1986, 464). The goal of *narrative fidelity* becomes a crucial component: successful framing efforts “resonate with cultural narrations, that is, with the stories, myths, and folk tales that are part and parcel of one’s cultural heritage and that thus function to inform events and experiences in the immediate present” (Snow and Benford 1988, 210).

In the case of populist mobilization, the articulation of blame needs to be sharpened toward a single point of failure in the system at the highest possible level, contributing to a narrative that recognizes “elites” as culprits and “the people” as victims, chiseling away competing causal interpretations based on traditional sociopolitical cleavages of a sectarian nature. At the same time, populists cannot rely exclusively on a dry, juridical invocation of a vigilant people-as-sovereign to instigate a political insurgency. “The people” cannot simply come together in union at a skin-deep, procedural level. The otherwise latent belief in the value of popular sovereignty provides a useful substrate for collective action, but activists still need resonant symbolic markers and cultural motifs to crystallize the notion of “a people” acting in concert against injustice.

Culture enters the picture as an instrument of frame alignment by providing symbolic and emotive tissue to help glue together the otherwise disparate political worldviews that temporarily coalesce within a populist movement. When one wishes to establish unyielding popular unity against a common elite enemy, knocking down the disruptive salience of class identity, ideological beliefs, material interests, gender, or even religious sentiment and ethnic make-up, culture can work as the linchpin to align and set in motion an audience of colorful ideological and social make-up. Citizens

are deeply imbedded in a system of cultural codes that can be mobilized to substantiate a distance from usurping elites; and since movements are both “consumers of existing cultural meanings and producers of new meanings” (Tarrow 1992, 189), “the people” will witness and contribute to cultural breakthroughs of a recalcitrant, anti-establishment nature right there on the spot where populist collective identity is constructed anew, thus galvanizing a feeling of camaraderie, establishing trust, and strengthening the resolve to stand together until the movement fulfills its redemptive mission.

Methodologically, frame analysis is helpfully in tune with studies of populist discourse in that it also relies on analyzing textual data – in a broad sense – to understand framing processes (Johnston 2005; Vicari 2010). This is done primarily by recourse to qualitative assessments, while also allowing quantitative explorations. Due to its infrequency and its usually short duration, grassroots mobilization is logistically cumbersome to analyze as compared to the study of party system politics. However, relying on the tried-and-tested literature on frame theory and the process of frame alignment as a theoretical framework, a research agenda that engages with the cultural aspect of populist mobilization has at its disposal a range of reliable research practices. Participant observation, interview data, the analysis of movement manifestos, assembly minutes, pamphlets, mottos, banners, and chants, all help to uncover how culture serves as a contributing factor in constructing and buttressing an emergent populist identity.

The spotty nature of social mobilization is no excuse for ignoring the numerous episodes of grassroots populism in favor of the electoral manifestations of the phenomenon. Perhaps the greatest hurdle moving forward is the mutual reluctance between political scientists and sociologists to delve into each other’s literature to borrow and build upon existing concepts and methods. The publication of this special issue is an encouraging signal that such a cooperation is not only feasible but also advantageous to both camps.

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AURHOR'S INFRMATION:

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Who Thinks, Feels: The Relationship Between Emotions, Politics And Populism

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ABSTRACT: There is a tendency both in academia and in popular understandings to posit emotions against rationality and to judge them as an expression of intellectual inferiority. This could not be more evident than in current accounts of populism, which often describe populist supporters as overtaken by passions rather than relying on rational deliberation. However these arguments hardly stand up to scientific scrutiny. As I will show by reviewing the state-of-the-art, advancements in disciplines such as political psychology have now provided systematic evidence of how, contrary to what is traditionally rooted in the public imaginary, emotions and cognition work in concert. If emotionality is an integral part of decision-making and is vital to any type of political engagement, the question we should rather ask is what is *peculiar* about the relationship between emotions and populism. In the second part of the article, I will explore how the emotional 'supply and demand' intersect in our contemporary societies, where capitalism, individualism and globalisation have created particular affective states that provide fertile ground for the populist appeal to resonate. By examining the emotions-populism relationship based on three broad dimensions - structural, subjective and communicative -, this article provides a multilevel analysis that unpacks the significance of emotions for the emergence, diffusion and success of populism.

KEYWORDS: Emotionality, Narratives, Political communication, Political psychology, Populism.

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1. Introduction

The ideal of the supremacy of reason is deeply rooted in our cultures. Since the Enlightenment Age, the public imaginary has perpetuated an eternal conflict between emotions and reason, prioritising the rational while condemning the passionate. The glorification of science, research and rationality that started during that age, has gradually shaped our vision of what 'righteous decision-making' should look like: it should involve reason, conscious deliberation, attentive and scrupulous analysis; with experience, it will provide us with wisdom and the ability to distinguish right from wrong; and when we master it, we are finally able to put 'the mind' before 'the heart'. This century-old 'rationality *versus* emotionality' idea is now cemented in our common understanding of emotions. The 'heart' is considered a place of grand and overwhelming feelings that gifts us with some of the most profound and powerful experiences. It is however *only* a place for experience, not for decisions, and on the battle against the 'mind', it is on the losing side.

Emotions are considered the 'Other of rationality' (Demertzis 2014) and decisions that are said to be based on them, rather than careful thinking, are usually dismissed and downgraded (Jenkins 2018). This could not be more evident than in the study of politics. Phenomena such as totalitarianism, propaganda and populism have historically been examined by equating emotionality with demagoguery, manipulation, and treating the 'masses' as slaves to irrational desires. For decades, emotions have been posited in a presumed antagonistic relationship with rationality and "believed to reflect intellectually inferior and often socially and morally irresponsible attitudes and forms of conduct" (Freedman 2013, 2). The renewed attention devoted to the populist phenomenon has only resurfaced this problematic approach.

The debate over emotions adds further complexity to populism research, a field of inquiry already characterized by widespread disagreement and a lack of full definitional consensus over the essence of the phenomenon and its main manifestations. When attempting to define what populism is, scholars focus on a recurrent set of characteristics that populist parties display, most notably the commendation of and appeal to a virtuous 'ordinary people' accompanied by a vilification of a corrupt establishment (Mudde 2004, Taggart 2000). Additional accounts highlight the charismatic personality of populist parties' leaders (Meny and Surel 2001), a straightforward and simplified political message similar to demagoguery (Taguieff 2007), a particular mode of party organisation revolving around the leader (Weyland 2001) or a performance of crisis (Moffitt 2015). Such variety of aspects highlighted by the available scholarship is mirrored into a wide range of definitions that see populism as an ideology (Mudde 2004), style (Moffitt and Tormey 2014),

discourse (Panizza 2005), logic (Laclau 2005) or organisation mode (Weyland 2001). In this article, I regard populism ‘to be first and foremost about ideas’ (Mudde 2017), thus following an ideational approach that conceptualises the phenomenon as a thin ideology “that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004, 543). It is however worth noting that some authors suggest tackling the definitional challenge by appraising populism as a matter of *degree*; as Caiani and Graziano (2016) argue, the various definitional attributes can be aggregated into a set of dimensions, namely rhetoric, ideology, organization and style of communication, that would allow scholars to proceed with a radial (rather than dichotomous) definition.

While the debate over populism as a discrete or continuous concept continues, authors concur on the need to adopt typological distinctions in order to shed light on its different manifestations (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). In Europe, a subfamily of right-wing populists is particularly common - the populist radical right – which combines populism with nativist and authoritarian ideological features (Mudde 2007). Because of the exclusionary nature of their discourse and their emphasis on law, order and authority, these parties have particularly influenced the way both academics and the public think about the relationship between emotions and populism. The term ‘populism’ has become a synonym to actually indicate the populist radical right and, as such, discourses filled with hate, anger, fear and nostalgia for a glorious past. Populist voters have been collectively accused of acting out of collective rage and cast their ballot based on gut-feelings rather than reasoning and deliberation. In many cases, they have been dismissed as bigots and a “basket of deplorable”. Mainstream parties across Europe have widely denounced populist parties as irresponsible actors for fuelling emotions rather than fostering a rational debate, and thus causing political and civic turmoil.

Such an approach is problematic in that it dismisses populism as irrationality *en masse*, downplaying grievances and concerns of populist voters as irrelevant or wrongly placed. Moreover, the dichotomy emotions vs. reason hardly stands up to scientific scrutiny. As this article will show by reviewing the state-of-the-art, advancements in disciplines such as political psychology have now provided systematic evidence of the absence of any sharp distinction between cognition and emotions as traditionally rooted in the public imaginary. After clarifying what emotions are and showing their inherent relationship with decision-making, the article will discuss their relevance to the study of politics. If emotionality is an integral part of decision-making and is vital to any type of political engagement, the question we should rather ask is what is *peculiar* about the relationship between emotions *and populism*. In the second part of the article, I will thus explore

how the emotional ‘supply and demand’ intersect in our contemporary societies, where capitalism, individualism and globalisation have created particular affective states of grievances, resentment and ontological insecurities that provide fertile ground for the populist appeal to resonate. I propose examining the emotions-populism relationship by looking at three broad dimensions – the structural, subjective and communicative – as this allows us to develop an integrated understanding of how emotions are produced at the macro-level, perceived at the individual level and further reproduced through political narratives. Via this multi-level analysis, the article contributes to unpacking the significance of emotions for the emergence, diffusion and success of populism.

2. Absolving Emotions

What do we mean when we speak about emotions? Emotions have been theorised differently in the literature but it is now widely agreed that they are the result of neural processes in the brain (Brader and Marcus 2013) and, as further evidenced by neuroscience research, they display an intimate interconnection with cognition (Marcus *et al.* 2011).

One of the most prominent accounts in the literature, the theory of affective intelligence (Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen 2000) posits that emotions are the display of feelings generated by the interaction between our personal goals and the surrounding environment. When our goals are met, we experience emotions of positive valence along the dimension of enthusiasm, such as happiness, hope or pride. These emotions tell the brain that a goal has been accomplished and the brain responds promptly by reinforcing existing attitudes and encouraging the establishment of routinized behaviour, as these have been found successful in securing the initial accomplishment (Marcus and MacKuen 1993). On the contrary, when our goals are threatened, we experience feelings of negative valence, along the dimension of anxiety; our brain, in response, suspends routines and rather than relying on existing knowledge and attitudes, examines all information more accurately, in order to reduce threat and uncertainty (*ibid.*). Finally, when our goals are not met, we experience aversion, which taps into feelings of anger, contempt, frustration or disgust. Unlike what happens with anxiety, aversion is brought about by events which challenge us but that are not entirely unknown or uncertain; as a consequence, our brain does not scan the environment for new information but rather reacts by clinging to previously held opinions (Marcus *et al.* 2000). According to this theory, these three systems – enthusiasm, anxiety and aversion – generate a set of emotions that in turn

affect the way we think and behave in the social world. Emotions thus precede cognition but also work in concert with it in determining the different ways we navigate reality.

This theory represents a 'dimensional approach' to emotions, because it conceptualises them along the valence dimension (negative-positive) in each system and clusters them accordingly. Another approach, the so-called appraisal theory, differentiates more finely among emotions based on the way the individual appraises the surrounding environment. The central tenant of this approach is that emotions do not arise from a situation per se, but from the individual's own interpretations of it, both at the conscious and preconscious levels (Lazarus 1991). As an evolutionary survival function, the individual continuously scans the surrounding environment and appraises all its characteristics, leading to the arousal of certain emotions that relate closely to those evaluations. This means that, unlike the theory of affective intelligence, appraisals theory does not conceptualise emotions along a set of dimensions, but rather as *discrete*, that is, distinguishable from one another. Fear can be a fruitful example to this regard: whereas in the theory of affective intelligence, this emotion is but one possible along the anxiety dimension, for appraisal theorists fear and anxiety can be clearly separated because the first results from the appraisal of a specific and identifiable threat whereas the latter is an appraisal of uncertainty and a diffuse, non identifiable danger (Smith and Ellsworth 1985). In this theoretical account, each emotion is therefore the product of specific combinations of cognitive appraisals; appraisals are automatic but nonetheless cognitive, because they result from how the individual elaborates and makes sense of the surroundings in relation to his or her own needs. Scholars within this approach have identified several 'antecedents' of emotions, that is, the "core relational themes" (Lazarus 1991) that characterise a certain feeling and can therefore predict its arousal. Although there is no consensus on a definite list of these dimensions, academics at least concur on a recurring set, such as goal-relevance, responsibility, certainty and control (Smith and Ellsworth 1985; Lazarus 1991; Roseman, Antoniou and Jose 1996).

Regardless of whether we agree with conceptualising emotions according to valence (the dimensional approach) or we try to differentiate among them more precisely (the discrete approach), what emerges from the literature is that emotions appear inevitably, as we navigate the world around us. They have a diagnostic power, in that they communicate to the brain what is going on around us and whether or how to attend to it. Research has provided extensive evidence of this inherent connection between emotions and cognition. Overall, emotions affect *the way* we think by influencing three important areas.

First, emotions have an impact on the level of attention to the surrounding environment. Attention is a foundational step for any consequent evaluation and decision-

making activity, in that it determines whether the individual is going to attend to a stimulus, avoid it or ignore it altogether (Scherer 1982). Defensive emotions have been found to increase attention levels, as they affect the individual's motivation to be vigilant (Marcus *et al.* 2000). Fear, for example, results in higher levels of attention, as the brain becomes interested in collecting more information to reduce uncertainty (Huddy, Feldman and Cassese 2007; Valentino, Hutchings, Banks and Davis 2008). Anger has the opposite effect, as experiencing this emotion has been found to reduce interest and attention to new information and opposite views (MacKuen, Marcus, Neuman and Keele 2007; Redlawsk, Civettini, and Lau 2007). This is because, as an 'approach emotion' (Carver 2004), anger is activated by the system that manages rewards, signaling an obstacle to their pursuit (Marcus *et al.* 2000). As the path to reward is blocked, this emotion communicates to the brain that all attention and interest be diverted to focus exclusively on the goal.

Second, emotions affect our motivation to act. The behavioral component of emotions has long been emphasized, as one of their core effects is to provoke a change in behavioral intentions prompting the individual to act or behave in certain ways (Oatley and Jenkins 1996; Scherer 2001). Emotions have what has been labeled 'action tendencies' (Frijda 1986), in that they signal the brain that a certain course of action is advisable in order to meet situational needs. Returning to our previous example on the divergent effects of defensive and approach emotions, experiencing anger has been found to motivate individuals to engage in risk-taking and confrontational behaviour (Lerner, Gonzalez, Small and Fischhoff 2003; Brader, Groenendyk and Valentino 2010) whereas the opposite effect has been registered for defensive emotions, with fear prompting individuals to reconsider their course of action and thus to engage in risk-averse behaviour (Lerner *et al.* 2003; Druckman and McDermott, 2008).

Finally, emotions impact the way we form a judgment. As Brader and Marcus (2013) argue, the dual-process model of decision-making, holding that individuals process information based on a 'fast' and on a 'slow' system, is now widely accepted in the literature. Interestingly, and opposite to conventional popular understandings, both systems are influenced by emotions. The fast system is labelled as such as it relies predominantly on more automatic processes and draws heavily on already-formed opinions; this judgment formation route is mostly shaped by approach emotions, which as we have seen decrease attention and push towards confrontational action, hence prompting the individual towards a less deliberative decision-making (Brader 2006; MacKuen *et al.* 2007). The slow system, on the contrary, is more thoughtful and introspective and is shaped by defensive emotions, which foster the brain to examine all collected information

carefully, in a widely deliberative mode of information processing (Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse and Stevens 2005; MacKuen *et al.*, 2007; Brader, Valentino and Suhay 2008).

The implications are therefore two-fold. First, the idea that our decision-making is based on two systems, one exclusively emotional and one predominantly rational, is only part of the public imaginary; the picture emerging from academic work is rather one of conjunction between emotions and cognition, which work together in guiding our understanding of the social world. Even the most 'thoughtful and deliberate' decisions are partly submerged in processes that are prominently affective. Second, emotions do not only affect the way we think and make sense of the world, but also the way we act about it. As we have seen, emotions have 'action tendencies' that prompt individual towards one behavior rather than another, based on the information that the emotion itself has passed along to the brain.

As we will see in the following section, this becomes of utmost importance when unpacking how citizens make sense and act in the political world.

3. The Emotional Side of Politics

Rather than 'the Other to reason', emotions are an integral part of our decision-making process and, as such, of any form of political engagement. Research in political psychology has indeed provided systematic evidence that a substantial part of our political life is remarkably affective. Although an exhaustive review of this body of work would be impossible here, we can highlight several prominent examples to show that the reach of emotions in politics goes well beyond populism.

Traditional ideologies, usually embodied by mainstream parties, are anchored in emotionality as much as populism may be. Research has shown how conservative thinking can be a response to a need to reduce fear and uncertainty (Jost, Kruglanski, Glaser and Sulloway 2003), with experimental evidence that priming mortality threats (via terrorism) results in post-manipulation conservative identification (Thorisdottir and Jost 2010). Liberals, on the other hand, are less concerned with fear and rather characterized by a higher propensity for empathy (Hsu, Anen, and Quartz 2008; Taber and Young 2013). This emotion emerges as a distinctive trait of liberal ideology in a number of studies, highlighting its centrality in underpinning attitudes toward social spending and the welfare state (Smith 2006).

The relevance of emotions in politics can also be seen through the lenses of intergroup dynamics. In-group identification is one of the most important factors that influence our

social and political life. Individuals have an innate tendency to self-categorize into one or multiple groups, as part of a general cognitive function that helps organize and navigate the social world (Higgins 2000). These dynamics are underpinned by affectivity in several ways. First, individuals have a need to maintain a positive sense of Self and, for this reason, they tend to perceive their in-group more positively than the out-groups (Sindic and Condor 2014). Furthermore, identification with the in-group can grow so strongly that membership culminates in feelings of psychological attachment (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960); membership is thus internalized as part of the Self, in what becomes a 'social identity' (Tajfel and Turner 1979). The boundaries marking in-group belonging also separate members from 'Others' and hostility towards out-groups can increase exponentially whenever challenges or threat to its cohesiveness are perceived (Brewer 2007). Emotions amplify these dynamics by reinforcing internal cohesion and increasing motivation to stand up against challenges to the group (Huddy 2013).

This is evident in the affective polarisation that often circumscribes political parties competition (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra and Westwood 2019). Rather than simply divided over issues and policies, citizens are increasingly hostile to members of the opposite party in a way that fuels prejudiced thinking and the development of biased judgement (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). This is because, for many, partisanship is an identity with often deep and stable affective attachment and not simply an efficient way of getting their interests represented (Groenendyk 2018). Distrust or dislike toward the opposite camp can escalate to hatred and even reach the point to affect interpersonal relations within one's family or social circle (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018).

Beyond political and social psychology, sociological research on political and social movements has demonstrated the critical role of emotions in generating, motivating and sustaining collective action (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001). For long time, social movement research dismissed emotions as irrational and primitive and later stripped protestors of emotions in an attempt to support scholars' over-rationalistic assumptions about citizens' behavior (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2000 for a review). On the contrary, the mechanisms that catalyze action and drive participation in social movements are underpinned by emotions originating from both moral outrage (Jasper 1998) and the pleasure to construct a positive sense of Self (Stein 2001). Emotions are also crucial to the day-to-day experience of activism, as the values, symbols and narratives that constitute a movement's culture reflect affective attachments and sustain participation (Goodwin and Pfaff 2001). The decline of a movement is also linked to emotional dynamics: if anger and enthusiasm are pivotal for triggering a desire for activism, disappointment and frustration, as well as intra-group rivalry, very often cause groups to fall apart. And

even after a movement ceases to exist, emotions help reshape the emotional cultures and repertoires for future activism (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001).

These are only *some* examples of how emotions shape different aspects of politics, from ideological thinking to group identification, partisan attachment or collective action. The crucial take-away point from these strands of research is that emotionality is an integral part of the way individuals navigate the surrounding environment and make relevant decisions; as such it is also vital to *any* type of political engagement. Affective reactions are automatic and inevitable and there is no 'rational' thinking that it is entirely independent from emotions.

4. Emotions and Populism

While there is a tendency to ascribe a significant part of populist success to the role of emotions, all forms of politics must comprise affective dimensions that engage citizens (Alvares and Dahlgren 2016). Building upon the research findings explored in earlier sections, I suggest that the question we should rather ask is what is *peculiar* about the relationship between emotions *and* *populism*.

I propose analysing this relationship by looking at three broad dimensions - the structural, subjective and communicative dimensions. Examining these different levels of analysis allows us to unpack the significance of emotions for the emergence, diffusion and success of populism. The 'Structural Dimension' looks at those studies that have identified a series of macro processes and long-term trends that link the role of emotions to support for populism, by pointing out the development of an affective fertile ground; the 'Subjective Dimension' draws on the political psychology literature documenting, more specifically, what those affective states are, how they are perceived at the individual level and why they make citizens more prone to populist appeals; finally, the 'Communicative Dimension' section discusses studies from different traditions that are brought together by their interest in how emotionality intertwines with populist discourse to address the publics' affective requests.

The Structural Dimension

The relationship between emotions and populism originates first and foremost at the macro, structural level. Several works interested in unpacking the populist appeal and success have highlighted how our contemporary societies provide a particular *affective* breeding ground for populist discourse to resonate. As I will show below, it is several

processes that, in particular, have been identified as contributors and facilitators of populist success.

Political scientists have principally focused on the role played by globalisation processes. The scholarship that addresses the root causes of support for populist parties identifies globalisation as an important cause of those complex affective reactions that citizens of post-industrial societies are experiencing. For Inglehart and Norris (2016), the progress and advancements associated with globalisation have created a new social cleavage between those who embrace post-materialist values and those who fear the rapid erosion of previously predominant views. Such cleavage has a significant affective underpinning: it divides citizens whose preferences have increasingly shifted towards 'progressive issues', such as cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, from those who reject these developments, which they perceive as a form of displacement. Seen through these lenses, the success of the populist radical right (which is what the authors are focusing on, despite their use of the general 'populism' label) has a lot to do with the profoundly emotional issues of identity, attachment and belonging. Affect is deeply embroiled in citizens' responses as well: in fact, supporters of traditional values, such as the older generations or the less educated, resent and blame the 'cosmopolitan' elites for the erosion of their previously predominant views and polarise towards the anti-establishment and conservative appeal of the populist radical right.

Whereas Inglehart and Norris' theory places emphasis on the *cultural backlash* that has given rise to populist success, the *losers of globalisation* thesis (Grande and Kriesi 2012) has been largely linked to the issue of economic decline and has become as shortcut to imply that conditions of economic crisis and unemployment favour the success of populist parties. However, Grande and Kriesi's argument is broader and again provides a useful picture of how globalisation has affected subjective feelings of grievances and threat perception. As the authors argue, globalisation has created new forms of conflict, not only economic but also cultural and political, that have disproportionately affected certain sectors of society. By increasing economic competition, cultural diversity and political integration, globalisation has produced 'winners and losers'. The latter, in particular, experience economic insecurity, feelings of cultural threat from people with different ethnic or religious backgrounds, and feelings of loss over weakened national autonomy. The appeal of supporting populist parties is therefore inherently about the emotional need to address such grievances.

Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) have highlighted how complex and deeply rooted these grievances are, providing a comprehensive picture of populist success that involves feelings of *distrust* and *deprivation*, alongside processes that have caused *destruction* and *dealignment* (they label these, "the four Ds"). In this account as well, populism (or what

the authors call national populism to clarify the rightist connotation of their empirical focus) is profoundly emotional; it is successful precisely because it speaks to people that have long distrusted political elites, that have felt increasingly economically deprived and sceptical about the ability of their community to survive the fast-pace changes that immigration was bringing in; all of this while citizens are increasingly detached from political parties and apathetic towards politics. The role of insecurities is pivotal here, as these broad feelings of 'distrust', 'destruction' and 'deprivation' can be identified in a series of strong fears and concerns that citizens have developed, respectively, about lack of voice, ethnic change and economic loss. A further crucial takeaway point in this analysis is that these processes and grievances are long-term and now deeply rooted and that we should be wary of those analyses that try to pinpoint one single and recent cause for populist success.

As these studies show, a complex range of structural processes has created particular affective states of grievances and insecurities, providing fertile ground for the populist appeal to resonate. This research is therefore highly relevant because it documents the structural dimension of the link between populism and emotions, and lays the theoretical ground for investigating how these macro insecurities are perceived and internalized by individuals and how they are translated into narratives by political actors, which is the focus of the next sections.

The Subjective Dimension

The structural dimension has highlighted how a particular affective state, the sense of *insecurity*, dominates post-industrial societies and creates a fertile ground for the populist message to resonate. The question that this section aims to answer is how do citizens perceive and make sense of such changes in the structure, and more importantly how this is connected to support for populism.

Political scientists Grande and Kriesi (2012) have anticipated that globalisation plays a crucial role, because by increasing competition in economic, cultural and political domains it has indeed brought about competition over jobs, cultural and political identities. For political theorists Salmela and von Scheve (2017, 2018), such emphasis on competition - typical of contemporary capitalist and highly individualist advanced societies - produces a sense of *anticipated shame* in those individuals who fail (or fear of failing) to maintain their status. Shame is 'anticipated' in that it signals a potential or expected loss for which individuals blame themselves; it resembles a sense of failure and incapacity, so painful that the individual diverts it from the Self and directs it as anger to others. The authors call this process of emotional repression and transmutation, *ressentiment*. Salmela and von Scheve thus provide a significant theoretical contribution, which

unpacks the *mechanisms* that explain how changes in the 'structure' may have affected the 'subjective' level, in turn providing ground for populist success. Their theory has yet to be tested empirically, but it points out how understanding the role and impact of insecurities for populism success is becoming increasingly relevant.

Political psychologists label these feelings as ontological insecurities because they concern individuals' own 'being' and refer to their need to have a stable, safe and secure sense of Self (Giddens 1991). Ontological insecurities may be less visible or latent, but studying them allows taking into account the role of contemporary anxieties about a wide range of issues - from culture, to the economy or the welfare state - which are currently fuelling political change but that institutional, legal and policy analyses fail to grasp (Kinnvall, Manners and Mitzen 2018). Ontological insecurities are complex affective states that intertwine in the web of past, present and future, as certain individuals long for the past and a reassuring present, while others fear what is to come (Kinnvall 2018). Taking an ontological security perspective enriches the scholarly understanding of populist success because it gives centre stage to the *subjective meaning* that individuals construct and attribute to their life experience, both in the present and as projected to the future, rather than to the objective *conditions* that are said to leave some people 'behind'. Indeed, political psychology research has found evidence that subjective perceptions are key and that citizens not only support populists when feeling deprived, but also in times of economic prosperity that they do not want to lose *in the future* (Mols and Jetten 2016).

The relevance of insecurity for understanding the populist appeal at the individual-level of analysis is also evident when examined through the lenses of emotionality, as almost all emotions linked to populism have an important insecurity dimension. *Fear and anxiety* are predominantly linked to populism precisely because of the insecurity that is said to emerge from macro-level processes (Grande and Kriesi 2012; Inglehart and Norris 2016). *Nostalgia*, typically linked to right-wing populism, has an insecurity dimension in that it addresses the anxiety of the present about a world that has become increasingly corrupted and distorted, by providing the comfort and security of the past imaginary (Kenny 2017). The nostalgic sentiment is thus as a symptom of a broader call for stability and continuity, in a world that for many is becoming unrecognizable. Also anger has an insecurity dimension, in that it may be the explicit reaction to more intimate vulnerabilities (Salmela and von Scheve 2017, 2018), emerging from the inability to keep up with the world's complexity (Capelos and Demertzis 2018).

Understanding insecurity and the emotions of insecurity is pivotal for developing a comprehensive account of populist success, one that takes into account the fact the audiences are not mere spectators, but appraise and interpret political developments

differently and may feel divergently about them. It therefore becomes crucial to take this complexity with us when analysing how people's feelings interact with populist communication.

The Communicative Dimension

After examining the conditions that have provoked a stoking sense of insecurity in post-industrial societies and how citizens are emotionally affected by such changes, we now turn to how populist actors communicate with their publics. I will focus in particular on how they address contemporary affective requests by constructing meaning and providing interpretations through the use of narratives and emotions.

Research on populist political communication has been a prolific field of enquiry and significant attention has been devoted to identifying the main discursive strategies that populist parties rely upon. As Wirz (2018) notes, the findings in this literature can be systematised into two broad strategies. On the one hand, populists use *advocative messages* to refer to 'the people', narrating its monolithic and uniform character, stressing its virtues and achievement, presenting populist actors as intimately belonging to the category of the ordinary men. Advocative messages help construct a homogeneous in-group and serve as a justification platform for demanding that power be back to the people. On the other hand, they use *conflictive messages* to exclude, discredit and blame elites and the so-called 'dangerous Others' (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, 2015). All those that do not belong to the people are most commonly denigrated through the attribution of bad characteristics and blamed for the difficulties that the people have to face. Conflictive messages therefore serve as a base to reject that power continues lying in the hand of elites.

Both these communication strategies are prominently affective. Conflictive messages convey negative emotionality towards out-groups, building hostility towards all of those who simply do not belong. Research has focused in particular on the enemification practices of the populist radical right. For instance, Kinnvall (2014) has highlighted that the discursive delineation of enemies both outside and inside the nation is a recurrent characteristic of these parties. Similarly, Wodak (2015) has shown how, by instrumentalising certain actors as scapegoats and constructing them as threatening, populists produce a 'politics of fear'. However, as I will show below, the inherent confrontation constructed by populist communication should be seen as extending beyond a monolithic experience of *fear*.

Populists are in fact more prone to discursive blame attributions than other political actors (Vasilopoulou, Halikiopoulou and Exadaktylos 2014) and this has consistently been found to elicit *anger* (Wagner 2014). Anger is a crucial emotion in populist politics

because, by engaging heavily with discourses of morality and injustice, populism taps into the core relational themes of this emotion (Rico, Guinjoan and Anduiza 2017). Furthermore, anger may also be the explicit reaction to more intimate vulnerabilities (Salmela and von Scheve 2017, 2018). In particular, right-wing populist rhetoric promotes anger with a discourse that is crafted to “deflect shame-induced anger and hatred away from the self and instead toward the political and cultural establishment and various Others” (Salmela and von Scheve 2018, 443). The populist left, on the other hand, acknowledges rather than represses shame, as both its discourse and networked structure foster solidarity and the sharing of grievances. Their social movement culture, based on the ideal of participation, encourages a collaborative sentiment and allows for the transformation of shame “into high-energy, active emotions such as frustration, indignation and anger” (ibid, 446).

Another integral feature of populist communication, especially on the Right, is *nostalgia*. For Kenny (2017) nostalgic appeals in populist discourse respond to visions of the contemporary world as disrupted by fast-pace socio-economic change. The populist narrative portrays the inability of the governing elites to attend, manage or halt such changes, as the principle cause that makes the present a moment of severe danger. The past, on the other hand, has already been lived and so shown to be feasible (Taggart 2004). Nostalgia, therefore, “offers an important route back to the past, and taps into an established emotional repertoire, while simultaneously marshaling arguments aimed at justifying new pathways in the present” (Kenny 2017, 260). With these appeals, populists address that sentiment of anxiety about the present that is prominent in contemporary societies, as many feel that the world surrounding them has become increasingly corrupted and distorted and has turned them into ‘strangers in their own land’ (Hochschild 2016). Populist nostalgic appeals tame these feelings by providing the comfort and security of the past imaginary.

The bittersweet element of nostalgic emotionality helps us transition to the role of positive affect in populist discourse, which is often sidelined in the literature. The narration infused of negative emotions is in fact complemented by a positive self-construction that harnesses the positive power of values such as honesty, hard work and ordinariness, which bring the people together (Bonansinga 2019). Here political narratives intersect with popular culture and help construct the notion of ‘belonging to the people’. After all, as Canovan (1984) noted, the people is an idealised and hyper-vague audience, an inclusive and exclusive, integrative and divisive conceptualization, that eventually means different things to different populists. Therefore, what does it mean to be part of the ordinary people? Populists foster a sense of belonging by drawing on two main narratives: the commonality of values and the commonality of experiences (Bonansinga

2019). With the first narrative, they focus on the virtues of authenticity and genuinity that bring the people together, thus building a strong and positive sense of cohesion. By promoting the virtues of the 'ordinary men' while also focusing on the populist actor's commitment to defend people's sovereignty against the out-groups, populist advocative communication reflects the core relational themes of, respectively, pride and hope. These emotions have indeed been linked to populist communication (Marquart and Matthes 2016). Identities, however, are constructed both internally *and externally* (Jones and Krzyzanowski 2008). Populists build cohesion also by highlighting that the people share the common experience of deception and exploitation by self-serving and corrupt elites. There is thus a flow of both positive and negative affect that is directed both inwards and outwards, toward the people and its enemies (Bonansinga 2019).

There is therefore a profound emotional complexity in populist communication that is important to keep in mind; we should refrain from simplifying populist rhetoric as a single-emotion politics (e.g. the politics of fear, the politics of anger) and rather take into account that different emotional appeals coexist at the same time and within the same narrative.

This point has been strongly reiterated by sociological research on political mobilization. Visual research, in particular, has provided a pivotal contribution in evidencing both the complexity and variety of emotions invoked by populists (especially on the Right). The strategic use of images, such as the controversial electoral posters frequently circulated by these parties, allows conveying highly charged messages in a simplified and instant way (Richardson and Colombo 2014). Posters build boundaries between in-groups and out-groups by mobilising, on the one hand, symbols of pride and belonging and appealing to the positive affect generated by one's identity (Flam and Doerr 2015). On the other hand, they construct imaginaries of threat and insecurity, by invoking otherness (Richardson and Wodak 2009). They also portray an immediate, shared and common sense solution to the presumed threat (*ibid.*), that can certainly appeal to both the relief of safety and the thrill of payback, as well as extending an authoritarian appeal to those who long for tough responses. This strand of research shows rather powerfully the heterogeneity of populist emotional mobilization and its reach well beyond text and narratives.

Although the majority of scholarship produced, and examined so far, tends to focus on right-wing populism, it is crucial to remark that populists address and articulate their emotional appeals differently, depending on the 'exclusionary' versus 'inclusionary' nature of their populist ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). Mudde and Kaltwasser's distinction builds on Margaret Canovan (1984) insights that the 'content' of the term 'the people' has several connotations. First, the people may be intended with a

'democratic' connotation to indicate the ultimate source of power in a democratic regime; hence, the people as the sovereign, the ruler. Second, the term can be used to refer to an average socioeconomic status, which usually brings together the majority of citizens in a given country; thus the people as 'the common' and 'ordinary' people. Finally, the ethno-nationalist connotation gives the term a more nativist dimension and appeals to those who are natives of a specific place. For Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013), it is these latter two - socio-economic vs nativist connotations - that constitute an important distinction between what they call inclusionary and exclusionary populists: whereas the latter define the people strictly as natives and thus construct a large number of out-groups, inclusionary populists understand the people more broadly, as those who have been aggrieved by neoliberal elites, regardless of ethnicity, religion or culture. As Salmela and von Scheve (2018, 440) put it:

“Right-wing populist rhetoric and discourse promote anger and resentment directed at those who have a “good life” without hard work, such as politicians and top managers on high and secure income, welfare recipients and refugees “looked after by the state,” and the long-term unemployed who “avoid work,” but also at groups perceived to be different from “us”: ethnic, cultural, political, and sexual minorities. By contrast, left-wing discourse and rhetoric instill anger and resentment at those responsible for enforcing politics perceived to increase injustice, inequality, and precariousness, such as national governments and supranational institutions”.

Therefore, different populists direct their narratives to different affective 'recipients', which reflect dissimilar constructions of 'the people' and 'the elite' and the meanings ascribed to them.

5. Conclusion

Social and political sciences suffer from a significant normative bias against emotionality that is only being redressed by the recent affective turn (Demertizis 2014). Populism has long been labelled an 'emotional' phenomenon, with the adjective used predominantly in negative terms to indicate an opportunistic discourse that manipulates citizens' passions. Such normative bias is not only an academic or journalistic matter; it is widely rooted in the idea of a clear-cut divide between emotions and reason, which makes decision-making based on the former too 'fast' and 'unreliable'.

By exploring the world of emotions from a psychological perspective, this article has shown that the dichotomy heart versus mind hardly stands up to scientific inquiry. Systematic and compelling evidence now sustains an idea of decision-making as a function

that relies conjunctly on emotions and cognition. Rather than marked by a divide, emotionality and rationality are intimately related and interdependent from each other. This does not certainly exclude the political domain: although with different degrees, functions and effects, all aspects of our engagement with politics are characterized by important affective underpinnings.

Building upon such evidence, we can argue that the role of emotions is a significant factor that helps disentangling the puzzle of the populist appeal, but not because populism is an 'emotional' phenomenon in an 'unemotional and entirely rational' political world; rather, populism is *peculiarly* emotional, as *specific* affective states contribute to its rise, development and success. As the have seen, their role features prominently in the scholarship interested in identifying the structural opportunities for populist success: indeed, populism finds a fertile emotional ground in contemporary post-industrial societies where a series of processes of at the macro-level have brought about increasing insecurities. The scholarship in political psychology is complementing these accounts with a fast developing research agenda looking at the individual-level factors that contribute to populist success, as the public perceives and internalises these structural changes differently. In this discipline as well, in particular in recent years, there has been an increase of attention to the role of affects and analyses have shown how citizens have developed a variety of ontological insecurities that differ in their referent object, as this can span from perceived cultural dilution to economic distress; ontological insecurities are also extremely complex affective states because they intertwine in the web of past, present and future, and can be manifested through divergent expressions of grievances. At the intersection between the structural and subjective levels, populist communication becomes pivotal in the construction, interpretation and reproduction of insecurity narratives. Even though the structural and subjective level may create a favourable affective space, it is the narratives provided at the political level that construct particular interpretations in turn affecting the way citizens make sense of unfolding political events. Political leaders' judgments are therefore central in guiding the deconstruction of information and the creation of meaning and this marks the clearest point of departure from mainstream parties. The focus on the agency of populist actors, manifested through the use of narratives, serves as an analytical bridge to understand why certain interpretations are favored and become dominant in some contexts but not in others. Populists, on the left and on the right, have built their deeply affective accounts of who is *the danger*, who is *in danger* and who is *to blame*, that are crafted to respond to contemporary affective requests. Populist narratives become the lenses through which meaning is constructed, attributed and transferred; interestingly, they attend to affective requests

through the further mobilisation of emotionality, creating the affective glue that can potentially translate grievances into support.

Analyzing the emotions-populism relationship by looking in conjunction at the structural, subjective and communicative levels is thus useful to develop a *comprehensive* understanding of emotions as a significant contributor to populist success. This analytical framework captures the vital interconnections between how emotions are produced at the macro-level, perceived at the individual level but also guided, shaped and reproduced through political narratives. Rather than focusing exclusively on a single dimension, a multi-level analysis has the advantage to unpack the significance of emotions for the entire process of populism emergence, diffusion and success.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EXCLUDING EMOTIONS: THE PERFORMATIVE FUNCTION OF POPULISM

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ABSTRACT: Populists are often excluded from political life on the basis that they are too emotional. Both social movements as well as political parties who are labelled as populist are accused of using demagoguery and manipulation in order to attract support and new membership. Often, these critiques emanate from the political establishment, creating a division between emotional and rational actors in politics. In this article, I argue that instead of seeing populism as a nominal or ordinal category, we should look at how the term itself has performative properties. The article is interested in how populism as a concept is used as a tool for exclusion, and how being 'too emotional' is used as justification for excluding certain actors. This article first contends that this perspective is endemic to political and social theory, and has long been utilised to marginalise women, non-Europeans, or young people. Second, the article demonstrates how this perspective also pervades much of contemporary studies on populism, which do not sufficiently recognise the political implications of employing a strict divide between emotion and reason. Third, the article further contends that by using a Laclauian framework which sees politics as equal to hegemony as equal to populism, one can conclude that populist actors are no different from other political actors; emotions and affects are always central to any political identity. Instead, the division between emotional and rational in politics serves to sediment exclusionary practices against newcomers and challengers of the status quo. I conclude by using the Laclauian framework, focus can be turned to the performative function of populism, and its political implications.

KEYWORDS: populism, emotions, exclusion, politics of emotions, political theory, Laclau.

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1. Introduction

In July 2018, Brett Kavanaugh was nominated as candidate to the US Supreme Court. In September the same year, Dr Christine Blasey Ford published a statement saying that she had been sexually assaulted by Kavanaugh when she was a teenager. The statement quickly became an inflamed issue, where Ford was accused of lying, and Kavanaugh was by some deemed unsuitable for holding a high office such as Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. On September 27th, Kavanaugh was called to a hearing with the Senate Judiciary Committee, where he gave a statement on the accusation. While vehemently denying any involvement in criminal activity, Kavanaugh also displayed a highly emotional response. While narrating how he and his daughter had together prayed for Dr Ford, he could not hold back his tears, and his voice broke up at several occasions. Kavanaugh had, voluntarily or involuntarily, retorted to emotions. On the other hand, during this same process, Dr Ford remained remarkably calm. Even though her life had been visibly upset by the publicity and the aggressive approach by media and politicians alike, Dr Ford completed all her testimonies, never raised her voice, and shed only a few tears quietly. On October 6, 2018, Kavanaugh was sworn in as Justice, and today serves on the US Supreme Court.

This incident, apart from being a highly topical issue in the wake of the MeToo movement, tells a story about emotions. It tells the story of how emotions are viewed and assessed in political life, and who can and cannot be emotional. Oftentimes, we hear that emotions have no place in politics, and that actors that express ‘too much’ emotion – such as women, people of colour, or the ‘uneducated’, but also populists – should rather stay away from engaging in the political sphere, since they cannot possibly be capable of making rational decisions. This story, on the other hand, is of how a grown man cries in public, and gains nothing but sympathy and realises his professional goals. It was no issue that Kavanaugh decided to display emotion, and there was little criticism for his having done so. No one argued that his claims should be disregarded, or that his emotionality disqualified him from office. In this article, I will argue that the discussion on emotions, in academia and elsewhere, actually has very little to do with emotions, and everything to do with exclusion. Emotion, I contend, is nothing but a code used when wanting to discredit anyone who upsets the status quo and its beneficiaries. I will demonstrate that when discussing populist parties and movements, the claims that populists are too emotional are nothing but an attempt at excluding these actors, like women, young people, or non-Europeans have been excluded on this basis before. Emotions should therefore not be seen as an analytical category, but a *performative* category.

In the past decade, populist politics has so obviously become part and parcel of politics in general, that it is no longer possible to ignore or dismiss the forces which have given rise to this populist ‘moment’ (Mouffe 2018b), ‘zeitgeist’ (Mudde 2004), or, as some would say, a ‘hype’ (Glynos and Mondon, 2019). When discussing populism, many scholars and commentators would like to refer to populist parties and movements as ‘highly emotional’ (Müller 2016). For instance, established European parties have long discussed how to best avoid the ‘populist threat’ and argued that politics needs to return to rational dialogue (BBC 2012; Galston 2018). This imposes a strict division between different types of actors in political life, where some are deemed rational and thus worthy citizens capable of government, whereas others are deemed irrational and therefore unworthy of political participation. It defends the status quo and makes it difficult for newcomers to break down the barriers to participation.

Populism is often seen as an emotional enterprise, but what that phrase actually indicates is rarely sufficiently discussed. The assumption rests upon a certain idea of what populism is, of what emotions are, and how the two function together. In this article, I take issue with the definitions of emotions, populism, and their mutual relation. In particular, I resist using ‘populism’ and ‘emotions’ as either nominal or ordinal categories, that is, whether we can analytically determine *if* something is populist/emotional or not, or *to what degree* something is populist/emotional. Instead, this article is interested in the performative function of these terms, and their political implications. I propose looking at the terms as markers of exclusion, rather than neutral analytical categories, following a long tradition within poststructuralism which always highlights the politics of categories. In doing so, I follow the emerging set of literature on anti-populism (Stavrakakis 2014; Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Kioupkiolis, Nikisianis and Siomos 2018) and the discussion of populism as a signifier, rather than a concept (Dean and Maiguashca 2020; Glynos and Mondon 2019). There is also recent work on how feminist scholarship should inform future research on populism, to avoid repeating the common exclusionary politics of our time (Maiguashca 2019). This article, however, whilst indebted to these works, is specifically interested in how the negative discourse on emotions is pervaded with anti-populist rhetoric.

By analysing the performative function of the concepts of populism and emotion, I will argue that these terms are influenced by particular political perspectives that are often based on exclusionary logics. I argue that current debate has been marked by an unwillingness to recognize different forms of political action as belonging to a democratic society, as well as an unnecessarily strict division between emotions as instrumental tools or as constitutive of political identities. This strict division is still performed by the concept of populism, but is not sufficiently highlighted or questioned

within the field of populism studies. I will show how there are other ways to conceptualise emotions and populism in a way which does not rest upon these exclusionary politics. By employing a more positive reading of the theories of Ernesto Laclau, and specifically his claims that all politics is potentially populist, it is possible to circumvent this exclusionary impasse.

In a first part, I depict how the devaluation of emotion is by no means local to populism studies, but often endemic to the study of emotions. In political and social theory, emotion has been deemed a pathological behaviour for centuries, but the rhetoric surrounding emotion today is still influenced by the foundational perspectives, where disadvantaged groups – whether that be women, non-whites, or young people – are accused of not being in control of their emotions. The prominence of rationality is still key to democratic thought and is not seen as an exclusionary force. I demonstrate how emotion is only acceptable if thought of as a means to an end, instead of as the very foundation of political life. As such, emotion can be beneficial to political life if used correctly; this perspective, I argue, only accepts emotions when *controllable*.

In the second part of this article, I will outline how the field of populism studies have not only struggled to define populism (which is not necessarily a negative aspect), but also to agree on how emotions are defined. Nonetheless, I demonstrate how varying strands of the populism literature, whether defining populism as a threat to or a natural part of democracy, are conceptualising emotions in a largely negative fashion. Importantly, there is not sufficient discussion about how the definitions of emotions and populism function to sediment current power relations, or how emotions are used as a proxy for justifying exclusion. Whilst there is important work on anti-populism, and how populism should rather be seen as a signifier, there is a need to engage with how the hierarchy between emotion and reason can be dismantled.

To do this, I argue that a psychoanalytical approach as proposed by Ernesto Laclau offers a theoretical framework which sees emotion as constitutive of any political identity. Based on a theoretical perspective which sees any identity as created through a symbolic order, affective investment in that order is not something which can be manipulated or used for specific political purposes. In Laclau's eyes, all identities are affective by default, and all are potentially populist. I thus take issue with the criticisms against Laclau who disagree with his interpretation that all politics potentially populist. I contend that it is in fact this type of perspective that can help us overcome hierarchical power relations, where some are deemed more worthy political subjects than others. In other words, the political implications for Laclauian thoughts on populism are far-reaching. If emotional politics is simply the basis for all politics, there is no need to single out populist actors and movements as more emotional than others. Im-

portantly, labelling some actors as emotional and some as rational only works to sediment the status quo, and we therefore need to put the performative function of emotions and populism into question.

2. Varieties of exclusion: Emotion as pathology in social and political theory

For a long time, emotions have been used as a derogatory term, closely aligned with the traditional markers of exclusion. Emotions were largely the ailment of women, of the mentally unstable, or of the non-European 'savage'. This type of reasoning is evident in both political and social thought. Below, I give a few examples of how such thinking has manifested itself over time, in order to later draw parallels with current arguments in populism studies. It is clear that a lack of rationality, or an overly emotional character, has for centuries been used as a proxy for excluding unwanted elements from the political sphere.

Throughout democratic thought, rationality has been central, but not only as a tool for ensuring good government, but as a tool of exclusion. Sovereignty is only possible because individuals are free (and equal), since they choose to enter the social contract and obey the rules of the community. For Hobbes, as well as for the later liberal thinkers, individuals can only make this decision if they are *capable of reason*, which has large repercussions for who can be included in the sovereign People. Rationality was given as one of the main reasons for the large limitations placed on who could be counted as a citizen, and who could not. Whilst sovereignty indeed did reside with the People for thinkers such as Locke (who disagreed with the Hobbesian focus on the Head of State as the only sovereign), the concept of citizenship was heavily limited (Locke 1988; Plamenatz 1963). Women and non-property owners could not vote, and Locke did not see this as a major caveat of democracy. In addition, concomitant to the rise of liberal thought and individualism, was also the idea of market freedom. As capitalism became evermore popular, the concept of the property-owning class as natural guards of the democratic realm was sedimented, primarily through thinkers such as Bentham (1995) and Mill (1937). Even though modern-day liberals sometimes prefer to leave economic liberalism aside, the common foundations of the two must be recognised. The importance of property protection also led to some deeply undemocratic tendencies within early democratic theory. As the fear of popular participation grew, there were concerted efforts to limit the influence of those without property. Democracy, it was said, must protect the natural rights of property owners, not destroy them. This later led to the cleverest move: to portray the masses as a threat to democracy,

rather than its foundation. With the rise of the power of state, and the increased bureaucratic nature of political work, it was argued that such complexities were out of reach for the common man; elected representatives with 'higher capacities' were better suited to a life in government, given their capacity to rationality. Dissent against the 'common good', which was often synonymous with market freedom, should be subject to 'person management', i.e. imprisonment (Foucault 1977; Ignatieff 1978).

The 'higher capacity' of rational thinking was, however, not only out of reach for women and the poor, but also for non-Europeans. Rationality was explicitly reserved for the white Man, importantly, this racism is not accessory to democratic theory, but forms a core part of how democracies were, and are, constituted. The state of nature, which is the very condition upon which modern democracies are founded (in order to avoid it), is by Hobbes conceived of not as a hypothetical figment of imagination, but as a brutal reality for the 'savage people in many places of America' (Hobbes 1991, 89). The very possibility of escaping the state of nature and create order and a functioning society, lies in the fact that some people are civilised, and some are inevitably not (Mills 1999, 66). The state of nature is thus not only a breakdown of order in absence of sovereignty, but a condition which savages are bound to, and which Europeans would never allow. Locke also made a clear distinction between Peoples and their capacity for an ordered society. Locke, an investor in the slave-trading Royal Africa Company, supported the thought of colonisation with the justification that white civilisations would add value to the land which native populations did not (and were therefore right to be removed from it) (Williams 1995, 103). Furthermore, Kant, who can be seen as the founding father of modern-day liberalism, adds a genius twist to the exclusion of the savage, which will influence democratic thought until this day. By placing increased importance on the presence of rationality and reserving rational capacity for the white European, Kant provided the ultimate justification for racial violence; since the savages could not think for themselves, this had to be done for them. Kant, in addition to providing a modern concept of what a political subject is, also provides ample proof of what it is not: 'So fundamental is the difference between the black and white races of man, it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour' (Kant 1960, 111–113). As pointed out by Emmanuel Eze, Kant's racism is not casual, but only seems accidental since white academia has consistently overlooked it (Eze 1997). In fact, racial difference is key to understanding who is a valid political subject, and who is not. Kant provides us with lengthy exposés on the ineptitude of savages, ranks them, and ultimately concludes that talent (which includes both rationality and the capacity to knowledge), is inherently contingent upon race (Eze 1995). The popular sovereign, and who can be counted as a citizen, is thus not only contingent upon property, but al-

so upon the colour of one's skin. Cleverly, this has been masked as the capacity of reason.

To sustain this narrative, in the 19th century theorists developed the concept of the tyranny of the majority, when resistance to the squalid conditions for most people in the early days of industrialisation grew at a steady pace. The hysteric majority, it was said, could under democratic conditions rob legislators of their law-making powers, and further wreak havoc in the careful balance between rulers and ruled. The answer was simple: not only was resistance to state and market power a nuisance, but even pathological, a sign of madness. Individuals who fought for equal rights should not only be prosecuted, but medically treated for their conditions. This was the birth of crowd psychology, which to this day influences common assumptions made about certain political actors, often those who are outside the political establishment. Crowd psychologists such as Gabriel Tarde and Hippolyte Taine were convinced of the unsuitability of 'ordinary people' for high political office, due to their emotional character. The rise of the use of asylums, along with increases in imprisonment (Foucault 1977), were not accidental but fundamental to a society in need of docile labour. The lack of rationality and a 'too emotional' nature was key in establishing whether individuals were unsuitable for participation in politics. Crowds were, according to French theorist Gustave Le Bon, primitive and highly damaging for individuals and society alike (Le Bon 1960 [1895]). Popular sovereignty, in other words, was out of reach for most people, and bestowed on the property-owning classes.

In the 20th century, Schumpeter adopted the same ideas when arguing that the citizen 'drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyses in a way which he would readily recognise as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again' (Schumpeter 1976 [1942], 262). Of course, Le Bon did not only influence Schumpeter, but also some of his other referents, such as Pareto (1935) and Michels (1959). Nonetheless, these thinkers also supported the view that politics is reserved for the elites, to ensure a proper implementation of the common good. All of these thoughts could, naturally, be easily adopted by authoritarian tendencies (Smelser 1995, 21; Medearis 1997). Schumpeter heavily influenced years of American political science, which often adhered to the idea that common people were too uninformed or incapable of reason. Allowing the masses to take part in politics is apparently a dangerous endeavour as argued by David Held: participation can go wrong and history is replete with examples of this such as the Bolshevik revolutions or the democratic election of Hitler (Held 1987, 165). Almond and Verba's argue along a similar line *Civic Culture* (1963), or as Phillip Converse has stated: 'what needs repairing is not the [survey] item but the population' (1970,

176). A similar focus on rationality is expressed in deliberative democratic theory, where the foundations of Habermas' work are all reliant on the capacity to rational argumentation (Habermas 1984, 1996). Whilst deliberation, according to Habermas, is open to all, the practical and political implications have strong exclusionary traits, as identified by Young (2001).

Some might say that such negative views on emotion are long gone, and that we cannot possibly argue that political participation is frowned upon today. I contend that whilst emotions are not as demonised as before, there is an over-reliance on rationality and cognitive aspects in much scholarship on political participation and emotions. Even though emotions now have a definite place in social theory (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2000, 2005; Ferree 1992; Kingston and Ferry 2008; Clarke, Hoggett and Thompson 2006), their place comes with certain limitations and caveats. Most studies on emotions in politics are concerned with how social movements and parties *use* emotion to gain political advantage, i.e. how can emotions incite participation, and attract and sustain membership (Taylor 1996; Jasper 1998). For instance, the Pride movement is cited as a key example of how emotions can be used to gain political advantage (Gould 2009; Scheff 1988). Further, Romanos has argued that emotions are highly important in sustaining high-risk activism, and cites specifically the anarchist movement (Romanos 2014). Similar thoughts have been expressed by Perugorria and Tejerina, who, when analysing the anti-austerity movements in Spain after 2011, argued that the movements 'DRY strategically 'mobilized' the emotion of indignation to motivate and then broaden participation. In doing this, it turned this emotion into the stepping stone for the construction of the movement's collective identity' (Perugorria and Tejerina 2013, 432). Here, it is clearly evident that emotions are part of a movement's repertoire, that it is a tool which the movement can use to its own advantage. The acceptance of emotion is therefore not necessarily unconditional. The emotional repertoire should be able to demonstrate efficacy in reaching certain goals and interests, i.e. have certain rational qualities. Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta even admit that 'the emotions most relevant to politics, we suspect, fall toward the more constructed, cognitive end of this dimension' (2000, 79) and Jasper argues that 'emotions involve beliefs and assumptions open to cognitive persuasion. We often can be talked out of our anger on the grounds that it is too extreme a response, or that we are misinformed' (Jasper 1998, 401). It could be argued that emotions are thus only accepted conditionally, upon the presence of rationality. The political implications of such a perspective are several. Emotional political actors, whether social movements or political parties, must be able to demonstrate a certain *end* for their emotional *means*. Without a greater goal in mind, whether that is social change or electoral success, the emotional has no value.

Political actors who do not manage to showcase successful outcomes, such as the Occupy movement, are immediately branded as 'inefficient' and their emotional character is seen as a hindrance rather than an asset.

From this brief exposé, we can see that emotions are by no means apolitical and occupy a contested space in political and social theory. Emotions have for a long time been disregarded as something which is undesirable for politics, following the argument that rationality is indispensable to make political decisions. I argue that this focus on rationality is used as a proxy to devalue or exclude or certain groups from the political sphere, and that when we are discussing emotions, we are simply using a euphemism for describing groups who are not deemed worthy of inclusion. The performative function of emotions, in other words, has for a long time been to create hierarchies between political identities. In the next two sections, I demonstrate how this performative use of emotions has deeply influenced contemporary discourses on populism.

3. Emotions in Populism Studies

To a large degree, populism studies struggles with a similar commitment to rationality. A nowadays crowded field, populism studies hosts views which are openly hostile to emotional expressions in politics, as well as more moderate and nuanced takes. Interestingly, the perspectives on emotion and the perspective on populism are strongly correlated, where the works most critical towards populism are also the most critical towards emotions in politics. Even though there is a large spread in the attitude towards emotion, I contend that there is a need for further engagement with the performative function of populism, and how emotions play into the sedimentation of exclusion. In this section I show how such engagement, whilst entirely compatible with the current discursive scholarship on populism, has yet to be formulated and studied; what do the concepts of emotions and populism *do* in politics, what do they *perform*?

In the, as of yet, quite limited research on specifically emotions and populism, emotions are treated much the same as populism is in the more traditional accounts of the field: as a nominal or ordinal category. Most research on the topic attempts to determine if populists are more emotional than 'regular' politicians (Breeze 2019; Skonieczny 2018), and, if so, what type of emotions they are exhibiting (Salmela and von Scheve 2017), or if they are more convincing due to their emotional appeals (Wirz 2018). These works, however, do not engage with the *performative* aspects of populism. There have been recent efforts to recognise the political aspects of the term populism, most notably in the works of De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon (2018) and Mai-

guashca and Dean (2020), who contend that research on populism could should also include how the very term itself is used as a signifier for political purposes. There is also the emerging literature on anti-populism, which sees the label 'populist' latched on to anything which challenges the status quo (Stavrakakis 2014; Stavrakakis et al. 2018). Cossarini and Vallespín (2019) have also highlighted how emotions, or passions, are central to understanding populism, and how they are central to various populist movements across the globe. This article is very much in agreement with the conclusions in these works, but also wants to emphasise how specifically emotions are used to exclude populist movements. It is therefore essential to investigate the classic works on populism, and which assumptions regarding emotions and rationality that underpin them.

Some of the most famous works on populism, such as Jan-Werner Müller's 'What is Populism', exhibit a rather pessimistic view on the role of emotions and populism. Whilst Müller does not agree that one should simply explain populism saying that the people are angry and frustrated, he also agrees that populism could be characterized by the 'striking image' depicted by Benjamin Arditi: 'populism resembles a drunken guest at a dinner party: he is not respecting table manners, he is rude, he might even start "flirting with the wives of other guests"' (Müller 2016, 8). Müller here reveals a common, rather condescending, view of what popular participation might look like. Nonetheless, Müller asserts that he is in no way convinced by the socio-cultural or socio-psychological perspective on populism, which would emphasise the emotional components of politics. He argues that this equates popular participation with resentment, which, in Müller's view is an impossibility since 'the resentful are always incapable of anything like autonomous conduct' (Müller 2016, 16). The resentful, he argues, should by no means be confined to political sanatoria, but instead we should recognize 'the basic democratic duty to engage in reasoning' (ibid). The perspective on emotions here may seem contradictory in that it advocates a move away from seeing populists as simply emotional victims of demagoguery, but still argues that populism is something damaging for democracy. The crux of the matter lies in Müller's commitment to reasoning as a condition for participation. He clearly sees reason as a precondition for political action, and if populists want to be recognized as valid political actors, they must engage in reasonable dialogue. Müller here aligns with most of political science which is built upon reason as a foundation of democratic thought.

Even though Müller sees emotional populists as, in least in some way, salvageable from the abyss, other scholars are less positive. The very significant and far-reaching studies conducted by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart argue that populism is in direct opposition to liberal democracy, whilst recognizing also material factors such as eco-

nomic inequality. In doing so, they also contend that it is the presence of rationality that makes democracy work, and that without a capacity to reasoning, civic participation becomes suboptimal (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Another key approach to populism which has become one of the most used definitions is Cas Mudde's ideational approach (Mudde 2004, 2007; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Mudde follows on from Freedon (1996) who argues that populism, unlike socialism or liberalism, is a thin ideology. A thin ideology, unlike its thick or full counterpart, only has a limited range of concepts that it covers, and does not provide a comprehensive ideological approach to political problems (Freedon 1996; Mudde 2004). This means, as Mudde puts it rather bluntly, that it lacks intellectual refinement and consistency. Whilst the ideational approach does not regard populist voters as uneducated illiterates, it is clear that populism is not on par with other 'thick' ideologies, and is clearly in need of sophistication. Populists are identified as the clear outsiders, and at odds with the bases of liberal democracy. In this sense, the outside and the emotional are grouped together; excluded groups are emotional, and emotional groups are excluded. The terms emotions and populism here *perform* exclusion against actors which they identify as less rational, less intelligent, or less sophisticated.

Populism studies also houses a less categorically negative faction, which sees populism as a more complex phenomenon, influenced by cultural and social factors. These approaches are more positive towards emotions, but the performative function of labelling actors as emotional, is not at the centre of the agenda. Pierre Ostiguy's work is particularly pertinent, as he argues for a socio-cultural approach to populism. Here, we can see that there is a clear preponderance to differentiate between varieties of populism; not all populisms are the same, and they have different political outcomes. Ostiguy turns against the categorically damning perspective proposed by Müller, but is also unconvinced of Mudde's ideological approach. Even though Mudde recognizes that discourses are important to political identities, there is a lingering essentialism in his works. Mudde adheres to an ontological framework which sees political identities as prior to articulation or identification. That is, a discourse is a sign of a political identity or ideology, not a part of it.

Ostiguy is hesitant to agree with this, and is rather saying that populism, like other political identities, are created relationally through identification. In that sense, populism can be studied performatively (Ostiguy 2017, 74). The main contribution of Ostiguy lies in his proposal to define populism as a distinction between the high and low of politics, where populism is unmistakably the 'low'. Ostiguy proposes a sophisticated model of this dimension, which is orthogonal to the left-right axis in politics. His works have identified how populist actors often make use of 'raw' or improper forms of poli-

tics, which are often scorned by the establishment. Populists thus challenge the politically correct, and play on a certain relatability, or ‘appeal’ of their humanity. As Ostiguy puts it, ‘agitation, indignation, provocations become ontologically decisive in populism, since wilful political action is absolutely “all there is”’ (Ostiguy 2017, 77). He thus presents a model which posits the high of politics, often associated with institutions, impersonal authority and proceduralism, against the low: personalism and nepotism, strong leaders, and the uninhibited.

Similar thoughts have been expressed by Benjamin Moffitt in his recent works on populism as a political style (Moffitt 2016). Moffitt is clearly inspired by the discursive approaches to populism, and argues populism should be seen as a political style, instead of an ideology or simply a rhetorical model. Moffitt successfully breaks down the sometimes rigid limits between content and style, and demonstrates how populism is performative, and consists of ‘the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domains of government through to everyday life’ (Moffitt 2016, 29). Populism as a political style has, according to Moffitt, some key features, including appeals to the People versus the Elite, bad manners, and references to crisis, breakdowns or threats. The most interesting aspect for this article lies in the bad manners, where Moffitt is largely in agreement with Ostiguy’s (2017) and Canovan’s (2005) lines of thought supporting that populism has a ‘tabloid style’. The ‘low’ in populist performances can be seen in the ‘use of slang, swearing, political incorrectness, and being overly demonstrative and “colourful”’. In opposition, established politicians exhibiting a ‘high’ behaviour would rather display ‘rigidness, rationality, composure, and use of technocratic language’ (Moffitt 2016, 43). We can see clear examples of such behaviour, argues Moffitt, by looking at the US context, and compares Sarah Palin to Al Gore. Gore would display ‘seriousness, earnestness, gravitas, intelligence, and sensitivity to the position of others’ while Palin would display ‘directness, playfulness, a certain disregard for hierarchy and tradition, ready to resort to anecdote as “evidence” and a studied ignorance of that which does not interest her of which does not go to the “heart of the matter”’ (Ibid.). We can clearly discern here how populists are considered inferior, exhibiting less intelligence and capacity to rational thinking.

This article is largely in agreement with Ostiguy’s and Moffitt’s works – especially relating to their discursive approach to populism – but would like to place a larger emphasis on the performative function of the concept of emotion. Much of what Ostiguy and Moffitt refer to as being cultured or ‘high’ can also be subsumed under the term rationality. What is considered propriety is often equated with a capacity to reason,

which forms the foundation of political thought in Europe, and the absence of propriety, the improper, is also the emotional and the hysteric (Devenney 2020). There is a need to also engage with the exclusionary performativity of the definition of populism as the 'low' or 'unrefined'. Ostiguy already makes the observation that the high is a 'propriety (and even distinction and refinement) that is legitimate by prevailing international standards, especially in the more developed countries' (Ostiguy 2017, 79). At the opposite end of the spectrum, we can consider how 'the popular classes' and certain "third-world" practices often appear more "coarse" or less "slick" (Ibid.). As such, being 'populist' already carries a negative and exclusionary connotation, which is already tightly linked to exclusion of certain groups, such as women, non-Europeans, or young people. The aspect of emotions simply works to strengthen the distinction between who is a worthy political subject, and who is not. The challenge of populism studies is to engage with how this exclusionary logic is rearticulated within the field, and how distinguishing between the high and the low, between the good and the bad manners, is still influenced by a commitment to rationality which has in the past produced a highly unequal and often violent reality for excluded groups, such as women, non-Europeans, or young people. Emotions, in other words, is only a proxy which tends to follow extant exclusionary lines. Here this article strongly agrees with the work of Maiguashca, who argues that populism must be treated as a signifier, and that we must engage with the 'performative effects of this term on our contemporary political discourse and political imagination' (Maiguashca 2019, 769).

There are also recent efforts to relabel populism as a more valid political project, especially from a left-wing perspective. In particular, Chantal Mouffe has been leading the way to propose how a left-wing populism can produce a more equal society, and be the main carrier for egalitarian politics. Mouffe proposes that populisms based on equality, so-called inclusive populisms, should not be considered dangers to democracy, but rather the key to true democratic innovation. This perspective has become highly appealing in studies on left-wing populism, and is supported by studies on the most common European left-wing populist, such as Podemos and Syriza (Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2017; Kioupkiolis 2016; Markou 2017). Interestingly, however, while Mouffe agrees that passions are important for creating a viable political alternative of the left, she is more concerned with articulating a coherent strategy. It is true that Mouffe is defending the emotional when she argues that populists are excluded from politics 'by establishing a "moral" frontier so as to exclude the "extremists" from the democratic debate, the "good democrats" believe that they can stop the rise of "irrational" passions' (Mouffe 2018a, 22). Nonetheless, Mouffe is highly critical of the social movements in the wake of the financial crisis in 2008 and whose 'refusal to engage

with the political institutions limited their impact' (Mouffe 2018a, 19). She contends that movements, while worthwhile, must be followed by a structured political entity, in order to reach results, and one clear way of doing so is to have an explicit strategy. Podemos, claims Mouffe, has exactly such a strategy and can play on emotions in order to construct a 'People'. In other words, Podemos can use emotions to reach their political ends.

The take on emotions becomes somewhat blurred in this instance. While agreeing that affects are key to any political identity, Mouffe still believes that emotions and affects can be controlled by political actors, more in line with the recent works on emotions in social movement theory: 'recognising the crucial role played by affects in politics and how they can be mobilised is decisive for designing a successful left populist strategy' (Mouffe 2018a, 76). Here it becomes clear that Mouffe believes that affects are the result of an intended strategy. If we, as Mouffe says, should indeed conceive of emotions and affects as central to political identities, does this mean that they can be controlled or manipulated by political leaders? Can emotions really only be means to an end? Similarly, the question of strategy is vital when considering emotional expressions for political change. Here, Mouffe is again inconclusive since she argues that the movements who do not engage with institutions are insufficient to bring about political change and should be more strategic. On the other hand, she holds that 'artistic practices can play a decisive role in the construction of new forms of subjectivity' (Mouffe 2018a, 77). As such, the role of affects and its relation to strategy remains underdeveloped, and the political implications of valuing strategy and rational thinking over 'inefficient' protest are not sufficiently explored. To what extent does this type of reasoning favour certain political subjects over others?

In sum, populism studies house very varying approaches to emotions, ranging from a complete disregard and devaluation of the emotional reminiscent of the rationalism in 19th and 20th century political theory, to the more nuanced admittance that emotions are present, and do play an important role. Nonetheless, I argue that the current definitions of populism are not sufficiently recognising how the strict divisions between the emotional and rational are not simple analytical categories, but play a very strong part in exclusionary logics. Even though the ambition may be to help categorise political behaviour, the constant insistence that emotional populism is uncivilised, unsophisticated, or 'low', run the risk of perpetuating rationalistic tropes about what political participation can and should look like. As such, I would like to propose an alternative reading of the emotional in relation to populism, embracing Laclau's somewhat controversial statement that politics is always hegemonic, which means that it is always, to some extent, populist.

4. Populism: The Affective Approach

The affective approach takes the performative function of populism seriously, based on Laclau's theory of populism. It does this by stating that all political expressions are based on affective investment, which makes the emotion-reason divide obsolete. Any effort to create hierarchies between emotional and rational actors will be nothing but attempts at exclusion.

The affective¹ approach turns against social movement theory and its instrumentalization of emotions, but also against the negative conceptualisation of emotions as seen in much of traditional populism research. In many aspects the affective approach overlaps with the socio-cultural approach to populism, which argues that identities, populist or otherwise, are created through articulation, and that this articulation is always political. The key focus for this article lies in the fact that emotionality is paired with exclusion, but is often only seen as a simple analytical category. The that populists need to be excluded from politics based on their emotional character becomes a circular, almost tautological, and self-reinforcing logic. Populist actors are emotional because they are excluded but are at the same time excluded because they are emotional.

I argue that instead of an analytical category, emotions should rather be seen as a euphemism for someone who does not belong in politics. This performative function of populists as emotional is, therefore, to justify exclusion. In addition, I propose that if emotions are seen as simply instrumental, as something which can be *chosen* as a form of action, it is not emotions per se that are being criticised by their political opponents. It is the political identity that the populists are presumed to have that is rejected. In this sense, if emotions are decoupled from identification – since they can be used, or not be used – the critique against overly 'emotional' political actors must stem from something else. As such, if emotions are not part and parcel of the political identity, if they are simply chosen as a tactic, they cannot be the problem. In other words, I argue that emotions, as currently conceptualised, are a proxy for saying that you disagree with something ideologically: it is the high against the low. The performative function of the term populism, i.e. exclusion, is made possible under a veil of rationality.

Is there a way to think about emotions which recognises this performative element of its articulation? Argentinian political theorist Ernesto Laclau offers us exactly this type of theoretical framework. Even though Laclau's works have frequently been used

¹ Whilst I recognize the literature in cultural studies (Massumi 1995; Gregg and Seigworth 2013; Berlant 2006) which argues that affect is different from emotions (in that the latter is more cognitive and the former more corporeal), I see this as yet another hierarchization between emotion and reason.

to analyse populism (Gerbaudo and Screti 2017; Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2017; Kioupkiolis 2016; Markou 2017; Stavrakakis, Kioupkiolis, Katsambekis, Nikisianis and Siomos, 2016), it has become common for scholars to avoid Laclau's argument that all politics is based on hegemony, which means it is always potentially populist, since this is interpreted as being too vague, or not analytically helpful (Arditi 2010; Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019, 8; Moffitt 2016, 24). Instead, I would argue that it is precisely this argument which can enable a perspective on populism which does not rearticulate the rationalistic mindset, and instead makes populism – and emotions – part and parcel of any political identity.

For Laclau, the foundation to his argument is that no identity is present prior to articulation, and that this articulation needs affect to function in the first place (Stavrakakis 2014; Stavrakakis 2007; Glynos 2012) and his works are heavily influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis (Lacan 1964; 1966). Identities are formed through language, and the idea that the political subject is coterminous with the *ego cogito* is heavily refuted. Laclau and Mouffe reject this already in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* from 1985, and in particular took issue with 'the view of the subject as an agent both rational and transparent to itself; the supposed unity and homogeneity of the ensemble of its positions; and the conception of the subject as origin and basis of social relations (the problem of constitutivity in the strict sense)' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 115). For Laclau, the start of the subject lies in the impossibility of signification, as developed by Lacan. Here, Lacan refers to how we often try to create a necessary relation between a signifier (the Symbolic) and the signified (the Real), but that this is an impossible endeavour. There is no necessary relation between the two, simply a historical pattern. Essentially, however, there is a constant desire to create some form of necessary relation between the signified and an objective reality. We want to believe that when we say 'chair', it is because this signifier could not mean anything else. What is actually happening, however, is that we are constantly trying to tie down our reality into some form of Symbolic order, but this Symbolic order, which consists of different signifiers, is only an attempt at doing so; it will never capture the Real. As such, when we use language to try to capture our own identities, the signifiers we use are never actually grounded in any objective reality. We are, therefore, caught in the logic of the signifiers; we must succumb to the Symbolic order available to us through language if we want to try to realise who we are (Stavrakakis 1999).

This attempt to realise who we are and to use signifiers to try to capture our identities, but never actually succeeding in doing so, results in what Lacan refers to as the constitutive lack. This lack is fundamental in understanding how identities are formed. The subject, for Lacan, is thus never complete, but is carrying an essential split, a part

of itself which cannot be reflected in the Symbolic. This split is nonetheless crucial, since it creates a desire to overcome it. What Lacan refers to as the impossibility of signification, also indicates the impossibility of identification. Laclau argues that the very desire to fix meaning emanates from the constitutive lack: 'lack is precisely the locus of the subject, whose relation with the structure takes place through various processes of identification' (Laclau 1990, 210). Identification, as such, is a radical investment in a signifier. The concept of radical investment is central to his idea of the subject, and is, in other words, 'making an object the embodiment of a mythical fullness' (Laclau 2005, 115). Investment represents the affect stemming from the lack, and radical is the contingent chimerical satiation of the lack.

Affect, in other words, a desire to fix meaning – but also the impossibility of fixing meaning – is what makes identities possible in the first place. Already here Laclau differs from the vast majority of literature on political subjectivities and emotions, in that the emotional is not something which can be used for political ends, or an inherent trait which is bestowed upon some and not others; affect is central to all political identities, and cannot be negotiated away, but must remain at the centre of analysis. Affect is not something which political actors can choose to engage with or not; it is a *sine qua non* for any identity creation.

Importantly, however, Laclau's argument on identification is only the starting point for his work on populism. Accepting the impossibility of identification, of fully reflecting one's identity in the Symbolic, through signifiers, is also valid beyond the individual level. Laclau's work on radical forms of collectivity is one of his main contributions, and most relevant to the discussion on populism and emotions. For Laclau, the fact that the subject is always split opens up a range of uncertainties when it comes to political identities. No longer can we argue that collective identities (such as class or ethnicity) exist prior to the articulation of that identity. In other words, identities are only formed once we try to articulate them in the Symbolic order, once we try to capture the Real, an imagined objective reality.

This enables two movements, according to Laclau: the logics of equivalence and difference. If we imagine any identity as having a particular, differential content (be that gender, class, or anything else), there is also an empty part of that identity which cannot be captured in the Symbolic, through a signifier. This empty part is always the same for all groups and individuals, and indicates that we all share a commonality in this emptiness, and this is referred to as the logic of equivalence. There is therefore always a potentiality of a shared emptiness, a potentiality for a common identity, regardless of the particular content that the group may have otherwise. This is also how any collective identity is formed, through investment in an empty signifier, whose emptiness res-

onates with the lacking definition of the Subject. This is, according to Laclau, how populism works, and that empty signifier is then likely to be “the People”, but the same mechanism is true for all identities. When the logic of equivalence is at play, there is a potentiality for creating a populist demand, i.e. an empty signifier which assumes the role of a false universal for a chain of different demands (Laclau 2005, 107). The reason why this happens in the first place, is because there is an inherent quest for order: ‘In a situation of radical disorder, the demand is for some kind of order, and the concrete social arrangement that will meet that request is a secondary consideration (the same can also be said of similar terms such as ‘justice’, ‘equality’, ‘freedom’, etc...)(Laclau 2005, 96). What is crucial to realise about Laclau’s argument is that there can be no separation between affect and signification. All meaning – be that language, ideologies, values – is created through affective investment in a signifier, and that does not differ between a social movement, a traditional party, or a populist party. Laclau’s argument that politics is hegemony is populism is in this case not a sign of lacking analytical utility, but should be seen as the way to circumvent the emotion-reason divide. It should be clear, however, that Laclau’s work can and often is read in a formulaic fashion where antagonistic relations are seen as necessary and even desirable, which diminishes some of the potentials of his conclusions. Whilst it is true that Laclau’s work has much to do in terms of empirical or theoretical foci on exclusion in terms of race or gender, this should not prevent a more historicised reading of his theory. Laclau’s works are heavily reliant on the *contingency* of the social, which means that power relations always have to be put into their historical context. Exclusion is never disjoint from historical patterns, which I have also aimed to demonstrate in this article. Social antagonism, in other words, is not created out of nothing, but will be influenced by past injustices.

If we assume Laclau’s affective approach to populism, the division between emotion and reason emerges as politically charged. Since any identity is always by default affective, the reason for labelling populist as more emotional, less civilised, and less sophisticated must be sought in the *politics* of these categories. I contend that the labelling of populists carries both overt and oblique traces of rationalism, which in the past have disadvantaged excluded groups, and often been used as the justifying narrative for exclusion. In many senses Laclau does argue that all politics is populist, but this need not only be a cause for concern about conceptual slippages, it could also be the path that makes us question exclusionary narratives. Emotions, in the case of populist movements and parties, should be considered as another façade for resistance to popular participation. In addition to showing concern with conceptual slippages, we need to be clear about what conceptual rigidity *performs*.

5. Conclusions

The benefit from addressing emotions in populism through Laclau's affective approach are clear. Conceptually, the affective approach encompasses all movements, and thus does not create unnecessary hierarchies between the emotional and the rational. As such, there is no political ideology or identity that precedes the populist articulation, and to discredit political actors due to their 'emotional' character becomes an illogical statement. More important, however, is the possibility to recognise how the very term populism has its own performativity. When the term is used to create new insides/outside and new highs/lows of politics, the political implications of this term must be critically assessed. By using Laclau's idea of political subjectivity, we can see that all identities are from their very inception the creation of fault lines, of creating an inside and an outside, and a theory of hegemony and populism enables us to see how those fault lines are by no means a given, but always political and hierarchical.

The future of populism research must therefore focus not only on how to conceptualise or define populism and/or emotions, but to also see how these very conceptualisations and definitions works to sediment exclusionary structures already at play. By consistently devaluing emotions, or keeping strict analytical divides between emotion and reason, populism research risks perpetuating a narrative of rationalism, which has for so long been used against women, against social movements, and against non-Europeans. There is, however, an important clarification to be made about inclusion and acceptance of all populist actors. I have above argued that it is necessary to look beyond the mere definitions of emotions and populism, to see which forms of exclusion are produced in their wake. This is not to say that all political actors who claim to be subject to exclusion are automatically so. It is important to keep in mind that strong figures of the establishment often claim to suffer exclusion (because they are populist), when they are in fact at the very centre of the political debate. As such, it is vital to consider the structural patterns produced by our definitions. To return to Brett Kavanaugh, this article is in many ways not about emotions at all, but about how actions and behaviours are judged differently depending on who enacts them.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

POPULISM, MUSIC AND THE MEDIA

The Sanremo Festival and the Circulation of Populist Discourses

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ABSTRACT: The article has the purpose of expanding the study of the relationship between music and populism in two directions. On a more theoretical level, the article aims at establishing further interconnections between political science, cultural sociology and media studies. On an empirical ground, a primary aim is that of presenting a distinctive case, able to offer an example of how populist discourses could emerge and circulate in relation with music phenomena; this empirical case is represented by the public controversy, anchored on populist references, emerged in Italy during the 2019 Sanremo festival, the most important musical event of the country. What emerges from the analysis is that the circulation of populist discourses in society requires a renewed theoretical sensibility, more able to intercept the role of aesthetic, cultural and symbolic phenomena, as well as a distinctive focus the role digital media technologies in reshaping the collective possibilities to articulate social and political identities.

KEYWORDS: populism, music, cultural sociology, media rituals, Sanremo

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1. Introduction: Exploring the Relationship between Populism, Culture and Music

Public and academic debates on populism resulting from transformations which affected political and social processes across different regions in the world have visibly increased in the last few years. As this special issue highlights, the renewed interest in the idea of “populism” triggered a distinctive exploration of how political transformations falling under the definition of “populism” intersect with, and are influenced by, processes that pertain to the realms of culture and aesthetics. In this article, I contribute to this emerging debate on the mutual influences between political populism and cultural processes by focussing specifically on how music and musical phenomena intersect with the emergence of populist discourses in society.

To begin, it is worth noting that both of the notions of “populism” and “culture” are quite multifaceted and both dependent by the disciplines and approaches put in place to explore them. As far as the notion of populism goes, political science scholars generally agree that this label lacks an accepted and universal definition (Caiani & Graziano, 2019; Fitzi, 2019; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). This puzzling situation is the result of several different factors: references related to populism have been used to address different phenomena across various historical times and in relation to different political systems; moreover, this notion gained traction in public debates only recently, being adopted quickly as a depreciatory judgement wielded against political opponents.

Still, populist scholars do agree on the presence of several recurring elements that characterise this notion: the insistence on the construction of a distinctive category of the “people,” opposed to that of the “elite”; an emphasis on the sovereignty of the “people”; the presence of a charismatic leadership with a direct relationship to the people and the devaluation of political institutions as well as of any kind of cultural and political form of intermediation. Consequently, in political science the notion of populism is addressed mostly as a flexible (or “thin”) political ideology, characterised by a set of features articulated differently in distinctive political and social contexts (Fitzi, 2019, p. 2).

In order to expand the understanding of the multifaceted forms of populism in today’s society, in this article I adopt a culturalist definition of populism, which is better able to encompass the wider cultural and symbolic processes going on in society. This approach understands populism primarily as a distinctive form of *discourse* about society and social relationships. Considering populism primarily as a discourse is in line with several current interpretations of this political phenomenon in political science, where populism is understood “as a *discourse* or what some scholars call a thin-centered ideology” consisting into “a coherent set of basic assumptions about the world and the language that

unwittingly expresses them” (Hawkins et al. 2012, p. 3). Thus, I will look at populism as a relatively distinctive kind of discourse that societal actors (including politician, journalists, institutions, media, etc.) perform publicly about society, essentially based on the separation “into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, *the pure people versus the corrupt elite*, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6).

Departing from these theoretical premises, I will empirically explore the ways in which a distinctive musical phenomenon, crucial for the Italian national identity, could become relevant for the articulation of populism discourses and how these discourses could then be enacted outside of the proper musical field. In order to explore the role of music in shaping contemporary populist discourses, further work regarding the integration of different theoretical perspectives is required. While populism has so far been addressed mainly by scholars interested in political processes or focussed on political communication, the theoretical standpoints often remain fragmentary and insufficient to recognise the “autonomy” of cultural processes over political ones (Alexander, 2003; Grinswold, 1994; Kane, 1991) as well as the ways in which aesthetic and symbolic processes function as co-generators of political understanding of reality. Moreover, it is also worth noting that the contemporary circulation of culture (and cultural products such as music) is undergoing profound changes as a consequence of the pervasiveness of digital means of communication. As Couldry and Hepp (2017) outlined, these changes are bringing us to a state of “*deep mediatization*, when the very elements and building-blocks from which a sense of the social is constructed become themselves based in technologically based processes of mediation” (p. 7). For the purposes of this work, Couldry and Hepp’s perspective also means that the production and reception of contemporary populist discourses are nested in, and are dependent on, a digital communication environment that is far more complex and multifaceted now than it was just a decade ago.

With this scenario in mind, this article has a double objective. On the one side, it shares the purpose of expanding the theoretical tools for the study of the relationship between music and populism, notably by establishing further interconnections between political science, cultural sociology and media studies. On the other side, the aim is also to present an analysis of an empirical case that is able to offer an example of how populist discourses could emerge and circulate in relation to music phenomena; this empirical case is related to the public controversy, anchored on populist discourses, that emerged during the 2019 Sanremo Festival, the most important musical event in Italy.

In order to address these objectives, in the next section 2 I will review some of the relevant, but rather fragmentary, literature on music and populism to then outline some other paths of inquiry to expand on. Then, in section 3 I will outline the autonomy of

music and music-related events and their ability to become stages for the generation and negotiation of collective identities and social values; moreover, I will also focus on the role of digital communication technologies in reconfiguring the collective environment in which music intersects with populist discourses.

In the sections that follow, I concentrate on an empirical case, represented by populist discourses that emerged in relation to the 2019 Sanremo Music Festival in Italy. More specifically, section 4 presents the methodology and the data collection strategy adopted for the analysis. Then, in section 5 I describe the historical role of Sanremo as a relevant symbolic space in which Italian values and identities have been represented and negotiated across time. In section 6 I focus more specifically on the musical controversy that emerged in relation to the winner of the 2019 competition, the Italian-Egyptian singer Mahmood. In section 7 I show how this musical controversy has been appropriated by leading Italian populist politicians and used by them to articulate their distinctive political populist agendas, especially through social media. Finally, in section 8 I reflect on the findings from the Sanremo case and connect them with the theoretical dimensions presented in section 2. Here, I highlight that the analysis of the circulation of populist discourses in society requires a renewed theoretical sensibility, more sympathetic for the role of aesthetic, cultural and symbolic collective phenomena, as well as for the role of digital media in shaping the contemporary communication environment where music and political discourses intersect one each other.

2. Music and Populism Beyond Political Communication

In order to explore the relationship between populism and music, I will start by outlining the literature related to the way music is directly appropriated by politicians and activists in order to articulate their populist agenda and feed their need for popular participation.

Up to now, the discussion of music in the analysis of political processes has focussed mainly on how music is appropriated more or less directly by politicians, social movements and other political actors as a tool to perform their political identity, to find support for their political agenda or to reinforce the mobilisation of their members or voters, especially during political events and campaigns (see Danhaer, 2010; Street, 2014). This perspective has been especially explored by scholars primarily interested in social movements (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Peddie, 2006,) and in political communication (Street, 2004; Street, 2004 2014; Way, 2019). However, this literature remains largely fragmented and underdeveloped, and only marginally addresses issues related to populism.

Amongst the major contributions in this area, the work of Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison (1998) was seminal, as it examined the mobilisation of cultural traditions and the formulation of new collective identities through music by several social movements. Adopting a theoretical focus rooted in social movement theory and focussing on historical-empirical studies of 19th-century populists and 20th-century social movements, the authors were amongst the first to more systematically explore the ways in which music has been instrumental for social movement mobilisation, including historical populist social movements. Amongst their explored musical objects are styles such as folk and country music, black music and music of 1960s activists, in relation to which the authors outlined how social movements adopted music for the forms of solidarity that music cultures bring to them.

More recently, the rise of populist politicians and movements in different regions of the world triggered more specific analyses of the populist use of music. Amongst these, Nolan and Brookes (2015) explored the role of Bruce Springsteen's music within American political communication. The authors focussed on the tensions that emerged between Springsteen's official engagement in Democratic politics and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie's attempts to appropriate the political meaning and populist appeal of the iconic American singer-songwriter. More specifically, in 2013 Christie attempted to use the Springsteen myth as a key element of his populist strategy to reinforce his connection to the working-class, blue-collar American identity. Being a Springsteen admirer, Christie has repeatedly reworded elements from the New Jersey-born musician. However, his efforts were directly criticised by Springsteen himself, notably at the beginning of 2014 in an appearance on a popular TV show, where the singer directly contested Christie's attempt to convince New Jersey's electorate to adhere to his political populism project through the use of his music.

Another interesting study in music and populism is Jordan (2013)'s work, which focussed on how Barack Obama used popular music during his two terms as US president as part of an explicit populist communication strategy. Jordan argued that Obama adopted the aesthetics of popular music to strategically articulate his political identity. The Obama-centred aesthetic populism of the 2008 campaign aimed to inspire people to identify with a leader through the shared enjoyment of music, but since that election, the White House has been increasingly unable to articulate such a unifying message (Jordan, 2013, p. 112)

Another notable reflection about US political campaigns was by Patch (2016), who analysed the role of music in the 2008 and 2012 US election campaign cycles, outlining the evolution in the use of music to articulate populist discourses up to the 2016 campaign. One distinctive utilisation of music by a politician was Bernie Sanders' use of

Simon and Garfunkel's song *America* in a television ad. The campaign-related usage of this popular song was an attempt to create affective links and to reinforce collective identities, hence also supporting a symbolic context in which to re-invent the category of "the people." At the same time, republican Mitt Romney visibly adopted country music as a key element to convince a disgruntled working class of his conservatism and patriotism.

This concise literature review outlines that existing work on populism and music has mostly concentrated on exploring the use of music in explicitly political contexts, lacking to address the more indirect ways through which music can become relevant for political processes and discourses; moreover, it also points out that the research in this field still remains sparse and fragmentary, missing for instance to address the geographical and cultural variations of populism in different countries.

3. Music as a Collective Ritual in a Deeply Mediatized Scenario

A further path to exploring the relationship between music and populism can be found in the ability of music and music-related functions to build distinctive symbolic events, during which the attention of a large audience can be channelled into a ritual form. This perspective addresses the degree of autonomy of cultural and aesthetic phenomena in shaping collective identities and meanings, including political ones. More specifically, music events and experiences could represent powerful forms of collective rituals, during which constructions of collective identities (including distinctions between "us" and "the others") are performed.

This perspective is rooted in cultural sociology and is connected with the work of sociologist Jeffrey Alexander (2003, 2004). The approach proposed by Alexander outlines that culture is made up of narrative and discursive structures that organise the understanding and intelligibility of social life. In this way, Alexander emphasises the performative nature of culture and the idea that collective discourses require the performance of symbolic events in order to unfold fully in society. In this regard, music festivals are particularly interesting collective events that are able to shape collective identities. Alexander's approach has also been adopted by Italian cultural sociologist Marco Santoro (2010) in order to demonstrate the power of a tragedy that occurred at the 1969 Sanremo Festival to reshape collective cultural classifications as well as to establish the legitimation some form of popular music as a respected artform. More generally, as outlined by Bennett and colleagues, contemporary festivals, and musical ones in particular, "are important ways to communicating something meaningful about identity,

community, locality and belonging” and “therefore become potential sites for representing, encountering, incorporating and researching aspects of cultural difference” (Bennet et al. 2014, p. 1).

In this vein, a useful notion is that of *media events*, elaborated on by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992). In their pioneering book, the authors brought attention to collective phenomena they called “media events.” Media events represent a form of ritual in a Durkheimian sense, playing an active role as a force of social integration and as a cultural space in which solidarity and collective values are reaffirmed and where tensions affecting an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) become symbolically manifest. These media events are interruptions of collective routines that monopolise media communication across different channels and are generally broadcasted live. They are staged as historic moments, possibly marked by ceremonial reverence and, above all, these events attract very large audiences.

Later on, Couldry and Hepp (2010) contributed to exploring this notion of media events, pointing out that in Dayan and Katz’s original formulation media events were approached with the implicit assumption that societies or communities are stable entities, characterised by a shared set of values. Moreover, they also pointed out that media’s ability to create collective events is not only based on collective values, but is also connected to the power of the media system to legitimise itself and increase its power and centrality within society. In any case, the ritual power of these media events lies in the fact that exceptional media phenomena serve to sustain and mobilise collective sentiments on the basis of the symbolisation of values and the legitimisation of distinctive narratives of social life (see also Cottle, 2006).

In summation, what these streams of research add to the analysis of the relationship between populism and music is that the power of music, especially in the form of live big events like festivals or TV-based competitions, also resides in its relatively autonomous ability to shape identities and create shared meanings through aesthetic and artistic content. Hence, this literature suggests a way to look at the ability of music-related phenomena be a stage to collectively perform and negotiate values and identities, well beyond the boundaries of musical aesthetics.

A further highly interesting dimension to be explored in the relationship between music and populism regards the role of emerging digital media technologies in music selection, circulation and consumption, as well as in enabling new forms of collective discussion about music. Music, as other forms of cultural production and consumption, is undergoing a process of “deep mediatization” (Couldry & Hepp, 2018); a more consistent focus on the changes produced by digitisation and the integration of social media in

music circulation could definitively add a novel perspective to the debate. This issue has two main dimensions.

The first dimension is related to the fact that music circulation has experimented a strong process of disintermediation, in terms of the decreasing of the roles of intermediaries and professionals in organising music industry and consumption patterns. Digital music circulation and online stores, for example, contributed to undermine the crucial symbolic role of local shops, as music can be now acquired directly in digital formats through platforms such as iTunes or Amazon. At the same time, automatic music selection offered by platforms such as Spotify, which suggests to listeners the music they might possibly like, is replacing intermediaries like journalists, experts or magazines that before were at the core of the process of collective taste shaping (Ericsson et al., 2019; Spilker, 2018). The automation of music selection, largely based on the idea that autonomous algorithms are able to organise people's collective tastes without any intermediation, can be seen as part of the same trend toward disintermediation favoured by contemporary digital media, that is also reflected in the disintermediation of the relationship between people and their political leaders. Indeed, it is not hard to trace here a parallelism between the apparent disintermediation of music tastes, thanks to the role of platforms and algorithms, and the disintermediation of political opinions, favoured – among other things – by the changes in political communication strategies triggered by the widespread adoption of social media and other forms of digital interaction (see Chadwick, 2013, p. 55 ff.).

A second dimension crucial to understanding the role of digital media is represented by the integration that occurs between music circulation and social media platforms, as well as other forms of people's direct involvement in music events though the mediation of online tools (Morris, 2015; Prey, 2018). Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have become crucial tools for musicians and their audiences to connect in less mediated and more direct ways. While in the pre-social-media era musicians were somewhat disconnected from their audiences outside the ritual of live concerts, today musicians and music artists are increasingly required to be present online via some sort of social media, as this is part of their promotional strategy and their careers depend on these activities. Through in-depth interviews with musicians, including well-established ones like Billy Bragg and Richie Hawtin, Baym (2018) revealed how online media transformed the connections between artists and their digital fanbase.

What these examples outline is that digital communication technologies are altering on different levels the role of musicians and their relationships with the audience, thus impacting on and multiplying the ways in which music contents and performers can

become meaningful in relation to different cultural spheres, including in the ways they contribute to the shaping of collective values and political identities.

4. Approach and methodology

The analysis presented in the following pages comes from a research based on a qualitative approach and focused on a specific case study. This approach reflects the established research related to the analysis of media events (Dayan and Katz, 1992; Couldry et al. 2010), that recognizes “the necessity of detailed, multi-level empirical research on outstanding phenomena”, rather than systematic or long-range inquiries (Hepp and Krotz, 2008, p. 268). As argued by media sociologist Andreas Hepp (2008), the choice of focussing on a distinctive case study is driven by the need to investigate the meaning structures and patterns of social narratives, making them accessible for further theorizing. Indeed, media events are reputed to reflect exemplarily how contemporary media culture is deeply characterized by exceptional happenings, that require not just to be described in detail, but to be interpreted with the aim of offering “meat to develop further a critical reflection on such kinds of cultural processes” (Hepp, 2008, p. 418).

For the present research, I decided to concentrate the attention on the 2019 edition of the Sanremo Festival, with the aim of understanding how the development of this music competition offered the opportunity to articulate explicitly populist political discourses in society. To this end, I adopted a qualitative methodology of data collection, influenced my media ethnographic and anthropological approaches (Postill and Pink, 2012; Hine 2017) and being driven by the theoretical need to build up a solid interpretation of the collective narratives circulating about the Sanremo Festival. Indeed, as it has been outlined by digital media anthropologist Gabriella Coleman (2010), ethnography of online communication is particularly important, because these forms of communication have indisputably arisen as crucial sites for the formation of the collective experience as well as for the emergence of socially shared narratives.

More specifically, I collected and analysed a heterogeneous set of documents and contents, which have been considered useful means to produce a solid interpretation of the circulation of populist discourses related to this music-based media event. More specifically, the main sources have been the following. First, I collected online articles from major newspapers related to the 2019 Sanremo festival published during the days of the event (Feb. 5 to 9, 2019) and in the following week, specifically looking to the adoption of populist references in the coverage of the music competition. In particular, this collection was focussed on mainstream national newspapers (“La Repubblica”, “Il Corriere

della Sera”, “La Stampa”, “Il Messaggero” and “Il Tempo”) and on other newspapers explicitly characterized by a distinctive coverage of populist stances (“Il Fatto”, “Il Giornale” and “Libero”). Moreover, data collection also encompassed a wide array of multimedia contents, especially including recorded videos of artists exhibitions from the music competition, but also press conferences and interviews, notably those involving the two singers at the centre of the controversy, Ultimo and Mahmood, about whom further documentation has been consulted in relation to their carriers and artistic development.

Furthermore, the research work also implied the analysis of the messages posted on social networks, notably Twitter, by the two main populist politicians involved in the controversy (Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini), who prominently used these media channels to convey their opinions, receiving a wide array of answers and comments from users. Finally, I also included the analysis of other documentation reputed useful to understand specific issues related to the Sanremo festival and its mechanisms, including historical accounts of the festival development (used in the section 5) and the technical procedures, not immediately transparent, by which the competition is organized and the final classification is elaborated (see, for instance, Eurofestivalnews, 2019).

The resulting research overall approach is thus characterized by the refusal of highly standardized methods, which are commonly considered to be insufficient for the task of capturing the specificity of media events (Hepp and Krotz, 2008, p. 268), which rather require tailored strategies of empirical data collection, common to ethnographic approaches. While this methodology also presents limits, notably represented by its emphasis on the subjective role of the researcher in constructing the field of inquiry, it nevertheless offers an original perspective to observe a research topic largely unexplored, like the relationship between music phenomena and political populism.

5. The Sanremo Festival as a Symbolic Arena

The Sanremo Festival, or simply Sanremo, is a music festival in Italy, held every year in the tourist city of Sanremo. Started in 1951, Sanremo is without question the best-known and most influential single musical event in the country, followed every year via radio and television by more than 11 million Italians. Since its origin in the fifties, many of the best-known names in Italian music have taken part in the event as competitors, guests or composers. The festival consists of a competition of original songs, selected by a special commission linked to record labels and other institutions belonging to the music industry. Historically, the Sanremo Festival has often been the most viewed TV event in Italy, reaching its peak of participation in the late ‘80s, drawing in an audience of more

than 15 million people (almost 70% of the national television audience). Even though in the last two decades the festival lost part of its fascination (also due to competition from other music-based TV shows, such as *The X-Factor*), the last years of the festival amassed an average viewership of about 11 million (almost 50% of the total of national TV audience).

These numbers offer a quantitative glimpse into how deeply the festival is embedded not just in Italian music scene, but more broadly in Italian culture, lifestyle and popular imagination. As outlined by several popular music scholars, Sanremo represents a central place in the national culture, playing the role of an important media event, able to express and contribute to the shaping of issues surrounding national identity as tensions related to social transformations spread across the Italian society (Facci & Soddu, 2011; Santoro, 2006; Tomatis, 2019). As summed up by Barra et al. (2019), since its inception the Sanremo Festival has represented “a ritual, a place of negotiation, confrontation, and sometimes clash, between tradition and innovation, inertia and change, not only in the field of songs or television entertainment, but in the intellectual and broad cultural sense” (p. 330).

There are several examples that help demonstrate the crucial symbolic role of the Sanremo Festival in the country’s historical moments and in relation to several social issues. For example, cultural sociologist Marco Santoro (2006, 2010), borrowing the theoretical framework from Alexander (2003), showed how the 1967 suicide of one of the most famous singers participating in the festival, Luigi Tenco, represented a collective “cultural trauma” that triggered a cultural dynamic which was able to reconfigure musical classifications within the Italian popular music field, thus leading to the legitimation of the new category of *cantautore* as a new form of poetry, as opposed to the category of pop music (*musica leggera*). Another example of Sanremo’s ability to stage broader social issues pertain to the ‘80s, when the festival became a space for representing the Italian industrial crisis of the time. Indeed, during the 1984 festival, presenter Pippo Baudo invited to speak live to the audience the workers of the important factory Finisider, who on the occasion of the opening night crowded in front of the theatre to demonstrate against a planned downsizing, asking for the festival to be blocked as a protest (Facci & Soddu, 2011, p. 220).

These are just a few examples of how, in recent Italian history, the Sanremo festival was able to play the role of a relevant symbolic arena where social and cultural issues related to Italian identity, values and politics have been presented and collectively negotiated, thus offering an interpretation of emerging social and dynamics. All this makes the festival not just the largest Italian singing event, but rather a very important cultural

institution, able to actively participate in the shaping of the deeply rooted symbols, values and identities of the country.

6. The 2019 Festival and the Populist Discourse about the Mahmood Victory

Considering the significant role Sanremo played in recent Italian social history, it is not surprising that the festival that followed the first populist government, formed in June 2018, became a stage for performing issues related to politics and populism. Indeed, in 2018 Italian politics went through a decisive modification due to the outcome of the elections held in March of that year, which didn't produce a clear leadership to form a government. As a consequence, two parties recurrently labelled (with different nuances) as "populist parties," the Five Star Movement and the League, agreed to form a coalition to support a new government, which took office in June 2018. This new government was the first one supported by what has been defined in the public debate as a "populist coalition"; at the same time, the leading politicians supporting the government spent much energy on building up distinctive political public identities, constantly flirting with populist references, especially by means of social media. The new political identities of the parties supporting the government, as well as the government itself (led by relatively unknown Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte), were presented not so much through conventional political communication strategies, but rather by means of the copious work of communication and symbolic appearances by the two main figures behind the government, Matteo Salvini (the League) and Luigi Di Maio (the Five Stars Movement). As the subsequent analysis of the discourses related to a distinctive music controversy during the music completion will argue, the 2019 festival offers an example of how populist discourses could be articulated in relation to a distinctive musical event, which played the role of a cultural space in which musical matters have been directly translated into broader narratives addressing wider social and political issues.

This major incident was the result of the competition in the 69th edition of the event. During the fifth and last night of the festival, the winner was proclaimed to be the song *Soldi* ("Money"), sung by the artist Mahmood, the pseudonym of Alessandro Mahmoud. Mahmood's unexpected victory at Sanremo gave rise to huge debates amongst experts, audiences and political figures. There are at least two interrelated reasons that triggered this controversy, which largely overcame the music context to expand forcefully into the realm of politics, in particular touching on populist issues.

The first reason was the identity of the winner, the singer Mahmood. Mahmood, a relatively unknown singer, was born in Milan in 1992 to a Sardinian mother and an

Egyptian father, growing up in the suburb of the post-industrial northern city. Despite having Italian citizenship, Mahmood's mixed origins made him the first winner of the Sanremo festival that can be considered to be the musical result of the waves of migration that characterised Italy, particularly in the last two decades. From this perspective, Mahmood was a winner whose national identity does not align undisputedly with the conventional definition of Italian identity. Even though Mahmood does not speak Arabic, his music and style are directly influenced by Arabic culture, including, for instance, references to Ramadan or the presence of Arabic sentences in the song that won at Sanremo. Consequently, the hybrid identity characterising Mahmood was at the centre of a controversy that was partially focussed on how he was or was not able to represent a negotiated form of "Italianness," as the winner of an event whose full title is "the Italian song festival of Sanremo." In short, Mahmood's victory was the first instance, in almost 70 years of the festival, in which the national identity of the winner was not taken for granted (see Barra et al., 2019), contributing to shedding light on the collective understanding of "otherness" and, consequently, on the differing political perspectives from which to address the cultural, demographic and political changes going on in Italian society.

The second relevant issue that even more directly prompted a wider public debate, well beyond issues of musical tastes and styles, was connected to the process of the selection of Mahmood as the final winner, and more specifically to the functioning of the voting mechanisms that accorded him this success. Mahmood overtook another young artist, Ultimo, only in the very last phase of the vote, during the last night of the event. During the course of the festival, Ultimo was believed by the majority of commentators to be the eventual probable winner. What caused an open conflict about the voting mechanisms was the fact that Ultimo was the favoured artist for the audience voting from home through an electronic voting system, winning almost half of the popular vote, while Mahmood was only in third place (after the popular trio *Il Volo*); however, this result was overturned by the experts and journalists, who largely gave their votes to Mahmood, assuring him the final victory.

The voting system of the 2019 Sanremo Festival was quite complicated, as it included a balanced system resulting from the combination of four methods: a) public televoting, carried out via phone and other online systems; b) a press jury made up of accredited journalists; c) a demoscopic poll, composed of a sample of 300 music fans voting from home and d) an expert jury, made up of personalities from the world of music and entertainment. In the final night, the vote was split 50-50% between public televoting from home and the press and expert juries (Eurofestivalnews, 2019). In the final vote, Ultimo was the most voted artist in the public televoting, with 46.5% of the votes, while

Mahmood was in third place with only 14.1%. The choice of the internal juries was therefore decisive in Mahmood's victory. However, the final outcome was perceived by many as a betrayal of the public's taste. This feeling was amplified by the reaction of the runner up, Ultimo, who refused to participate in the final appearance of the three top finishers. On top of this, he levied a public accusation of bias against journalists, and further insulted them during the final press conference.

Up to this point, the controversy was relevant, but it was still confined within the musical realm. However, the issues raised during the Sanremo competition about the winner and the voting mechanisms soon overcame the musical boundaries to enter the national political battlefield.

7. The Articulation of Populist Discourses after Sanremo

In the new Italian populist political landscape, Mahmood's victory was immediately presented by commentators and media as a metaphor of the clash between the elite and the people, claiming that the vote of the experts and journalists (the "elite") noticeably betrayed the "real" feelings and tastes expressed by the audience (the "people") voting from home. This interpretative frame was clearly exacerbated by the fact that the runner-up, the singer Ultimo, was at the top of the ranking after the "popular" vote and was the favourite since the beginning of the festival. Furthermore, the complexity of the voting system made the outcome of the competition relatively opaque and, on top of this, the angry statements from Ultimo against journalists and experts helped to support a contraposition between experts and the audience.

What made this controversy cross the musical boundaries to enter the realm of politics was that this narrative was immediately adopted and developed by two the major political figures belonging to the populist government in order to articulate their political discourses. A major comment occurred right at the end of the competition after the proclamation of the winner, when Matteo Salvini, Deputy Prime Minister of the populist government and leader of the League posted a tweet in which he questioned whether Mahmood's song was the best "Italian song," also affirming that he would have preferred the song by the runner-up Ultimo. Soon the post received a huge amount of reactions on Twitter: about 1,300 retweets, 9,000 likes and hundreds of direct replies (see <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1094394837468696578?lang=en>) and was widely reported on by the press on the following day.

The doubts expressed by Salvini regarding the Italian identity of Mahmood's song were interpreted by the majority as a clear reference to Mahmood's mixed identity and

to Salvini's well-known political stand against multiculturalism and any policies favouring migrants' integration (see for example Lana, 2019). Symbolically, Mahmood was clearly representing a different kind of Italian identity, especially when compared to the quite more traditional profile represented by Ultimo, a man from Rome, whose aesthetic features were more similar to "traditional" Italians than to the style and appearance of second-generation Italian immigrants. Furthermore, the differences between the two artists didn't extend only their biographical origins, but also to the aesthetics of their respective songs. Ultimo's song, *I tuoi particolari* (Your Details), was a tune well rooted in a solid tradition in Italian popular music, featuring elements of bel canto, highlighting the role of the voice over rhythm, and a traditional acoustic piano solo at the beginning of the song. The presence of a clear reference to a love story in the song, one of the traditional subjects of songs performed at the Sanremo Festival, was another element that contributed to reinforcing the song's traditional appeal, as well as socio-cultural identity, in front of a national audience.

On the contrary, the winning song by Mahmood presented a completely different musical identity. First of all, the song *Soldi* was much more influenced by the trap genre, a style directly derived from hip-hop, in which the use of the voice is not based on bel canto and puts less emphasis on the singer's virtuosity, while offering a rather hypnotic *cantilena*—something very removed from Italian popular music tradition. In addition, the trap style has also been directly associated with the behaviours of "deviant" youth, especially due to explicit references to drugs and sex prevalent in the music of several Italian trap artists (including, for instance, Sferaebbasta, Dark Polo Gang and Ketema¹²⁶). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Mahmood's song also contained explicit links to his multicultural identity, stressing plainly and simply the alternative cultural influences that characterised the song.

This contrast between Ultimo, who was perceived as a young, traditional Italian pop singer with a recognisable Italian musical aesthetic, and Mahmood, a singer representing a set of diverse "otherness" attributes on biographical, aesthetic and musical levels, was a perfect opportunity for Deputy Prime Minister Salvini to articulate his populist discourse and to support his anti-multiculturalist standpoint. Ultimately, Salvini's discourse about the winner was related to the danger of Italian identity being "contaminated" by foreign influences, and especially how this contamination was supported by the elites (journalists and experts) who explicitly rejected the feelings and the will expressed by the people through the voting system from home.

The articulation of a populist discourse in relation to the musical controversy at the Sanremo Festival was emphasised differently by the other Italian Deputy Prime Minister, Luigi Di Maio. In the aftermath of the musical competition, Di Maio, leader of the Five

Star Movement party, gave statements in which he explicitly made an accusation against journalists, labelling them *radical-chic*, a pejorative term for the élite made up of leftist intellectuals. In several interviews, he equated the betrayal of the popular vote at Sanremo with the betrayal of people's will at the political level, thanking the festival for having shown "to millions of Italians the abyssal distance between the people and elites" (Damiata, 2019). His declarations were widely reported on in Italian newspapers, for example by the daily newspaper *Il Tempo*:

More than on everyone's favourite songs, I see that there is a great debate about the winner of Sanremo, because the jury, composed of music critics, like Beppe Severgnini, and by the press room, have totally overturned the result of the televoting. The singer that the majority of voters wanted from home Didn't succeed, but the one the minority represented by a jury wanted, a jury mostly made up of journalists and radical-chic, did. And what's new? These people are those that are more and more distant from the popular feeling and have shown it also on the occasion of Sanremo (Luigi Di Maio quoted in "Il Tempo", 2019, *my translation*).

While the intervention by Salvini pointed directly to one of the major political issues his party has been raising during recent years (the danger represented for Italians by immigrants and their different cultures), the discourse by Di Maio was much more directly related to the populist rhetoric that characterises his political party, the Five Star Movement, addressing the gulf between the elite and the people, as well as the notion that the Italian system would be dominated by "strong powers" to be demolished through the implementation of a "techno-populism" (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018) based on online tools of direct democracy (such as the online platform Rousseau, through which this party periodically consults their electoral base).

The discussion about the Mahmood victory and the role of the voting system quickly triggered a wide public controversy, in which key political and cultural figures took part. Amongst those, for example, the President of the Italian public television broadcaster (nominated by the populism government) called for a reformation of the voting system at Sanremo to address the "clear imbalance between the popular vote and a jury composed of a few dozen people" (*La Repubblica*, 2019).

In sum, the events surrounding the music competition at the 2019 Sanremo Festival have been directly appropriated by leading populist politicians in order to articulate their interpretations about crucial social and political issues and to support distinctive collective narratives aligned with their wider political agendas. The controversy surrounding the winning song indeed has been made to resonate in a perfect way with some of the major political and cultural tensions across the country connected to issues like

multiculturalism, Italian traditions, the power of elites and the need to rewrite the county's democratic rules. These narratives articulated by the two aforementioned politicians offered slightly different versions of populist discourses, in tune with the respective political agendas of their populist parties: on the one hand, Salvini linked his narrative to Sanremo by stressing issues related to the "Italianness" of the winning artist, thus triggering a discussion about the defence of a "traditional" Italian identity; on the other hand, Di Maio and the Five Star Movement used the musical event to put the Italian democratic system itself under discussion, in order to support a distinctive vision about how a democracy based on the will of the people would alternatively work.

8. Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of the circulation of populist discourses during the 2019 Sanremo music festival highlights several interesting issues about the way music (and, more in general, culture and aesthetic contents) is today able to become politically relevant and part of wider chains of political communication. At a more general level, what this case shows is one of the possible ways in which political discourses can emerge and assume relevance in relation to contexts, topics and events that are quite far from what it conventionally considered a "political arena". If, as Chadwick (2013) suggested, political communication has turned into a "hybrid media system", characterised by a multiplicity of logics and actors, the populist discourses emerged during Sanremo enlarge even more this interpretation, displaying one more step through which politics and entertainment can be short-circuited by the recent political populist wave: the "fragmented ideology" (Engesser et al. 2017) conveyed by contemporary populist movements and politicians seems to flourish into a communication environment that has been deeply reconfigured by social media and other digital tools.

More specifically, on a political level the Sanremo case outlines that contemporary political communication, especially that coming from populist movements, is increasingly connected with extra-political issues, unfolding a sort the "colonization" of other cultural and symbolic spaces that allow to intercept a much wider audience. In this scenario, any event that can be easily translated into a political narrative becomes a potential stage for the circulation of populist discourses and symbols. In short, the Sanremo case has revealed some of the processes at the basis of the interaction between the political and the cultural/aesthetic spheres, characterised by the exploitation of tensions around issues such as collective identities, distinctions between "us" and the "others" and the rightfulness of democratic processes' rules.

The Sanremo case also tells us something about the active role of music in shaping the circulation of political, populist discourses. What happened during the festival outlines how music contents and cultures can become meaningful at multiple levels, especially for the distinctive ways in which music contribute to support symbolically-dense collective rituals. Indeed, the analysis has emphasised that music can be relevant not only for the meanings that songs convey, the visible political declarations that artists do or the explicit appropriation of music by politicians. Moreover, the differences existing between the styles, music and identities – embodied by the two singers Mahmood and Ultimo – also tell us that the realm of music has the power to generate relatively coherent arrays of identities and narratives, which are disconnected from political issues, but that can be easily stretched and converted, in order to be articulated on a proper political, populist ground. This means first and foremost that it is hardly possible for politicians to articulate any kind of music in any political direction: this is an occurrence of what has been addressed as the “autonomy of culture” (Alexander, 1990; Kane, 1991) in relation to other social realms like political processes.

Then, we have a further issue about the relationship between populism, culture and music, represented by how digital technology and online communication tools altered in-depth not just the logics of political communication, but more widely how people experience collective meanings in society (Coudry and Hepp, 2018). As we have already outlined, changes triggered by digital media are a crucial piece of the entire transformation of the communication environment, in which the populist narrativisation of the Sanremo winner could take place: what we defined following as a “deep mediatisation” of people’s ordinary experience in the age of digital media. On top of this, we can also consider some of the more indirect and less noticeable consequences of the changes in communication technology in relation to how music and populism can align each other in unprecedented ways. Among them, one crucial issue is the emergence and legitimisation of new systems for expressing judgements, votes, preferences that digital technologies propelled in many social realms, including both politics choices and cultural industries. The proliferation of these online voting systems (including social media’s tools such as the “like” function of Facebook) seems to have reinforced the idea that “the people” can directly express a unified will, without any kind of influence or intermediation, as a unique and coherent outcome. Even though this is a misleading idea, as we know that digital platform or infrastructure always embody some kind of interests, politics or values (Van Dijck et al. 2018; Gillespie, 2018), nonetheless this very same logic is what feeds the possibility to construct the category of “people” and to articulate populist narratives in relation to different realms of social life, like music.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

MISLEADING MEMES

The effects of deceptive visuals of the British National Party

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ABSTRACT:

This study investigates how visual manipulation is employed on the Facebook page of a far-right party; and whether manipulation evokes different forms of engagement from Facebook users. The study takes as a case the Facebook page of the British National Party (BNP), which has recently been censored from the social media platform. It therefore provides a rare insight in the visual practices of the party's online political communication. A manual coding of 342 images into *factual*, *funny*, *fallacious* or *fabricated* content finds that completely fabricated information in images is rare. However, most images do contain information that is presented in a fallacious or misleading manner. The results show how deliberate manipulated images evoke more engagement in the form of comments and more negative emotional responses than images that present information in a factual or funny manner.

KEYWORDS: content analysis, far-right, internet memes, online propaganda, misleading information

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1. Introduction

Visual forms of political manipulation are an age-old phenomenon, but much has changed since printed posters and leaflets. Whereas before, political propaganda was difficult to manipulate and hard to circulate, nowadays it is easier for almost anyone to produce fake political imagery in a convincing manner and rapidly disseminate them. Photoshop allows for falsifications that are sometimes impossible to distinguish from reality. Images that are plausibly manipulated can often spread widely before any corrections are made (Highfield and Leaver 2016, 52).

Images as these are often referred to as memes (Shifman 2014; Mina 2019). Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (2006, 3) coined the term 'meme' as a cultural variant of the gene. He described memes as "non-genetic behaviour and cultural ideas, which are transferred from person to person". When the reach of a meme is large, one can speak of a viral effect, as the content has spread like a virus online (Shifman 2014, 11). Internet memes play an increasingly important role in the dissemination of political information to citizens and voters (Penney 2017).

Despite the suggestion that images are suitable for spreading manipulated forms of information (Marwick and Lewis 2017), there is a dearth of studies that examine how information is communicated in these online visuals and what their impact is. Studies focusing on phenomena such as fake news, misinformation and disinformation rely almost solely on textual content and have a strong focus on foreign, often Russian, disinformation by bots and trolls (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Narayanan *et al.* 2018). Manipulated content spread by established political actors, such as parties and politicians, has been neglected in research. Nevertheless, the prominent, and often legitimate role of these actors can make their discursive practices particularly salient for influencing peoples' political views and setting the agenda. Moreover, as a recent study of Pew Research Center has found, most American internet users perceive political parties and politicians as the main source of fake news, instead of journalists, foreign actors or the public (Mitchell, Gottfried, Stocking, Walker, and Fedeli 2019).

Information manipulation does not limit itself to the right side of the political spectrum (Waterson 2017a). Nevertheless, far-right actors are considered one of the primary creators and distributors of manipulated information online (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Faris *et al.* 2017; Humprecht 2018; Marwick and Lewis 2017; Narayanan *et al.* 2018; Sunstein 2018). These groups are characterized by their populist, nativist and authoritarian ideology (Mudde 2007). Nativism refers to a combination of emphasizing one's own culture, traditions and nationality, and negatively portraying culturally

deviant outgroups (Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2005). The populist nature of these groups is visible in their anti-elitist sentiment and opposition to the establishment (Mudde 2007).

This study aims to fill the above-mentioned gaps by analysing how information is disseminated in images by the far-right British National Party (BNP). The BNP was formed in 1982 by John Tydall, a former supporter of the fascist party National Front. It was most successful under leadership of Nick Griffin, who downplayed the party's previous anti-Semitic views and broadened its issue scope (Copsley and Macklin 2011: 85). The BNP is an example of a party that has been remarkably successful online. It was the first British party to create a webpage in 1995 (Copsley and Macklin 2011, 96). Despite it being a rather small party, it held "sophisticated e-campaigns" and adopted innovative strategies, such as an online television channel (Small, Taris and Danchuk 2008, p. 138). The website was the most viewed of all political parties in Britain in 2007, and in Europe in 2011 (Copsley and Macklin 2011, 96). Also on social media, the BNP attracted many more followers than offline. Due to its hateful posts, the party was censored from Facebook in April 2019 (Hern 2019). The BNP is a particularly interesting case for studying its online visual propaganda, as its strong visual culture has been subject of earlier studies (Lee and Littler 2015; Engström 2014).

Beyond looking at how visual propaganda of the party is employed; the paper also addresses the effects of visual manipulation on user engagement. Engagement refers in this paper to how often users comment below a post, and how often they – through the click of a mouse – indicate their emotional reaction towards the image. Content that evokes much engagement of users or many strong emotional responses, such as anger, tends to be amplified by the algorithms of these platforms (Matamoros-Fernández 2017, 939). Therefore, such content is likely to reach a broad audience online.

The paper addresses the following questions *how is visual propaganda employed on the Facebook page of the BNP? And how does this visual propaganda influence user engagement?* Memes and visuals are becoming a mainstream form of communication in this post-text world (Bowles 2018). Understanding how these visual pieces of culture are used for political communication and manipulation provides an insight in the way in which social media has been able to amplify the voice of the far-right. Studying symbols and references allows for understanding how the far-right has been able to enter the mainstream (Miller-Idriss 2018). Moreover, now that younger generations are shifting their attention to visual social media platforms (Perrin and Anderson 2019), a better understanding of manipulative memes and their effects is necessary.

In the following sections, I will elaborate on the concepts of propaganda and media manipulation in images, and their possible effects on user engagement and emotions. Next, this study outlines the research design and methods after which the findings are

presented. The analysis shows that most content on the page of the BNP is presented in a fallacious or misleading way. This representation often evokes more anger and disbelief compared to images representing content in factual or funny ways. The paper concludes with a brief reflection on these results and the implications for understanding far-right politics.

2. Propaganda, media manipulation and emotions

“In the widespread sense that we have entered a post-truth era” there has been a surge in research on phenomena such as fake news, misinformation, disinformation and malinformation (Benkler, Roberts and Faris 2018, 23). This study uses the umbrella concept propaganda. Benkler, Roberts and Faris (2018, 26) define propaganda as “*intentional* communication designed to manipulate a *target population* by affecting its beliefs, attitudes, or preferences in order to obtain behaviour compliant with *political* goals of the propagandist”. They indicate three critical elements of propaganda, namely “(a) an actor with the intent to manage a (b) target population’s attitudes or behaviours (c) through symbolic manipulation informed by a psychological model of belief or attitude formation and revision, as opposed to rational or deliberative approach” (Benkler *et al.* 2018, 29). Research in the field of political mobilization and communication refer to frames as the tool that is employed by political actors to shape the public’s interpretation of political issues (Kriesi 2012a, 4). Frames are “central organizing ideas that provide coherence to a designated set of idea elements” (Kriesi 2012a, 4).

Manipulation accounts for those forms of propaganda that might not necessarily be considered as normatively inappropriate (Benkler *et al.* 2018, 31). Benkler *et al.* (2018, 31) for example argue that whilst outright false or materially misleading content (such as falsified videos or images) are clearly normatively inappropriate, using emotional language is not necessarily deemed as such. For example, they compare the positive emotions that were evoked by Martin Luther King Jr’s “I have a Dream” speech as considered desirable, compared to frames that evoke negative emotions about immigrants. This normative distinction fits with the typology created by Tandoc, Lim and Ling (2018), who categorize manipulations based on their *levels of facticity* and their *levels of deception*. Manipulations can be considered wrong when they contain information that is not factual. However, factual content can also be presented in a deceiving manner. This is the case for sensationalist-, junk- and partisan news (Faris *et al.* 2017; Narayanan *et al.* 2018; Humprecht 2018). These often use “emotionally driven language with emotive

expressions”, “misleading headlines” and “excessive capitalization” to deceive the viewer (Narayanan *et al.* 2018).

Types of manipulation can differ in their persuasive power (Tandoc *et al.* 2018). For example, complete fabrications are not factual, whereas sensationalist or partisan news often contain aspects of truth. This makes that the latter has a stronger power to persuade than the former (Sunstein 2014). While Tandoc *et al.* (2018) rely on the level of deception to create their typology, there is a distinction between the aim or purpose to deceive, and the power to actually deceive. Whilst satire or parodies are not meant to deceive (Wardle and Derhakshan 2018), they can be deceiving. Tina Fey’s portrayal of Sarah Palin in Saturday Night Live, for example, made viewers more sceptical of Palin (Baumgartner, Morris and Walth 2012).

Making a distinction between various forms of information representation is important, as people respond differently to true than to false stories. False content leads to much more engagement than factual content, as false content is considered more novel (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral 2018). A sentiment analysis of users’ textual responses to false and true tweets showed that false news led to more surprise and disgust, whereas facts provoked sadness, anticipation, joy and trust (Vosoughi *et al.* 2018, 1150). That content that evokes high arousal emotions is more likely to go viral was also shown by Berger and Milkman (2012). Larsson (2018) refers to this phenomenon, where people are more inclined to share online what upsets them than what makes them happy as the “indignation effect”. This is problematic, as Facebook and other social media platforms tend to reinforce content that is highly emotional and engaging their algorithmic design (Yardi and boyd 2010). Consequently, anger has become a useful tool for mobilization (Matamoros-Fernández 2018).

Emotions are important for political mobilization, as they can alter political behaviour and matter in voting decisions (Kriesi 2012b). “Emotions help us gather and process information about the world, more rapidly than the conscious part of our brains could proceed” (Jasper 2018, 8). Brader (2005, 388) argues that “emotions play a fundamental role in reasoning and are as likely to enhance rationality as to subvert it”. He himself found that, by using music and images in their campaign ads to elicit emotions such as fear or enthusiasm, candidates could significantly alter the motivational and persuasive power of these ads. Similarly, adding emotional words or images to misleading political messages can make them more persuasive (Huddy and Gunthorsdottir 2000).

Different types of emotions have different political effects. Anger, for example, increases political mobilization, more so than anxiety or enthusiasm (Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, and Hutchings 2011). Anger arises “when threats are attributable to a particular source”, giving the individual a certain feeling of control over the

situation, whereas with anxiety, the individual is less certain and thus less in control (Valentino *et al.* 2011, 159; Lerner and Keltner 2001; Smith and Kirby 2004; Tiedens and Linton 2001). Consequently, anger triggers risk-seeking behaviour, whereas anxiety leads to risk-avoidance (Lerner and Keltner 2001; Valentino *et al.* 2011).

Fear and anger “have been used as the exemplars for most theories of emotions in politics, selected to exaggerate the suddenness and disruptive power of emotions” (Jasper 2018, 4). Besides these, what Jasper calls reflex emotions, which are “fairly quick, automatic responses to events and information”, far-right groups also often rely on what he (2018, 4) refers to as moral emotions, or the “feelings of approval or disapproval (...) based on moral intuitions or principles, such as shame, guilt, pride, indignation, outrage, and compassion”.

Most research about fake news, misinformation, disinformation and malformation analysed textual rather than audio-visual misinformation (Tucker *et al.* 2018, 40). However, images can be more effective than text for political persuasion, as they contain certain manipulative techniques that make them more suitable for transferring a distorted view of reality.

3. Memes as modern-day propaganda

In 2018, the New York Times wrote that we are entering a post-text future, which is characterized by a “decline of text and the exploding reach and power” of a “multimedia internet”, dominated by images, videos and audio (Manjoo 2018). Visuals, and in particular internet memes, have become a more and more dominant medium to transfer cultural messages (Highfield and Leaver 2016).

Memes can be considered a form of modern-day propaganda. They often present a simplistic message conveying “one uncomplicated idea or slogan” (Shifman 2014, 67). Through their brevity, facts can more easily be left out. There is limited space for sharing detailed information or presenting counter arguments. Simplified messages can be especially persuasive if viewers have little or no knowledge on the topic that is being addressed (Baumgartner and Morris 2008). This simplicity means that images almost completely rely on visuals to convey a message.

Visuals are effective for propagandizing political views for several reasons. Images are less threatening and are understandable to a larger audience than text (Entman 2004). Moreover, visual frames have a stronger influence on an audience (Schill 2012), as their influence is more subtle. A distorted view of reality can be created using manipulated images. Visual messages are especially memorable and leave a stronger memory mark

than text (Joffe 2008). Information spread via images can therefore be retrieved better at a later stage, than information transferred using text. Photographs are perceived as less falsifiable, causing less scepticism with the audience (Messaris and Abraham 2001, 217).

Images tend to evoke stronger emotions than texts (Joffe 2008, 85). They can be particularly effective for arousing strong emotions, such as fear and anger, which can influence political views (Gross 2008). Iyer and Oldmeadow (2006) for example show how people who saw imagery of a kidnapping felt significantly more fear than people who only read about it.

As misleading content in visuals might be highly effective in influencing emotions and political mobilization, the remaining part of the paper will form a case study analysing how visual propaganda is employed by the British National Party (BNP), and how this influences emotions and user engagement.

4. Design and methods

The data from this study was gathered from the Facebook page of the BNP. During the time of this study, in August 2018, the party had 216.352 followers on Facebook, whereas during the local elections of May 2018, the last BNP councillor retired due to a lack of support (Pidd 2018). Analysing the content of such a popular page can thus give a good indication of what types of memes 'work' in terms of attracting support and gaining resonance with online followers.

For this study, the URLs of images that were posted on the page of the BNP were gathered using the image retriever from *Netvizz* (Rieder 2013). Additionally, text that accompanied the images were collected. Only the images that were visible on the page at the period of data gathering were included. Images or posts that Facebook or page owners have removed cannot be retrieved retrospectively. As hateful content is often censored from Facebook, the images were stored offline, as to be able to access them at a later stage. Therefore, URLs were put into the Chrome Extension Image Downloader as to download and save all images. For this study, the most recent 342 images were coded, covering a year between August 2017 and July 2018.

Images come in different forms, such as photographs, fabricated visuals, memes, cartoons, screenshots of Tweets, newspaper headlines or graphs. Almost all images analysed for this study (98%) had a corresponding caption adjoining the image. This study is not a complete image analysis, but rather a multimodal analysis (Serafini and Reid 2019). Multimodal forms of analysis are becoming increasingly used "in contemporary forms of

representation and communication”, particularly by “social science researchers working across online platforms and other forms of digital phenomena” (Serafini and Reid 2019, 2). When it comes to the study of online visuals these additional captions are not often considered (Highfield and Leaver 2016; Pearce *et al.* 2018). Nevertheless, this additional caption is visible to viewers when they scroll through the Facebook timeline. It should therefore be included in the study as to understand the context of the visual (Serafini and Reid 2019).

The first step in understanding how images were used for manipulation was to identify categories of information manipulation. Manipulated frames by Wardle and Derakhshan (2018) and Humprecht (2018) were taken as a starting point for analysing the framing of information in images. After an iterative process of going over a subset of the images to identify the different types of manipulative frames that were present in the images, a categorization was made consisting of *factual*, *funny*, *fallacious* and *fabricated* frames. These four categories differ in their level of *facticity* and their aim to *deceive* the viewer. Table 1 summarizes these four categories on these two axes.

Table 1 – The level of facticity and the aim to deceive for different ways of information representation

	<i>High facticity</i>	<i>Low facticity</i>
High (aim of) deception	Fallacious	Fabricated
Low (aim of) deception	Factual	Funny

Source: Authors elaboration

After identifying the different categories, the images were analysed through a process of latent content analysis (Krippendorff 2004, 296; Neuendorf 2002, 23). Content analysis is “a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson 1952, 18). Latent coding, in contrast to manifest coding, does not just count visible aspects in the image, but needs the interpretation of the researcher to make a judgement. In this case, images were coded into the category to which they most clearly belonged. For each image, Google and Google image search were used as to identify the source of the image as well as to get more background and context on the text in and next to the image. If not much information was found, coders searched online using keywords that were posted in or next to the meme and searched for news articles posted around the time that the meme was posted.

Images that stated information about the party, that summed up their policy proposals or were pictures of the politicians without any further information were coded as *factual*. So were images dedicated to British heroes, British holidays and the British

nation. Images that were not factually wrong, but framed information “in a certain way by cropping photos or choosing quotes or statistics selectively” were coded as *fallacious* (Wardle and Derakhshan 2018, 49). These misleading types of images often apply a sensationalist, partisan or exaggerated frame (Humphrecht 2018). Images containing made up (news) stories or images that were debunked by fact checking outlets were coded as *fabricated*. Images that used satire to express political criticism were coded as *funny*. A few cases were coded in the category *fuzzy*, as not enough information could be found about the image to make a sound judgement.

About 10 percent of the images was analysed and discussed by two coders. Agreements were made on difficult cases. To illustrate these different forms of manipulation in the results section, a more qualitative analysis was carried out, consisting of making field notes on the topics, actors, colours and language used in the images.

The second aspect of the study consisted of looking at how users interacted with these different forms of information representation. This study operationalizes user engagement by looking at the number of comments by users, and their reactions through clicks. Users can post one or multiple comments (🗨️) below images and they can, with the click of a mouse, react to the image. Users can like (👍) a post, they can indicate whether the post made them laugh (😂), feel angry (😡), sad (😞), enthusiastic (❤️) or surprised (😲). They can only click on one of these options for each image. Users can share the image on their own page, so that their friends can see it. However, as this is private data that is related to a personal users’ timeline, information on shares are not retrieved by Netvizz. As the interactions are anonymized and cannot be traced back to individual users, the privacy of users is warranted. No other information on the user, such as name, gender or location, was gathered.

To test the effects of online visual propaganda on users’ engagement, I carried out ANOVAs to compare the mean values of Facebook reactions for images that portrayed information in a funny, factual or fallacious manner. As the number of fabricated images was very low (N=4), these were not included in the statistical analysis, but were instead described in the text.

5. Results

Table 2 summarizes how information was represented in images on the Facebook page of the British National Party. In 37 percent of all images, information was depicted without a clear frame. Images that used humour to portray a topic or person were relatively common, occurring in almost 9 percent of all instances. Most images – over 50

percent – used a form of manipulation, and thus relied on a fallacious frame. Four images (1 percent) contained completely fabricated content.

Table 2 – Overview of the types of information used in visual images

Type	Number	(%)
Factual	127	37,13%
Funny	30	8,77%
Fallacious	179	52,34%
Fabricated	4	1,17%
Fuzzy	2	0,58%
Total	342	100%

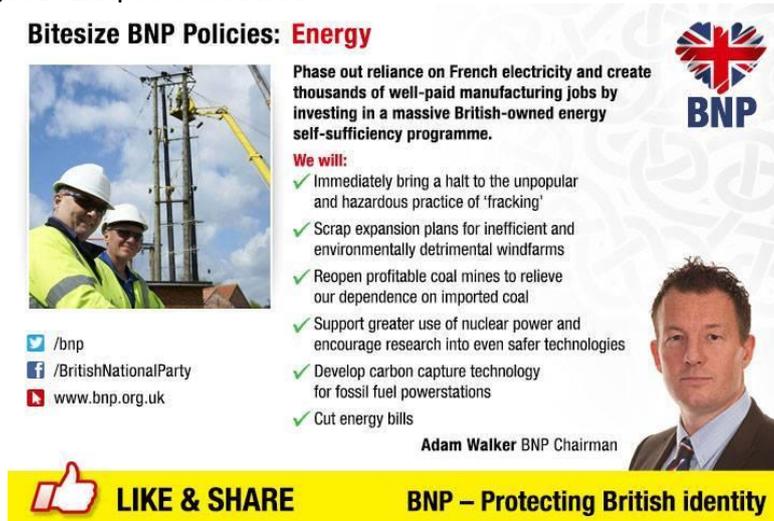
Source: Authors elaboration

Most images presented information without a clear frame. These factual messages often informed users about the policies of the BNP (Figure 1), or the specific activities that members of the party undertook. These images often use limited colours, either relying on white or yellow. Pictures of BNP politicians show them often in normal clothing, handing out flyers on the streets, and engaging with people. The images providing an overview of the BNP's policies are clearly structured, they show a professional picture of the leader of the party, his name, and clearly indicate how to connect with the party on Facebook, Twitter and through the webpage. Many of these images contained the words "Share & Like" as to encourage users to bring this content under the attention of their broader networks. The logo of the party, a heart representing the British flag, is almost always present on these images. Other images coded as factual expressed support or pride towards the army, the English football team and the nation, and wished BNP supporters happy holidays. These visuals often showed the British flag as a background, contained poppy flowers and words such as pride and respect. These images fit well with the nationalist aspects of BNP's ideology.

Content can also be brought in a funny or humorous manner. Satire was rather common in images of the BNP that criticize the elite. Most such memes make fun of Diane Abbott, Member of Parliament for Labour, who is often mocked for allegedly being stupid. Her inability to do mathematics is a returning topic for scorn. Similarly, Jeremy Corbyn was often portrayed in a mocking way. One image showed Jeremy Corbyn in between military men, wearing an "I love the IRA" t-shirt. The picture referred to Corbyn's past in which he arguably spoke out in support of the paramilitary organization. Images making fun of these politicians portray them in very unflattering ways. Jeremy Corbyn often is pictured as dressed very shabbily (Figure 2), and Diane Abbott is shown pulling weird faces. Satirical imagery differs from other forms of manipulative content in that it

primarily focusses on mocking the alleged shortcomings of politicians. The images fit the populist ideology of the BNP.

Figure 1 – Example of a factual visual



Bitesize BNP Policies: Energy

Phase out reliance on French electricity and create thousands of well-paid manufacturing jobs by investing in a massive British-owned energy self-sufficiency programme.

We will:

- ✓ Immediately bring a halt to the unpopular and hazardous practice of 'fracking'
- ✓ Scrap expansion plans for inefficient and environmentally detrimental windfarms
- ✓ Reopen profitable coal mines to relieve our dependence on imported coal
- ✓ Support greater use of nuclear power and encourage research into even safer technologies
- ✓ Develop carbon capture technology for fossil fuel powerstations
- ✓ Cut energy bills

Adam Walker BNP Chairman

LIKE & SHARE **BNP – Protecting British identity**

The infographic features a central text area with a list of six green checkmarks. To the left is a photo of two men in high-visibility work clothes. To the right is a portrait of Adam Walker. At the bottom, there is a yellow banner with a thumbs-up icon and the text 'LIKE & SHARE' and 'BNP – Protecting British identity'. Social media icons for Twitter, Facebook, and a website link are on the left.

The third category of images, those with a fallacious frame, apply various manipulative techniques to propagandize information. Often these different types of manipulative tactics were used in combination and were therefore not specified. The following paragraphs provide examples of the ways in which images were fallacious.

Images can be fallacious by offering too little information, and therefore making the image suggestive. Only one example occurred in the sample of images that was analysed for this study. The image portrays a woman, wearing a headscarf and having a phone in her hand. She walks past the victim of a terrorist attack in London. A few other people, who are not wearing a headscarf seem to help the victim. The image was posted on the page with the caption "*London terror attack: A picture says a thousand words*". Without providing any further contextual information, it suggests that the veiled woman does not care about victims of the attacks, whereas all other people in the images are surrounding the victim. This image 'became an Islamophobic meme' online (Hunt and Pegg 2017). The image that was posted on the page of the BNP seems to be blurred, which underlines the suggestion that the woman walks past in a disinterested way. A sharp version of the image (see Hunt and Pegg 2017), clearly shows the distress

on the woman's face. Suggestive pictures such as these leave it to the interpreter of the image to decide which message they take from it.

Figure 2 – Example of a funny visual. The caption states: "Have you seen this man? Recently escaped from a secure mental institution, he suffers from delusions of grandeur and was last seen at Highgate Cemetery visiting the grave of Karl Marx. He responds to the name Jeremy"



Slightly more common on the page were images that were fallacious because they were posted in the wrong context. These primarily consisted of screenshots of newspaper articles that were posted as if these were current items. One such example was a news article from 2008 that described how the police apologized for an ad they put out with a puppy in it, because it "upsets Muslims". Similarly, statements made by Sadiq Kahn, mayor of London, were often decontextualized as to portray his inability in leading the city.

Fallacious images most often used a combination of exaggerated, sensationalized or partisan frames. Exaggerated post suggest that a specific event, situation or opinion is more widespread than it actually is. Many images on the page of the BNP use exaggerations. The BNP often refers to a child sex abuse scandal, where several men were convicted for grooming young girls for sex. Posts on the page of the BNP suggests that these sex scandals are occurring in "*all towns in the UK with a reasonable Muslim population*". Similarly, images showing pictures of Muslims advocating for Sharia law in London were captioned stating that this phenomenon was happening "*right now in our towns and*

cities". Rarer were exaggerations that were used to criticize political opponents. In one example, the failure of Ukip is shown, as it is argued that with Henry Bolton leaving, the party would be "*looking for their seventh leader in seventeen months*", which was an overstatement.

Exaggerations often go together with sensationalist content, which relies on emotional descriptions and scandalized reporting (Humprecht 2018, 12). The abovementioned child sex abuse scandal is sensationalized by using emotional phrasing. One image describes it as "*acts of war*" or the "*worst ever slavery of whites*". The image portrayed in Figure 3 was shared multiple times on the page of the BNP, showing that it was considered by the page moderator(s) as effective in getting the attention of users. The image shows a crying girl and makes use of black and red letters. The text in the image makes sure to link the crime to Muslims, and to portray them as an outgroup by describing in capital letters that "*our*" children are "*not halal meat*" and that the men on trial are "*Asian Muslims*" accused of "*gang rape of white girls*". This combination of colours is also visible in images that portray outrage about ritual slaughter. These images show bloodied sheep and are captioned in red letters with a horror font. Sensationalized posts attempt to heighten the emotional aspect of the message by portraying Muslims as terrifying, violent or monstrous. Muslims are often presented with a burqa to emphasize their alleged faceless nature and heighten the fear towards them. The helplessness in countering this "Muslim takeover" is often stressed by portraying Theresa May's incapability in handling the situation. She is often presented as very emotional, distraught and about to cry (Figure 4).

Images can be fallacious or misleading by framing information in a partisan manner. In this case current news or happenings are described from a political perspective. Examples are linking low unemployment, problems with healthcare or homelessness to immigrants (Figure 5). Most partisan frames are combined with sensationalized or exaggerated reporting. An example is shown in Figure 6. The way in which the image is portrayed creates an effect of compassion. The elderly woman in the picture is even given a name as to make the message more personalized. This is strengthened by her looking into the camera and being portrayed in a colour compared to the background of the image. The background shows a large amount of people ("immigrants"), who are less visible, almost faceless and in black and white. This inequality between the woman who gets nothing, compared to the migrants who get everything (despite being, as the image suggests, with many more), can create the feeling of being considered and treated as "second class citizens". This is a phrase that is used in several of the images of the BNP. The examples given in the text correctly underline the strong nativist nature of many of these fallacious images.

Figure 3 – Example of a fallacious visual

OUR CHILDREN ARE NOT HALAL MEAT



13 Asian Muslim men are on trial accused of paedophilia, child grooming and gang rape of white girls

And that's just the tip of the iceberg!
They tried to lock Nick Griffin up for 7 years for speaking out against it, they condemned the British National Party for exposing it, now the establishment admit it – Muslim paedophile rape gangs are very real!

"These girls are being passed around and used as meat."
Chief Det. Insp. Alan Edwards

Help the British National Party fight this outrage. Nobody else will. You can donate at: www.bnp.org.uk/donations/general

Figure 4 – Example of an image with an emotionalized Teresa May



Figure 5 – Example of a fallacious image with a partisan frame

There isn't a housing crisis



There is an immigration crisis

Figure 6 – Example of a fallacious image with a partisan frame



Fabricated content was less common. The only completely false content on the page were conspiracy theories related to planned or organized replacements. Fears were expressed that immigrants would replace “white people”, that non-white males would dominate white males, or that Islam would dominate Britain. Examples of such posts claimed that the “*left-wing wants white people to have fewer children so that immigrants*

can replace us”; or “advertisers deliberately do not show any white male in dominant roles”. Just as exaggerated posts, images containing conspiracies use visuals that evoke strong emotions. Conspiracy theories on Islamic takeover for example represented Teresa May with a photoshopped headscarf, and the burning of the British flag in the background (Figure 7).

Figure 7 – Example of a fabricated image, with the caption “A high Court judge has set the precedent that Britain now has two laws of the land and that Shariah (Islamic Law) is to be recognised in British Law.”



As posts presenting complete fake information were rarely occurring, the responses to these images were analysed qualitatively. Anger and disbelief were the main responses of users on most of the posts. However, the post on advertisers not willing to show white males evoked a lot of humorous reactions; and so, did a post stating that the Tories had a secret plan to sell out Britain to Muslims. Despite the overly serious tone in which these posts were brought – the latter post even contained an article fabricated by the BNP to support this story -, the responses suggest that many users perceived the story as too far-fetched to take it seriously.

Table 3 portrays how the three main categories of information representation in images - factual, funny and fallacious – relate to how users engage with the content. The outcomes of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) indicate that funny images evoked significantly happier responses than images containing either factual or fallacious information ($f=12.1; p<0.001$). Similarly, images containing factual information evoked more

enthusiasm ($f=5.58; p<0.05$) than imagery that was fallacious or funny. Images that were fallacious or misleading created many angrier (18.24; $p<0.001$), surprised (11.07; $p<0.001$) and sad responses (4.11; $p<0.05$) as well as many more comments from followers (7.75; $p<0.01$) than factual or funny imagery.

Table 3 – Comparison of mean values of followers’ activity for different types of information in images

	Factual	Fallacious	Funny	F	p
Number of images	127	179	30		
👍 – like	230.8(337.04)	265.7 (338.03)	226.4 (141.91)	0.50	
😡 – anger	16.35 (44.13)	87.61 (142.47)	8.367 (17.05)	18.24	***< .001
😞 – sadness	1.606 (6.24)	6.631 (22.58)	1.667 (3.84)	4.11	* <.05
😲 – surprise/disbelief	1.488 (3.08)	4.274 (7.27)	1.467 (1.36)	11.07	***< .001
😂 – hilarious	12.85 (50.90)	16.75 (34.88)	115.6 (150.92)	12.1	***< .001
❤️ – love	10.02 (17.99)	6.302 (14.17)	4.267 (4.72)	5.85	* <.05
💬 – comment	49.9 (92.43)	119.9 (230.23)	60.10 (62.62)	7.75	** <.01

Source: Authors elaboration

6. Discussion and conclusion

This paper analysed how information is presented in images created and distributed on Facebook by the British National Party and how users engage differently with these forms of visual manipulation. The findings show that images do not usually consist of outright lies or hoaxes. However, most images do present information in a manipulated or fallacious manner. Most posts on the page presented information that was factual, but framed, by selectively using quotes or statistics (Wardle and Derakhshan 2018, 54). This finding suggests that scholars should more carefully distinguish between different degrees of manipulation in content, as to better understand the phenomenon, rather than merging categories of partisan, misleading and completely fabricated content (cf. Humprecht 2018). The low number of completely fabricated images on the page furthermore puts a critical note to the assumed relevance of the phenomenon of fake news (cf. Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2018; Allcott and Gentzkow 2017).

The outcomes of this study are in line with the findings of Humprecht (2018), who found a high amount of partisan news stories in the UK and a relatively low number of stories emerging out of rumours. On the page of the BNP “emotionalized, scandalized and conflict-oriented” content dominated as well. This lack of complete fake news items and the absence of a fake news industry in Britain has previously been linked to the presence and role of highly partisan newspapers in the British context (Waterson 2017b). Nevertheless, complete fabrications might not be as effective in influencing people’s

views than stories that have some aspect of truth in them (Sunstein, 2014). In this sense, the finding that almost half of the images are manipulative, is worrying.

In line with Vosoughi *et al.* (2018), I found that different ways of portraying information seemed to evoke different interactions and emotional responses from users. Funny images led to significantly happier responses than visuals containing either factual or misleading information. Similarly, users were more enthusiastic about images containing factual information than about visuals with fallacious or funny content. Images that were fallacious aroused more angry, surprised and sad responses than factual or funny content. Moreover, fallacious images also evoked many more user activity in the form of comments than images that were factual or funny. These findings suggest that false or misleading information seems to induce participation in online political talk.

Images can powerfully shape how viewers think about certain political issues and can evoke strong emotions. Emotions, that were evoked by manipulated and fake, such as anger, sadness and disbelief have been shown to affect political beliefs and political behaviour. This is the case for both offline and online political behaviour. Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018) found that online content that evokes anger and disbelief increases people's online involvement in politics and is shared more often than content that leads to happiness or joy. In turn, an increased online involvement can also reinforce offline mobilisation (Vissers and Stolle 2014).

The persuasive potential of images is often overlooked, but important now that younger generations are shifting to visual-based platforms (Anderson and Jiang 2018). These platforms are used for spreading so-called computational propaganda (Woolley and Howard 2017). The fear of the misleading abilities of visuals is not limited to images. With the emergence of a phenomenon called deep-fakes not only images can be mimicked, but also video material (Chesney and Citron 2019). The easy access to tools to manipulate reality convincingly, is thus, an alarming development in the field of political communication.

This study offers a methodological framework for further research. Images might become an interesting new venue for online research, compared to the strong big-data and textual focus in online research. These forms of data contain a "richness that scholars will not see if we continue an overreliance on tagged data sets" as well as other forms of big data analyses (Gerrard 2018, 9). With the increasing multimodal nature of our interactions, this visual aspect should not be overlooked (Matamoros-Fernández 2018).

Visuals play an increasingly important role in the online strategies of parties and movements. Penney (2017) for example shows how the Bernie Sanders campaign during the 2016 US Presidential election made strategic use of bottom-up online groups to heighten the popularity of Sanders using memes. Moreover, Baldwin-Philippi (2019)

shows how memes were used strategically by the Trump campaign to amplify a populist message. She argues how the unprofessional look of many of these memes suggested that anyone could participate in creating political content using a meme generator.

The visuals of the British National Party seem to fit a clear online strategy. Different aspects of their far-right ideology were represented using various tactics. Funny images often mocked politicians' inabilities, fallacious images tended to use exaggerations to describe the subordinated positions of the "white British", and to exaggerate the danger or presence of foreigners in the country. Fabrications were exclusively conspiracy theories that feared that "the system", whether it be leftist politicians, the mainstream media or advertisers, had a purposeful plan to install Sharia law in Britain, or "ethnically cleanse" the British population for the sake of diversity. Factual posts primarily address information about the party, or express pride for the army, the national soccer team, national heroes or for Britain itself. The way images look suggests a strategy as well. Images referring to the ingroup or the nation often contained lighter colours and positive symbols (the flag, the poppy), images that referred to the outgroup relied on strong emotional colours and language, which was often underlined, capitalized or in bold letters. Images about the party itself on the other hand, had a much more professional outlook.

While memes are employed by political actors on the left- and right side of the political spectrum (Waterson 2017a; Penney 2017), they are especially a useful medium to diffuse populist political propaganda. Their briefness and visual aspects fit well with the simplified, sharp and emotional nature of far-right discourse (Bartlett 2014). Future studies should address the varieties in use of visuals between populist actors as well as the use of cultural, visual and symbolic elements that make this modern-day form of propaganda so effective.

Despite the limited electoral success of the BNP, the online influence of the party goes beyond electoral mobilization. Online pages with a large reach, such as BNP, play a key role in the mainstreaming of far-right discourses. This is shown by Berntzen and Weisskircher (2016, 570) who argue that, despite PEGIDA no longer being "a label for street mobilization", the Facebook pages of this movement provide "permanent arenas for disseminating their views". This is important as through the ability "to circumvent traditional channels of communication and control", these groups can spread their messages and frames transnationally. Far-right actors draw inspiration from each other by taking over symbols, songs and political discourses (Wodak, 2013). Images are of importance for this, as these are understandable for broader audiences, even transnationally (Doerr, 2017). Doerr (2017) shows how an anti-immigrant cartoon aided the Swiss People's Party (SVP) in gaining broader support and reaching the mainstream. The same

poster was adopted, like a meme, by far-right parties in different European countries. Online, such transnational adaptations of a meme might occur more swiftly and virally, reaching mainstream audiences.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

POPULISM AND POP CULTURES: PODEMOS, THE POLITICAL USE OF MUSIC AND THE PARTY AS A 'POP PRODUCT'

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ABSTRACT: The role of 'popular cultures' and symbolic aspects such as narratives, imaginaries, audio and visual products in the emergence, success, and development of populism is poorly explored in literature. This article aims at investigating the relationship between populism and popular cultures by analyzing the case of the Spanish party Podemos. From the beginning, for the founding nucleus of Podemos it was crucial to try to be hegemonic, to match common sense, popular attitudes and identities, and to go beyond the traditional boundaries inside which the alternative left was enclosed. The article focuses on the relationship between the political evolution of the party and its use of music as a political tool and a ground for cultural debate. The link emerges between these political uses of music and the trajectory of the party, where the latter influences the former. Moreover, by debating on the political role of music, Podemos leaders delved deeper into the wider issue of the relationship between political hegemony and popular cultures, and discussed it.

KEYWORDS: common sense; hegemony; Podemos; populism and music; popular cultures and politics

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1. Introduction

The role of popular cultures and symbolic aspects such as narratives, imaginaries, audio and visual products in the emergence and development of populism is poorly

explored in literature (Caiani and Padoan, this volume). The scarce presence of these elements in populist studies is quite paradoxical, given the acknowledged importance that emotions and symbolic constructions have in populist phenomena. Popular cultures and cultural objects that transmit, spread, and shape them may play an important role in defining populist discourses (Ostiguy 2018). Populisms and populist leaders aim at establishing emotional connections with their People and at representing their authenticity. They pursue these goals also by appropriating and mobilizing popular cultures linked to forms of *folklore*, tastes, aesthetics, and cultural productions. From this point of view, between populism and “pop” (pop cultures and pop products) there is a sort of natural correlation. Moreover, emotions may produce cognitive effects that contribute to shaping symbolic constructions and the populist use of cultural products, which precisely aims to link emotions, symbolic constructs and narratives (Máiz 2011, Ben-Ze’ev 2000). Amongst cultural products, the function of music in these processes and its use by populist actors has been underestimated so far, although these actors often resort to music as a tool to create shared identities and shape the narratives sustaining them (Duncombe and Bleiker 2015).

This article aims at exploring the relationship between populism and popular cultures, by analysing the case of the Spanish party *Podemos*. The empirical focus is placed on the relationship between the political evolution of the party and its use of music as a political tool and a ground for cultural debate. As it will be displayed, by debating on the political role of music, *Podemos* leaders deepened the wider issue of the relationship between hegemony and popular cultures. Secondly, the link between this political use of music and the trajectory of the party, i.e. the ways in which the latter influences the former, will be observed by analysing the evolution of how *Podemos* has used music in campaign events and public meetings. Until 2016, this party usually referred to itself as a populist force (Lobera 2015, Gómez and Ramiro 2017), and its relationship with populism has always been an issue explicitly and publically discussed by its leaders (as well as an internal terrain of confrontation). As it will be observed, 2016 constituted a turning point in the evolution of the party also with respect to this issue. That turning point was reflected on the *Podemos* internal debate on music and popular culture.

The key issue that the article explores is precisely the constitutive link existing between the party’s approach to populism and its internal debate on popular culture. By virtue of the foundational role that the debate on populism and popular culture had in the very origins of the party (and in the decision to found it), the constitutive elements and features of *Podemos* will be itemized and related to its internal debate on music, pop culture and hegemony.

The case study is therefore linked to the theoretical issue of how a populist party tries to use symbols and cultural products to convey identity and emotions. The investigation concerns the very construction of 'the popular' by a populist force aiming at reaching a mass consensus. When a party such as Podemos (similarly to all populist parties) tries to set aside the traditional communication codes of political action to reach large audiences - in its case abandoning the liturgies, the language and symbols of the traditional left -, what tries to replace them with? Is this replacement successful? To what extent can a party aiming at building 'the popular' from the left draw on forms of *folklore* and popular culture autonomously elaborated by 'the people'? To what extent, on the contrary, does the construction of the popular depend on mainstream products and the cultural industry, historically a counterpart for left-wing parties? The relationship between Podemos and musical products is from this point of view emblematic. As a matter of fact, music was one of the elected grounds on which the party tried to build its own innovative symbolism and to elaborate new forms of identification with its base. Right here it had to suffer a setback in its action. Searching for a popular culture outside the market, Podemos mostly found a vacuum. The party has not found its own "music" (and, more in general, its own 'popular culture'), and its leaders came to the conclusion that a political party (especially left-wing), in highly plural and complex societies, can neither have nor communicate only *one* culture. They finally argued the party can at best be a platform assembling heterogeneous products, styles and messages developed by other social actors, such as social movements, artists or the media. In its internal debates on these issues, Podemos split between the defense of alternative and militant cultures and the use of mainstream cultural products. The party did not succeed in finding sufficient cultural resources in the middle of these two polarities, which could serve as a bridge between an autonomous cultural elaboration and mass consensus. Over time, the choice was to go back to symbols and themes more specific of the traditional left, also following a sort of repentance by its leaders for a use of 'pop' products and means they finally considered excessively subject to the market.

The article is structured as follows. In the second section the foundational elements of Podemos that later influenced its debate on culture and music will be summarized. The third section outlines a brief history of the party's trajectory and discusses the evolution of the party's use of music in public meetings, the internal discussion about it and the use of musical metaphors as a means to face internal disputes.

Regarding the use of music in political events by Podemos, the full videos (thirty videos overall) of the main party rallies and electoral events in the 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2019 European and national elections were viewed. The selected events are the ones in which the main national leaders of the party participated, thus the first and the last event

of each campaign, and the ones organized in the major cities of the Country during the last week of campaign. As for the internal debate on the use of music and cultural products, the public conferences and seminars the party devoted to this theme were viewed, and the interventions in the newspapers by its leaders linked to this debate were consulted.

2. Populism, common sense and hegemony: the sources of Podemos

Scholars, observers, and the media have defined Podemos in different ways so far. A movement party emerging from the *Indignados* (Martín 2015, Subirtas 2015, della Porta et al. 2017); neo-Leninist party (Torreblanca 2015); a party whose success is due to an intensive and innovative use of social media; television-party, in which the leader's media notoriety is an element that globally structures it (Giménez 2014a). Despite this variety of definitions, Podemos has been almost unanimously considered a populist party, whose rhetoric is centered on the contrast between pure people and a corrupt elite, which Podemos articulates in dichotomies such as common people/privileged, producers/parasites, social majority/elites, virtue/corruption, democracy/oligarchy, above/below (Del Rio 2015, Font, Graziano and Tsakatika 2015, Gómez-Reino and Llamazares I. 2015). In the context of existing varieties of populisms, Podemos is usually considered a form of inclusionary populism (Caiani and Graziano 2019, Gómez and Ramiro 2017, Graziano 2018).

The decision to constitute Podemos by its founding nucleus was based on four essential elements: the academic context from which all the founders came from; their creation of a web-TV and their approach to mass media; their interpretation of *Indignados* movements as hegemonic movements reshaping political cultures; their use of political theory and, particularly, of Laclau's theory on populism. Since the beginning, all these four elements have established a crucial link between the foundation of the party and its founders' theoretical research on populism, common sense, hegemony, popular cultures and mass media. Moreover, these four elements strongly resurfaced in a decisive period of the party's trajectory, the phase of internal confrontation between its two main political areas, during which the debate on music took place within the party.

2.1. Popularizing intellectual work

The founding nucleus of Podemos consisted of professors and researchers from the Faculty of Political Sciences and Sociology of the Complutense University of Madrid, who came from the radical left end of the spectrum (Torreblanca 2015, Gimenez 2014). This

nucleus came from two political groups: *Contrapoder* and *La Promotora*. The Student Association *Contrapoder* was founded in the Faculty in 2006, and it was involved in the mobilization process against education reforms between 2007 and 2010. In the same years and in the same faculty, Iglesias and other professors constituted *La Promotora de Pensamiento Crítico*, a political group formed by scholars who organized courses and debates, and published books and articles (Giménez 2014b). The dissatisfaction of these two groups with the usual forms of academic debate and with the limited boundaries within which the left was able to spread its proposals and analyses, was at the origin of stylistic and communicative innovations. In 2009, Iglesias promoted academic debates and seminars based on television formats. The objective was to be at the same time “majoritarian and disruptive,” bringing a message of social transformation as far as possible beyond the traditional circuit of the militant left (Avinazada 2015, Bescansa 2015, Toret Medina 2015). It was a form of intellectual production intrinsically mediatized, externally oriented and popularized, although it remained faithful, linguistically and thematically, to the canons of the alternative left, at least initially. In 2009, Iglesias began to organize academic seminars at the Complutense in the format of a public TV talk show, *99 segundos*.

Thanks to these initiatives by *La Promotora*, a decisive turning point was determined. The *Promotora-Contrapoder* network got the opportunity to act directly on the media. Tele K, a neighborhood television in Madrid, proposed Iglesias to create the *tertulias televisivas* (talk shows) inspired by *99 segundos* on its channel. Iglesias’s political-academic seminars then moved to television, and from 2010 he became the host of a small weekly political talk show, *La Tuerka*. The progressive technical improvement of the production favored a viewership increase of the talk show on what, since the beginning, had been thought as its true means of diffusion, Youtube (Giménez 2014a). The growing spreading of the show on social media made it possible to transfer *La Tuerka* to larger and more structured broadcasters, firstly to Canal 33 and finally, in 2013, to the web-TV of the national on-line newspaper *Público*, where it is still located. At the same time, the Iran-based broadcaster Hispan TV proposed Iglesias to conduct another weekly talk show, *Fort Apache*. Iglesias did not give up this job after the birth of Podemos, and he is still the presenter of the shows *Otra vuelta de Tuerka* and *Fort Apache*. Therefore, the general secretary of a political party conducts a television show twice a week, and this is a novelty.

This means that the founding nucleus of Podemos consists of a group of professional intellectuals and militants that primarily based its activities on the specific relationship that it established between theoretical reflection, militancy, and the search for communicative innovation in political endeavors. Going beyond traditional forms of

communication by left-wing forces and trying to match a wider audience was their main goal. To pursue it, they adopted “pop” formats such as TV ones.

2.2. Podemos and the party-television: media as the elected ground for ideological dispute

What is the value of *La Tuerka* in the history of Podemos? In the first place, *La Tuerka* was thought as a party from the beginning:

Since the beginning, we have considered *La Tuerka* “a party.” People do not engage anymore politically through parties, we thought, but through the media. *La Tuerka* and our second program, *Fort Apache*, were the “parties” through which we would launch our political battle on the most fundamental terrain of ideological production: television (Iglesias 2015, p. 21).

Anyone who wants to do politics must have tools for ideological production. We do not care and it is not enough to have ‘alternative media,’ as the left has traditionally thought. We want to compete as equals, to be a tool for the ideological and political battle, which competes with the big ones in defining reality.¹

Before the prospect of a new party arose, *La Tuerka* was conceived as an instrument to use on the terrain of ideological confrontation which, according to Iglesias, is essentially played in the field of media and, particularly, television (Iglesias 2014b). A left that does not want to condemn itself to marginality must be *popular*, and in order to be popular it must intervene effectively on television (Iglesias 2014a). The early Podemos produced a general re-evaluation of the role of mass culture, very discontinuous with the tradition of the critical and the alternative left:

Radical politics, which aspires to generate a new hegemony and a new power block, is not the one positioning itself against the forms of consensus of its age, in a melancholic margin of frontal opposition, but the one taking charge of the culture of its time (Errejón 2015).

This does not mean that the initial nucleus of Podemos did not strongly criticize mass media. Before Podemos, Iglesias was extremely critical towards the media, especially the private ones. What Podemos re-evaluated is the relationship between people and mass media, i.e. between what is popular and communication, arguing that the left should

¹ Interview to Pablo Iglesias, “Galiza ano cero” (galizaanocero.tv), June 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33j1QIP3pbY>.

abandon its historical attitude to ignore or stigmatize this relationship, which is instead a fact from which any force who wants to hold a significant political role must begin its action (Iglesias 2015). It can therefore be argued that if it is true that Podemos is a party born from a web television, the nature and objectives of this web television were originally political, if not immediately electoral.

Through *La Tuerka*, future Podemos leaders searched for a connection with the way common sense and popular attitudes were concretely constituted in public opinion rather than aspiring to communicate with a common sense purified of its relationship with mass culture and the media representations of reality, like the traditional left, according to Iglesias, used to do.

Television—both *La Tuerka* and Iglesias's later presence from 2013 in prime time shows on progressive national channels such as *La Sexta* and *Quatro*—was the fundamental precondition for the creation of the party (Avinazada 2015, Bescansa 2015, Sampedro 2015, Toret Medina 2015). If Iglesias had not become notorious nationwide thanks to his participation in prime time talk shows, Podemos would not have been born.

2.3. Podemos as the Indignados's party? Social movements and common sense

There is a strong connection between Spanish social movements and the success of *La Tuerka*. The opportunity for Iglesias to reach the big media was mainly due to the emergence in Spain of large social movements with a strong consensus in public opinion. *La Tuerka* became a reference for these movements and began to be considered “the TV of the *Indignados*.” National media could not avoid dealing with social demands pursued by large-scale mobilizations capable of reaching a majoritarian consensus, as 80% of Spaniards declared to agree with the demands of the 15-M movement (Pastor 2013). The fact that those movements already had a sort of media representation it was decisive for Iglesias to be invited as a commentator on national TV channels (Calvo and Álvarez 2015).

Podemos was thought as a political expression of social movements from the beginning (Iglesias 2015, Errejón 2015). On May 15, 2011, according to the founders of Podemos, a new political cycle began and its main feature was to be culturally and politically transversal, an element that shaped its ability to get a majoritarian consensus. Once again, in Podemos's initial discourse *common sense* was considered the central terrain of political disputes and of possible political changes (Franzé 2018). In the 15-M movement and the early Podemos there was no reference, as in Izquierda Unida's Marxist and anti-capitalist left, to class analysis and to the language characterizing it (Antentas 2015, Aslanidis 2015, Roberts 2016). The class cleavage—workers/entrepreneurs—did

not mark their symbolic elaboration (Calvo 2013, Pastor 2013). The 15-M was far away from the traditional left also due to its refusal to place itself along the right/left axis (Castañeda 2012). The largest part of the movement did not ascribe its self-definition to this dichotomy, but to the low/high and citizens/elites polarizations (Perugorría and Tejerina 2013, Hughes 2011, Cox and Fominaya 2013).

Podemos took all these elements from the 15-M movement. The founders of the new party considered the 15-M a politically, generationally and socially transversal movement, a plural reality impossible to force into traditional categories and able to obtain consensus and to change common sense by virtue of this transversal nature, signaling and expressing demands not by specific social actors, but by very broad “mayorías sociales” (Errejón 2015). Consequently, the early Podemos aimed to go beyond the symbols and identities of the traditional Left, by elaborating a new narration and addressing, like the 15-M, a heterogeneous majority, redefining the use of political symbols in a (Gramscian) national-popular sense (Iglesias 2015). These attitudes of the leadership group of Podemos decisively structured its political discourse until the 2016 general elections (Iglesias 2014a and 2014b, Errejón 2014a and 2014b, Del Río 2015), and they have been at the core of its internal debates on music and popular cultures.

2.4. Podemos and political theory: Laclau’s hypothesis as a strategic base

Behind all these considerations, there was not only the 15-M movement, but also a precise theoretical background. A further constitutive element of Podemos is Laclau’s theory on populism. It could be said that the party’s strategy was largely organized around a single book, *The Populist Reason* (Laclau 2008).

According to Laclau, populism is a necessary element of every constitutive process of the Political: populism is politics. There are no social groups already established in the economic dimension independently of a process of political construction. The units of analysis are neither social groups nor social classes, but more limited elements that Laclau defined social demands. If social demands remain unaddressed, they can be articulated in an equivalence relation: the requests become complaints, and they give shape to a border that constitutes the equivalential chain of unmet demands. Populism is precisely, Laclau argued, the political process that transforms demands into complaints, building between them a chain of equivalences capable of erecting an antagonistic frontier between complaints and authority. Demands articulated according to mutual equivalences constitute a wider social subjectivity, popular identity. According to Laclau, populism is therefore a clearly performative phenomenon: ‘the people’ as an actor do not emerge from the discovery of an abstract characteristic underlying all the

demands that make up the chain of equivalences, but from the construction of this chain through a specific act, the act of naming the We, the Them, and the frontier separating them (Cano 2015, Raniolo and Tarditi 2019).

Given the performative nature of populism, discourse and communication—this was the interpretation of Laclau by Podemos’s founders (Errejón 2015)—is the main terrain on which the construction of the people takes shape. An effective political discourse must therefore at the same time match and build common sense, through a double movement that simultaneously allows representing existing popular identities and building a new hegemony. By the early Podemos political struggle was mainly conceived as a struggle over words, the meanings and signifiers of political dispute, and it should be acted primarily on the ground of media. Discourse was considered a performative tool, capable of building collective subjects that are not mere and mechanic products of history, but that are constructed as social actors by an effective linguistic performance, which gives shape to a disorganized matter articulating it in a new collective will (Errejón 2014a).

This analytical framework had strong consequences on the way the party aimed to represent how the collective actor was articulated, and therefore on the general identity of the party. How were “We” and “Them,” “the people” and their adversaries configured? If politics is the construction of a discourse in which a wide spectrum of requests can be recognized, and these requests must not be limited to the simple empirical claims of specific social sectors, the discourse must build the broadest “people” possible (Meyenberg 2017). To be broad, these people must not have an antagonistic nature. They must stand on the side of common sense, legitimacy and law, making their opponents symbolically slip into minority and illegitimacy. Therefore, the “We” must be generic, open and adaptable to the actors and the demands it manages to include. The “Them” must be circumscribed instead: “They” are the “tiny minority that has set itself above the law.”

In the context of this theoretical and strategic background, a populist rhetoric—the division of society in the two antagonistic groups of the pure people and the corrupt elite and the initial declaration of extraneousness to the right/left dichotomy (Graziano 2018, Kriesi 2014 and 2015, Gómez-Reino and Llamazares I. 2015) —was used as a sort of «communicative technology» able to address wider segments of the population than those reached by the traditional radical left, and to build a hegemonic discourse by matching common sense and popular cultures.

3. The “popular”, commons sense and pop cultures: music and culture in Podemos’s trajectory

3.1. *The three phases of the party*

The ones discussed hitherto are the sources and the founding features of the early Podemos: they structured the party until the end of 2015, when Podemos faced its utmost tasks, namely, the general elections, the entrance in Parliament, and the negotiations with the socialist party (PSOE) for the formation of the government. Between March and April 2016, during the negotiations (later failed) for the formation of a new government with PSOE, Podemos went through an important internal crisis. Ten members of the party in the Madrid region resigned due to disagreement with their regional leader. All the outgoing people were very close to the political secretary of the party, Iñigo Errejón. The conflict was a sublimation of the rising divergence between Iglesias and Errejón at the national level. What were the objects of this divergence? They were three: a) divergences on the attitude to hold towards the PSOE; with Errejón open to dialogue and Iglesias on a confrontational position; b) differences on the form to give to the reorganization of the party and the internal weight of the respective components, with a hypothetical “assault” by Errejón on the internal balances to influence the direction of this reorganization, manifested by the resignation of the Madrilenian members closer to him; c) the dispute about preserving the politically and culturally transversal nature of the early Podemos (as the *Errejonistas* claimed) or more explicitly assuming a left-wing identity.

Thus the central issue of this conflict was the very identity of the party. Since 2016, Errejón insisted on the need to maintain the transversal profile—beyond left and right—that Podemos had from the beginning. He was also in favor of voting for a government formed by PSOE and Ciudadanos, without the presence of Podemos, while Iglesias excluded this option. Iglesias began working on an alliance with Izquierda Unida that could shift the ideological axis of the party more clearly to the left. In the beginning, Errejón’s commitment was to declare himself against this alliance. Then, he tried to confine it to a dimension of pure “electoral instrumentality,” denying it a general political value. Errejón consistently reiterated that the alliance should not affect Podemos’s transversal self-representation (Franzé 2018). Therefore, in that phase the prospectively decisive conflict between the two components of the party (the “*Pablistas*” supporting Iglesias and the “*Errejonistas*,” as they used to define each other) emerged. It is possible to define this period, between the end of 2015 and the second national convention of the party in 2017, as the transition phase of the party.

This dispute remained contained until the repetition of the general elections in June 2016, and gradually exploded after that date. The conflict led to an explicit opposition between the two areas at the party convention in 2017 (which was won by Iglesias with the 56% of internal consent, while the Errejonist area achieved the 30%), and finally to the definitive exit from the party by the Errejonists in 2019. In 2019, Errejón participated in the regional elections in Madrid with his own political platform. Since September 2019, this platform has become a national autonomous party, competing in the general elections in November 2019.

After the national convention in 2017 during which the two internal areas confronted, the transition phase of the party ended and Podemos began assuming a more defined left-wing profile.² Populist rhetoric was significantly set aside. The party system—formerly called “the Caste” by Podemos—ended up being the main argumentative object of the party discourse, which moved from the terrain of anti-political establishment rhetoric to the centrality of social issues and to criticism towards the economic establishment. The party began defining itself “the left” and being significantly institutionalized. Due to these reasons, the post-2017 phase can be considered as the post-populist phase of Podemos.

The emerging conflict between “*Pablistas*” and “*Errejonistas*” in 2016 is the context within which the internal confrontation on (and *through*) music and popular cultures took place. It was indeed after the elections in June 2016, when the divergence between the two areas began to emerge, that the use of musical metaphors became an instrument of internal political controversy, and the political differences were translated in and staged as cultural differences. However, the other side of the internal debate on music, the one regarding the political use of music by the party, had begun previously.

3.2. Popular culture and hegemony: music as a political metaphor

Three forms of political use of music have been explored so far. Firstly, music with explicit political contents can be used as a form of protest by social movements and

² It is also sensible to remind that Spanish citizens did never believe the tale of the transversal nature of Podemos. All surveys in 2015 and 2016 showed that citizens used to place Podemos on the extreme left, even more on the left than Izquierda Unida. Moreover, the share of Podemos votes coming from the right was derisory, while the party collected almost the totality of its votes from former voters of PSOE and Izquierda Unida, former abstaining voters, and new voters (Fernandez 2016). Therefore, the attempt to transmit a transversal profile was, in that period, effective to attract left-wing electors more than to collect a transversal consent.

contentious forms of collective action (Danaher 2019). Secondly, music can be employed to insert deviant or radical cultures into mainstream paradigms and de-marginalize them. Thirdly, political actors can appropriate non-political (and mainstream) songs adapting them to political functions as a form of “resistance to power” in authoritarian or traditional-mainstream regimes.

In this section, two further spheres of relationship between music (and popular culture) and politics will be explored. The first one involves the ways in which, within a party, music and culture become a disputed terrain in internal political dynamics and conflicts. How party leaders internally discuss their use of music and cultural products? In which ways the political use of cultural products may become an internal contentious and disputed issue? How the relationship between pop culture and politics is related with the populist nature of a party?

In 2016, after Podemos’s second participation to general elections, music became a terrain—and an instrument—of internal debate. Internal political differences among ‘Errejonistas’ and ‘Pablistas’ were translated into musical (and, more broadly, cultural) terms. Pablo Iglesias launched this sort of translation in a public meeting of the party in Vigo, in September 2016, where he said:

“Podemos must stick to a different language a language that allows to politicize pain. Causing fear in the powerful is a virtue. Podemos needs more Bruce Springsteen and less Coldplay.”³

This metaphorical dichotomy was re-launched by El Nega, the front man of *Los Chikos del Maíz*, a militant hip-hop band that has been a musical landmark for Pablo Iglesias since several years. El Nega (Ricardo Romero) is a friend of Iglesias’s and an activist in Podemos, where he supports Iglesias’s stances.⁴ *Los Chikos del Maíz* are very popular in Spain, particularly among young people, although they are excluded from mainstream media circuits and their songs contain radical political messages.

In September 2016, two months after the general elections in which Podemos did not succeed in getting more votes than the Socialist Party and guiding a left-wing cabinet, El Nega wrote a tweet launching the debate about music and populism:

³ Available at: https://www.eldiario.es/galicia/Pablo-Iglesias-Podemos-Bruce-Springsteen_0_560994872.html

⁴ He also took part several times in the early shows on *La Tuerka*, in the context of the column “La Tuerka rap”.

There are two Podemos (there have always been) one that wants to be kind as Coldplay and another that wants to be like Bruce Springsteen. Let's be like the #Boss⁵

This metaphorical dichotomy became the umbrella under which the internal debate between two different cultural approaches (and approaches to culture) was then developed: Springsteen (rock, genuineness, authenticity, combativeness) vs. Coldplay (mainstream, pop music, conformism, moderation, and cultural industry).

This debate was related to more general and abstract topics, evoking some very long-lasting debates within the Left. These topics are: a) critical theory and mass alienation; b) the relationship between popular culture and cultural industry; c) the problem, for the left, to reach people through popular messages and, at the same time, distancing them from mainstream pop culture, thus being simultaneously inside and outside dominant codes; d) the relationship between cultural populism (to talk and act like common people do) and alternative cultures, and consequently, the relationship between political-electoral effectiveness and the transformation of society; e) reformism (Coldplay) vs. radicalism (Springsteen); f) the relationship between alternative cultures and social conflicts; g) the role of Gramscian “organic intellectuals”; h) the relationship between high culture and popular culture; i) the relationship between popular culture and hegemony; l) essentialism vs. constructivism; m) the ability in current times, by a left-wing party, to build and spread a systematic cultural discourse, able to expand a collective identity and a global vision of society. The whole debate was hence about broad and structural topics regarding the very role of the party in society.

In 2016, Podemos devoted a panel of its Summer University to discuss the dichotomy launched by Iglesias and Nega.⁶ In that panel, Nega discussed with Germán Cano, a philosopher and an active member of Podemos who, since the beginning, had been close to the minority's leader Iñigo Errejón and to his strategic approach. In a few weeks, Nega became the most emblematic figure in this debate and Pablo Iglesias, to a certain extent, delegated him to argue the majority's stances. -. In such context he better specified the content of his polarizing tweet. He argued that by counterpoising Coldplay and Springsteen he meant to talk about two different possible natures of Podemos. While “The Boss” is an inter-generational artist, appreciated by people aged from 15 to 70, Coldplay are mainly supported by young people. Secondly, the metaphor also regards the dichotomy virtuality vs. reality: according to Nega, Coldplay have an enormous success in the digital dimension and on social media, while Springsteen “also lives in the real life of the

⁵ Available at: https://twitter.com/nega_maiz/status/774171491269087232

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8bOX3Hum5s>

people.” It is not just a matter of contents and messages, but also of the social usage people make of music, the context in which it is played and diffused, and the social practices it is linked to. Music, in this light, is also seen as a set of social relationships and activities, and the people’s reception and use of it is as important as its contents and messages. Following this metaphor, Nega described two possible evolutions and natures of Podemos: the mainstream-young-virtual-moderate one (the Coldplay-Podemos) vs. the popular-intergenerational-social-radical one. These two Podemos closely resemble the “Errejonist” and the “Pablista” parties, in the kind of depiction the *Pablistas* gave of their two respective approaches.

Eventually, Nega stood for a farther musical model, which according to him would be even better than Springsteen: according to him, Podemos should be like *Rage against the machine*, a rap metal band that had great success in the Nineties. The discourse in this case moved on the terrain of the ways in which an alternative political force must search for hegemony and consent: by modifying the forms and content of its messages, or by remaining consistent with its original nature and goals? Nega’s opinion was that *Rage against the machine* were the perfect example of the ability to reach and retain a great audience without reducing one’s own radicalism. This band, in Nega’s view, was the example of a sort of “hegemony by virtue of radicalism (that is by virtue of being different, original, and anti-conformist)” counter posed to searching for “hegemony despite radicalism,” which, according to Nega, was Errejón’s approach.

These stances were deepened and systematized in an article that Nega wrote on the national newspaper *El Español*⁷, which was later quoted in an interview to Pablo Iglesias. It is worth to pinpoint the key arguments in this article, which is highly representative of the cultural approach through which Iglesias’s area was facing this internal debate:

“How far should we moderate the discourse in order to attract people without becoming blurred until we are unrecognizable? To adapt to reality or transform it?”

According to Nega, this was the key question, and for both him and Iglesias, Podemos had to remain critic towards mass culture products and cultural industries, working for alternative cultural values more than trying to use those products to transmit its messages. Music can be a tool in this work: “we must use the aesthetic and hedonistic dimension of music to transmit alternative values,” Nega wrote.

Nega and Iglesias disapproved what they defined as cultural populism, i.e. a set of behaviors through which politicians try to look like common people and to share their tastes and their aesthetic and expressive forms. Moreover, popular culture is not a

⁷ https://www.elespanol.com/cultura/20161012/162613738_13.html

'paradise' which left wing politicians should simply adopt and reproduce. Within working class cultures, also racism, authoritarianism, and male chauvinism prosper. To suppose that 'the people' and popular classes are better than how they really are, according to Nega—who was born and grew up in a popular neighborhood in Valencia—is a true form of elitism. This kind of elitism is typical of those who talk in the name of the people without knowing and frequenting them, and who consequently suppose that no pedagogical work of politicization towards them is needed by political forces aiming to transform society. Thus, this form of cultural populism appears to Nega as a form of political moderation and an approval of society for what it currently is.

Finally—and this is a decisive point in the internal debate—Nega argued that no cultural work by the party can be disconnected from political and social conflicts. Social conflicts, the material emergence of contentious forms of expressing concrete social interests, are the only way through which alternative cultures and imaginaries can get the space to emerge.

Pablo Iglesias, in an interview he gave to the online newspaper *El Diario*,⁸ stated:

Several times the debate within Podemos is a cultural debate, translated into musical references and even into dressing styles. The debate on Coldplay and Springsteen can be simplified as a debate between the hard and the soft ones. El Nega is pointing out the fundamental key: do we want to bet on an alternative culture or do we adopt a more or less progressive mass culture? This regards the dynamics of symbols, the relationships with other actors and with historical memory.

According to Iglesias, some parallelism can be drawn between Podemos and *Los Chikos del Maíz* (Nega's band). Both, in fact, were created and led to success by grassroot people involved in political activism. In saying this, Iglesias also defined "the others" in the internal debate:

"And where were you, *hipsters*? You just suffered this, because you did not succeed in being hegemonic in nothing. All the political sectors that at the end filled our rows had always seen us with fear, because we used to go much further on. This is true also in the case of *Chikos del Maíz*: they were considered politically incorrect, vanguardists, provoking. Change emerges in some way from there. Sure, making hip-hop and going on playing for young people are not the same thing."

⁸ "Es peligroso acostumbrarte a vivir en el parlamento," *El Diario*, 19-10-2016.

https://www.eldiario.es/politica/peligroso-acostumbrarte-vivir-Parlamento_0_571143917.html

It was a hard attack by Iglesias towards his *Errejonist* counterpart, and a contemptuous description of it. *The hipsters* is how he labels them: mainstream, conventional and often wealthy people playing the nonconformists, but scared of any real change and incapable of taking effective initiatives. *The hipsters* was (and currently is) a quite widespread label among the “Pablistas” to define the other area of the party. It almost indicates a sort of anthropological divide between the two areas that perceive each other also in terms of different social roots, anthropological diversity and even incompatibility.

In the same days Pablo Iglesias, spreading on Twitter the new video of the song “*They call it peace*” by the band *Riot Propaganda* (a rock-hip hop militant band that includes the members of *Chikos del Maíz*), whose music and lyrics resemble the style of *Rage against the machine*, wrote:

They will insult them, they will accuse them, but here they are again, *Riot Propaganda*, saying what almost nobody dares to say.

In this way, Iglesias established a parallelism between *Riot Propaganda* and the kind of party he wanted: a party able to “say what almost nobody dares to say,” i.e. “the truth,” and above all the truth about power, as Iglesias has been stating several times in this and further periods (for example during the whole national electoral campaign in April 2019, that Podemos strongly centered on this topic). The opposition he established between rock and pop music in the musical field was the same he instituted between “the street” and “the Palace” in the political one. According to him, during its first year in Parliament, Podemos risked becoming too much identified with the institutions and their habits and privileges, while it should have gone back to “the street,” closer to the concrete daily life and problems of common people. Musically, in Iglesias’s and Nega’s approach, rock and Springsteen stand for “the street,” while pop and Coldplay for “the Palace.”⁹

This is how the *Pablista* component approached these issues. Which was the approach of the *Errejonist* component? With regard to the metaphorical divide Coldplay/Springsteen, they: a) argued that this metaphor was not politically useful and effective; b) music and lyrics do not matter per se, but for the way in which they are (or they are not) ‘re-signified’: every kind of music can theoretically have emancipatory effects; c) to associate Podemos with ‘the hard against the soft’ was not useful for the party and, on the contrary, it was counter-productive.

⁹ Ibidem

In an article that he wrote for the online newspaper “El Confidencial,”¹⁰ Eduardo Maura, at that time a Podemos’s officer very close to Errejón responsible for the party’s cultural politics in Parliament, itemized the arguments of his area on this debate. The key point, according to Maura, was to criticize what he considered Iglesias’ and Nega’s central argument:

Nega has responded with an approach—supposedly inspired by Adorno's critical theory—according to which there is a radical *outside* of alienation that we must think, protect and activate. Only from this outside of oppression - which very few know - would it be possible to raise awareness in the majority, through truths that translate critical postulates into action.

This *outside*, according to *errejonistas*, does not exist. Everyone—according to a Foucauldian approach, we could say—is involved in power and in its truth; power is visible and ubiquitous, hence there is no need of a ‘prophetic’ party revealing hidden truths. In such a cultural world in which everything and everyone is irremediably ‘inside,’ all cultural objects can be signified, re-signified or contested only from the inside. No message coming from a supposedly existing, non-alienated and pure *outside* can be politically effective. People can understand only the languages, codes and symbols in which they are involved daily, and the model of an ‘external (revolutionary) consciousness’ making people free of its alienation is definitively outmoded.

By virtue of these arguments, *errejonistas* such as Rita Maestre stated that their model was not Coldplay neither the Boss, but Beyoncé who, despite being completely mainstream, was able to convey feminist messages to large audiences. This is an example of what the *errejonistas* mean by “re-signifying the mainstream”: using pop culture as a vector for emancipatory messages and claims. Consistently, in his article Maura affirms that: 1) Springsteen and Coldplay, to stay in Iglesias’s and Nega’s metaphor, are less different than they seem; they are not non-communicating worlds, as many people are fan of both, and both support similar political positions; 2) the political effectiveness of a cultural product has nothing to do with the personal commitment of the artist. It is perfectly possible that the work of a committed artist is not transformative, and vice versa.

¹⁰ “¿Cuestión de gustos? Apuntes sobre el debate cultural entre radicales y moderados,” 22-10-2016.

https://blogs.elconfidencial.com/cultura/tribuna/2016-10-22/debate-cultural-radicales-moderados-podemos_1278248/

This second point is Maura's and the *errejonistas'* key argument. It is very consistent with their general cultural and political approach, as well as with the early Podemos's one. This argument regards the opposition between essentialism and constructivism:

All the voices of this conversation defend constructivist positions in politics, and therefore they assume that political, cultural, institutional and religious responses are not mere superstructural reflections, but parts of an open process not determined in advance by the economic position that people occupy in society. But from the same positions [Iglesias's and Nega's], culture tends to be conceived in the opposite way, in such a way that they end up defending the existence of essentially popular cultural manifestations—in the sense of “distinctive of the people,” of “those below,” etc.—and of expressions of the “popular classes” with a non-popular, inauthentic and non-typical origin. With this, what had been gained politically is lost on the side of culture. No cultural manifestation is essential and definitely transformative, popular, elitist or reactionary.

By virtue of this argument, *errejonistas* completely refused the dichotomies launched by *pablistas*, such as Beyoncé vs. Los Chikos del Maíz, trap vs. combative rap, Coldplay vs. Springsteen, and Nirvana vs. Ismael Serrano.¹¹ According to them, the political effects of a song or a single verse by Beyoncé or by a trap band can be much more significant than the ones by clearly connoted artists such as Serrano or *Los Chikos del Maíz*.

Moreover, Maura refused the very opposition hard vs. soft music (and politics). First, because in a constructivist perspective, what is ‘hard’ and what is ‘soft’ is never completely determined. On the contrary, hardness or softness of cultural and political styles and strategies depend on the context, the ways in which they are recognized, and the function they may play in certain situations. The same song or artist can be ‘hard’ in a specific context and ‘soft’ in a different one:

The most committed culture can play a conformist function and, vice versa, from the most unexpected places cultural articulations that can change things can arise. Whether an object or cultural process is one or the other depends on political factors of at least two types: 1) Inward, what do we do with it? There are advanced cultural products experienced in regressive conditions, and left-wing anthems that only generate conformity. 2) Outward, what kind and what level of conflict does it generate and are we able to generate with it?

Therefore, according to this area, the key factor for a left-wing party is not to establish permanent and unmovable cultural hierarchies, but to be able to move effectively in constantly blurry environments, forcing adversaries and potential allies to move

¹¹ Ismael Serrano (1974) is a songwriter and guitarist from Spain, popular in Spain and Latin America, known for lyrics that are often political

consequently. “The key for Podemos doesn’t lie in sounding more or less hardcore, but in the fact that nothing and no one around it can stop moving,” Maura affirmed.

3.3. *A soundtrack for political change?*

The second dimension in which the relationship between music and politics was discussed in Podemos is the one regarding the links between the party, i.e. its public activities and its identity, and music. The issue was articulated in this way in two public conferences organized by Podemos in 2016 on this topic: *May a soundtrack of political change exist?* Both conferences were previous to the internal conflict between Iglesias and Errejón and show that the topic of the relationship between Podemos and music has always troubled the party leaders. Both were titled “Podemos y la música. ¿Hay una banda sonora del cambio?”. The first was held in February 2015 and the speakers were Diego Manrique (musical journalist), Sonia Cuevas (musical producer), Garikoitz Gamarra (musician and member of the club “Podemos cultura”), and Eduardo Maura.¹² The second one

was held in July 2015 and the speakers were the songwriter Nacho Vegas, El Nega, Victor Lenore (musical critic), and Lucia Lijtmaer (musical journalist).

In these two conferences, the topics of the relationship between Podemos and music and the possible soundtrack of political change were related to wider issues. In particular: a) the relationship between cultural change and political change; b) the possibility for a party, in current times, to have a uniform cultural identity and to be able to transmit that identity to militants and voters. A first, concrete field of discussion regarded the music that Podemos should feature in its public meetings and campaign events. This was considered a central issue regarding the kind of identity the party wanted to transmit to its members and to the external environment.

In its first year Podemos’s events were closed with four songs: *People have the power* by Patti Smith, *Golpe Maestro* by Vetusta Morla (a 2014 song); *Como hacer crack* by Nacho Vegas (2011); and *L’Estaca* by Luis Jack (1968). The selected singers and songs well represent the internal approaches (and uncertainty) to the different ways in which music could communicate identity-forming symbols. As a matter of fact, they included an international star and a historically symbolic protest song (Patti Smith and *People have the power*); a current famous Spanish pop-band such as Vetusta Morla, and their song lacking explicit political messages; a politically committed Spanish songwriter such as Nacho Vegas (who supports Podemos); and a traditional militant Catalan song such as *L’Estaca*.

¹² Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCS_ba3njfM.

Among these four songs, the most played in 2014 and early 2015 was the one by Vetusta Morla, a band that the *errejonistas* defined as “hipster.” They admitted that this choice was a failure: people did not participate in singing it in public events and it did not communicate any specific identity. Anyway, the choice to use this song more than the other ones was due to the logic of searching for some musical source of identification that could sound ‘transversal’ more than traditionally militant. The speakers of the first conference joked mentioning that *L’Estaca* was included because, as nobody of the participants in Podemos meetings used to sing the other three songs (which were respectively in English and Castilian) and this created a bad effect, the fact that *L’Estaca* was in Catalan at least avoided any problem of this kind (almost nobody outside Catalunya could sing it).

In January 2015 Podemos organized the “March for change,” a massive political demonstration that had a crucial importance for the party. During the demonstration, a playlist was selected by the (mainly *errejonistas*) organizers and transmitted in the streets. It was very discontinuous with the music accompanying traditional left-wing marches. It included: *Spanish bombs* by The Clash, *My generation* by The Who, *Déjame vivir con alegría* by Vainica Doble, *Rebel Rebel* by David Bowie, *Take a Walk on the Wild Side* by Lou Reed, Raffaella Carrà’s *Hay que venir al Sur* and *Ghostbusters*. A very heterogeneous playlist, aiming at representing the transversal profile that the party intended to transmit also at the political level. However, at the end of the march and after the leaders’ speeches, a band played on the stage the classic Mercedes Sousa’s *Todo cambia*, a song with clear political traditions and implications. This heterogeneity demonstrates the high uncertainty troubling the party with respect to its identification with music and to the political use that you can make of it. The playlist and the live show chosen for the demonstration— like the songs chosen to end public events in its first year—contained everything: classic rock, punk, pop-rock, pop and commercial songs, and political songs.

Despite this heterogeneity, in the first phase of the party trajectory (2014-2015) the attempt to be not identified with the “old left” prevailed and, consequently, pop, pop-rock and mainstream songs prevailed in public events. It is important to notice that the cultural sector of the party’s activities (and thus also musical choices) was in that period led by the *errejonist* area. In the first national elections in which Podemos participated, in December 2015, campaign events were opened with the theme song of the movie *Ghostbusters*, and closed with the new party anthem especially composed for the campaign. The lyrics of the song, which is still the party anthem, consist of just one sentence: “*Si se puede*” (“It is possible”), inspired by one of the most popular slogans by the *Indignados* movements that became Podemos’s main catchphrase. Its sound is pop,

simple and emotional.¹³ At the time of that campaign, also very commercial songs were played during events, like one by the Latin pop star Enrique Iglesias.¹⁴

In the following years, there was a clear evolution in the political use of music by Podemos. The prevalence of mainstream pop music was replaced, from 2016 and even more from 2017, by the prevalence of songs belonging to two political traditions: the left-wing tradition (such as Inti-Illimani's *El Pueblo unido jamás será vencido*), and the republican and anti-Francoist Spanish tradition. From the general elections in 2016 (after the alliance with *Izquierda Unida*), campaign events were often closed with *El Pueblo Unido...* and *A galopar*. The latter is a 1969 song by Paco Ibañez, and its lyrics are drawn from Rafael Alberti's poem *Galope* written during the Spanish Civil War and dedicated to anti-Francoist militants and soldiers. Therefore, from 2016 on, Podemos overcame the idea to be not identified with leftist traditions, and this became visible in its musical choices.

This final choice was, anyway, a proof of the truthfulness of previous concerns and doubts among party leaders about the political use of music. What emerges most from the public debates that Podemos organized on this topic in 2015 and 2016, is their complaint for the absence of contemporary Spanish bands and songs that could symbolically represent the stance of both Podemos and the political change, and thus the lacking of musical sources that could create forms of collective identification especially in new generations.

In the first conference devoted to the topic "May a soundtrack of political change exist?", Eduardo Maura stressed that during the first campaign for European elections in 2014 and the following months, the discussion about the songs with which to conclude public events was very intense in the party. The result was the medley of tradition and innovation, militant and pop songs, old and new tunes, international and national music that we have observed. According to all the speakers in the two conferences, it was not possible to identify *one* music of change: "Our generation has not its music," the speakers affirmed. For this reason, the quest for an identity-forming music finally brought the party, after 2016, to search the past (*El pueblo unido...*, *A galopar*, *Todo cambia*).

The answer to the question "is there a soundtrack of political change?" was unanimously "no." The conclusion that came out from these discussions was that, in current times, it is not possible to impose "a music of the party" to people. This conclusion was linked to the empirical observation that identity-forming music, songs or bands had not emerged even after a period of mass social mobilization (the *Indignados*). This empirical

¹³ Here it is possible to observe how *Gostbusters* was being played at the beginning and the anthem at the end of the last campaign event in 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PA0v0ZFYZO>

¹⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=klOb_7dDYac.

observation was connected to a wider assumption, mainly defended by *errejonistas*: in postmodern societies, there is no way to impose or spread uniform cultural messages, styles or tastes, because postmodern societies are too various, heterogeneous and fragmented. The party cannot produce or diffuse *one* culture. It can only represent the variety and heterogeneity spontaneously emerging from society, of course selecting within it what can be useful to the party's political and cultural scopes. The soundtrack of change can therefore only be plural and composite, and it can only be composed by "the people," not by the party. As it has been already disclosed, this argument was mainly defended by the *errejonist* area, which dominated the cultural sector of the party activities until 2016. It was also due to their internal weakening and their subsequent exit from the party that from 2016 on Podemos started politicizing more (and making more traditional) its "soundtrack": in today's Podemos it would not be possible to hear Raffaella Carrà in a public meeting. The 'music of the party' followed the party trajectory: from populism and search for a transversal consent, to a more left-wing and antagonist profile where leftist traditions were rediscovered.

4. Conclusion

The origins of Podemos can be connected to four fundamental elements. The academic origin of the founders and their attempt to popularize the academic and political debate. The foundation of a web TV and the consequential acquisition of a national notoriety by Pablo Iglesias. The capacity of the *Indignados* movements to reshape political identities and achieve a majoritarian consent. Laclau's theory on populism. Issues such as common sense, populism, hegemony, the relationship between politics and popular cultures, communication and consent, were at the core of all these four elements. Podemos was 'pop' since its beginning. To try to be hegemonic, to match common sense, popular attitudes and identities and to go beyond the traditional boundaries in which the alternative left was enclosed—in one word, to cease being marginal and try to become majoritarian—was crucial since the activities of *La Promotora* and *Contrapoder*, in the experience of *La Tuerka*, as well as in the founders' interpretation of the *Indignados* movements and of Laclau's theory on populism. In a way, Podemos itself was launched as a "pop product," a 'political commodity' that had to break into mainstream politics and be able to compete with the 'majors' of the sector, going beyond niche markets. Thus, its relationship with pop cultures is constitutive and primary.

We observed the centrality of all these elements in the internal debates on music and politics. First, in the discussions the leaders had about the ways in which music had to

be used in public events. On this terrain, we observed the internal tension to represent social heterogeneity, to use music that could communicate with wide audiences, and to transmit through music that the party shared the masses' tastes and did not talk from an 'outside' of popular attitudes. At the same time, we have seen that this attempt significantly failed. The "music of the party" was contradictory, it included extremely diversified musical tendencies, styles, traditions and contents, and it did not succeed (as the same leaders who were responsible for these choices admitted) in communicating and sharing a clear identity. The 'old left' and 'pop culture' constantly overlapped within the "soundtrack of change," signaling the same uncertainty and ambiguity that lay in the party on the political side. At the end, the political evolution of the party determined a choice between these two musical constellations. When the party moved away from its initial and self-defined populism, to a certain extent the attempt to be popular and 'mainstream' left space to the shared identities and traditions that political history made available.

What emerges from the internal debate on this issue is the disorientation of party leaders because of the absence of generationally and socially shared musical tastes and landmarks, even within the social groups that were involved in the *Indignados* protest cycle. This absence made the work of the party on this field even more complicated and signaled wider problems regarding the relationship with mainstream cultures and popular identities as a whole, as well as the difficulties in creating new identities and cultures. Even more, in the conferences organized on this issue, the main conclusion by party leaders (and by the experts discussing with them) was that, in our current complex society, it is impossible for a political party to carry out such a work.

Those problems were also at the core of the internal (political) debate based on musical metaphors. In that context, political divisions were translated into cultural and musical oppositions, and into the two traditional sides: 'apocalyptic' and 'integrated'. The resurgence of this sharp and paradigmatic dichotomy signals that within a party based on a populist theory such debates may assume a particularly high relevance and overheated discussions, but they concern very long lasting - and even initial - dilemmas in the history of left-wing parties. These dilemmas pivot on the question if and how it is possible to transform society acting in a largely hostile environment, if and how it is possible to combine radicalism and effectiveness, consistency and consent, and to pursue social change avoiding marginality.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE LONG EVOLUTION OF EXTREME RIGHT MUSIC IN ITALY AND GERMANY

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ABSTRACT: The importance of music in extreme right political culture is acknowledged in recent academic and non-academic contributions in Italy and Germany. Patterns of music development in different European contexts reflect the prevailing ideological dimension of the role of this cultural expression in the extreme right context (Dyck 2016). Labels such as “White power music”, “Rechtsrock” and “Reichsrock” all point to various trajectories in the recruitment and socialization functions of extreme right music. In Italy, the concept of “rock identitario” designates the most successful form of music production by well-known bands directly linked to political movements. However, identitarian rock is only the arrival point of a long tradition of music development within the Italian Extreme Right. In Germany, recent investigations of the “Rechtsrock” phenomenon have highlighted the intense internationalization of networks of extreme right movements that mostly mobilize cultural manifestations of extreme right ideologies. The analysis comprises a diachronic enquiry into the development of extreme right music in Germany and Italy. From a comparative perspective, the paper will highlight how – no different from other political languages – changes in music production both reflect and go along with the transformation of the Italian and German Extreme Right from an organizational, political culture and strategic perspective¹.

KEYWORDS: Extreme Right, Germany, Italy, Music, Subculture

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, comparative analysis of the evolution of the extreme right in Europe has focused on the political and electoral aspects of the extreme right's resurgence (Ignazi 2003, Rydgren 2005, Arzheimer and Carter 2006, Arzheimer 2018) in different West European countries. Extreme right parties and extreme right movements have been the main objects of comparative enquiries that highlight the parties' ideologies and electoral performances on the one side, and modifications to the movements' mobilization on the other. However, scant attention has been paid to the cultural aspects of the extreme right's evolution in a comparative approach. Cultural products like music, art and films have been relegated "to a secondary status analytically compared to more tangible social and political movement productions like protest, political turnout or media coverage" (Corte and Edwards 2008, 5).

This theoretical and empirical gap has recently been acknowledged by seminal studies that investigate the role of youth cultures in the transformation of the prevailing symbolic and recruitment tools adopted by extreme right movements in Europe (Miller Idriss 2018). Among these, dress codes, aesthetic elements of belonging such as tattoos, piercings etc., lifestyle remodelling (Kølvraa, C. and Forchtner 2019) and the use of cultural and consumer products (Forchtner and Tominc 2017) all point to a phenomenon of the commercialisation and mainstreaming of the extreme right in Europe (Miller Idriss, 2017). These recent studies highlight the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of extreme right evolution. As shown by Miller Idriss (2009) and Schedler (2014 and 2016), a perspective of enquiry that combines a sociological understanding of extreme right activism (Klandermans and Mayer 2006) with a culture-based analysis of the symbolic, ideological and material incentives offered by these groups to sympathizers and affiliated members can better explain the persistence of traditional organizations of the extreme right and the emergence of new modalities of extreme right aggregations. This interdisciplinary approach does not dismiss the political-science contribution to the analysis of the extreme right. On the contrary, it offers an innovative environment of theoretical and empirical discussion where typical variables like electoral success, organization structure and interactions with internal and external stakeholders are no longer the *explanandum*, but rather elements of a broader understanding of extreme right mobilization, where culture and symbols play a comparable role to political roles and voters' decisions. Within this new theoretical and empirical approach, significant gaps still exist. A first methodological lacuna is the limited adoption of a genuine comparative perspective in studies of the cultural aspects of extreme right mobilization.

The study of extreme right music – better known, depending on the context, as Nazi-Rock (Funk-Hennigs 1995, Brown 2004), Rechts-Rock (Dornbuschh and Raabe 2002) Reichsrock (Dyck 2016) and White Power Music (Corte and Edwards 2008, Langebach and Raabe 2013) – is not a new topic within studies of the extreme right. As the paper will highlight, music has always played an important role within the extreme right milieu for recruitment and socialization purposes. Moreover, being a crucial component for the formation of collective identities, music has also been particularly important in circumstances of crucial restructuring of extreme right subcultures in Germany and Italy. However, with a few exceptions (Brown 2004), little attention has been devoted to the comparative analysis of this political and cultural form of identity formation, recruitment and subcultural organization. The present article aims to fill this gap by presenting a comparative analysis of the evolution of extreme right music in two countries: Germany and Italy. The paper will highlight how – no different from other political languages – changes in music production and consumption both reflect and go along with the transformation of the Italian and German Extreme Right from an organizational, political culture and strategic perspective.

The methodological reasons for the selection of these two cases depend on historical/ cultural and political/ institutional aspects. From a historical point of view, Germany and Italy represent fertile ground for testing the impact of different patterns of evolution of the respective party systems after the Second World War, with particular attention paid to the reorganization of the extreme right. Comparing Germany and Italy will shed light on the influence of the different institutional and constitutional settings adopted by two new democracies in the reshaping of the extreme right in its organization and cultural aspects. The adoption in Germany of a constitutional setting based on the principle of *Streitbare Demokratie* (Militant Democracy) (Backes and Jaschke, 1990) permitted banning extreme right parties and extreme left parties, respectively, in 1952 and 1956. In contrast, the early founding of an extreme right party in the post-war scenario and its immediate inclusion in the Italian party system created a completely different background to the evolution of the extreme right, from both political and cultural points of view.

A comparison of the constitutional settings of the two countries as a background to the development of organized extreme right music in Germany and Italy after the Second World War rests on a case selection that highlights the striking differences between the two cases in the early phase of extreme music production (Przeworski and Teune, 1970). However, the individuation of evolution stages of the extreme right music scenarios in these two countries over time will also permit illustrating converging aspects of the two countries. Despite deep differences in the role played by the orga-

nized extreme right in the two parties' systems, similarities will emerge as a consequence of the aforementioned combination of sociological and cultural aspects responsible for the evolution of extreme right music in both countries.

The article is divided into three parts. In the first part (paragraphs 2 and 3), the theoretical framework will be described as comprising different bodies of literature that help to understand the functions of music in the process of identity-shaping, community creation and influence on extreme right political subcultures. Consequently, particular attention will be paid to the definition of the phenomenon of extreme right rock. In this context, the role played by the concept of "youth culture" will emerge as an indispensable point of reference in order to correctly locate extreme right music in its political environment. In the second part (paragraphs 4, 5 and 6), the evolutionary stages of extreme right music will be divided into three main historical phases. These three waves evidence the influence of political variables on the evolution stages of extreme right music in Germany and Italy, but also highlight the role played by its main actors – music bands, cultural/ economic entrepreneurs, fans – and their respective cultural and economic incentives. The third part (Conclusion) will offer an overarching assessment of the interplay of political, cultural and social elements in the evolution of extreme right music in Germany and Italy.

2. Theoretical framework: music, emotions, mobilization

A comparative study of the evolution of extreme right music highlights the necessity to combine different theoretical approaches reflecting the complexity of the interplay amongst cultural, social and political variables.

A first approach evidences the role played by music in the construction, perpetuation and modification of collective identities (Eyerman 2002) and their cultural self-perception. A second approach focuses on the functions of integration and symbolic representation (Clayton, Herbert and Middleton 2013) of music, as the background to the creation of new communities. A third approach acknowledges the role of emotions in politics, emphasizing the affective strategies adopted by political organizations in the mobilization of voters and sympathizers.

Following the first approach, Eyerman and Jaminson underlined early on the scant attention paid by the social movement and sociological literature to "musical components of collective identity" (1998, 7). This lacuna was particularly serious when considering that the production and consumption of music is a collective action and that its rites and rituals are a constitutive part of the musical *mise-en-scène*, which is a cul-

tural and political act (Futrell, Simi and Gottschalk 2006, Meyer 2000, 51). In “informing our sense of place” (Stokes 1994, 3), musical events “evoke and organize collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity”. More recent contributions have partially filled this gap (Martiniello and Lafleur 2008, 1199) by underlining the sense of belonging stimulated by music.

The second theoretical approach emphasizes the role of music in the creation of new communities kept together by cultural and social linkages (Clayton, Herbert and Middleton 2013). It is particularly in the area of subcultural studies that music has found proper acknowledgment as a constitutive element of the complex process of identity formation. Within this area of study, musicologists and ethnomusicologists have emphasized the particular capacity of music to intercept and shape moments of social crisis and identity formation. Frith (1978, 51) recognizes the function of rupture to pre-existing schemes that music – like other forms of cultural production – is able to perform. Particularly starting in the 1990s, the direct or indirect impact of music on social categories such as class, gender, ethnicity subcultures and counterculture mobilization has been interpreted within a broader influence of music in the process of community formation. Far from being just a soundtrack, music plays a crucial role in the creation and transformation of subcultures, as well as in the production of knowledge (Titon 2003).

A third more recent theoretical approach underscores the political investment by political parties in the politics of fear and resentment. If we consider the recent extensive literature on radical right populist parties, emotions are treated as the background to a successful populist mobilization. A politics of fear (Wodak 2015), as well as the exploitation of economic and cultural anxieties (Ivarsflaten 2008) by radical right populist parties, is constantly evoked when explaining the successful political communication adopted by populist parties and leaders in the relationship with their electors and sympathizers. This approach to the use of emotions hides a more profound – and much less analyzed – function that feelings have in the construction of collective identities².

Despite some differences amongst these approaches, a common understanding of the privileged relationship between emotions and political mobilization emerges when dealing with music production and consumption. It is on the basis of this common understanding that the three bodies of literature converge in highlighting the role of mu-

² Despite the extensive terminological debate on the use of the labels “extreme right”, “far right” and “radical right” (Mudde 1996), I opted to identify parties, movements and political cultures with a clear reference to an extreme right ideology (Mudde 2000) as “extreme right”. I used the label “radical right” to refer to the right wing populist shift (Betz 1994, Kitschelt 1995) and to the exploitation of popular resentment typical of radical right populist parties and movements (Wodak 2015).

sic in its cultural, social and political practices. The consumption and production of extreme right music pass through leisure activities, style affirmations and aesthetic configurations. Leisure plays an important role when taking into account the vital function of extreme right music performances (festivals, exhibitions, concerts) for aggregation and recruitment purposes (Virkow, 2007). Style refers not only to music genres, but also, and much more so, to changes to the visual aspect of participants at music performances: clothes, hair, individual and collective behaviour (Flad 2011). Recent modifications to the style (and lifestyle) of extreme right activists have been the object of documented enquiries in different countries, Germany and Italy included (Schedler 2014 and 2016; Albanese, Bulli, Castelli and Froio 2014, Schlembach 2013,). Leisure, style and aesthetics have also been taken into consideration in recent studies that highlight the hybridization of traditional right-wing and left-wing cultural practices (Kølvraa and Forchtner 2019) and the strategic cultural appropriation of traditional left practices to extreme right cultural mobilization activities (Koch 2013).

3. Extreme right music: a definable phenomenon?

Extreme right rock can be considered an umbrella concept that includes all forms of pop music at the service of political movements of the extreme right (Botsch, Raabe and Schulze 2019, 9). As underlined by Raabe (2019, 19), right wing rock is more than “music with extreme right content”. It includes music bands and music labels, distribution and business, recording houses and clothing brands, as well as the organization of national and international festivals. This multifaceted aspect of the phenomenon of extreme right music production and consumption is common to all countries taken into account by national and international enquiries into the expanding relevance of the cultural dimension of extreme right mobilization.

Defining extreme right music is no easy task (Marchi 1997, 332). The complexity of the concept interlinks with the multifaceted phenomenon of the extreme right (Mudde 2000). Enquiries into the music production of white supremacist movements in the United States show different evolution patterns if compared to the developing nature of extreme right music in European countries (Windisch and Simi 2017). In a study dedicated to the German extreme right music scene, Langebach and Raabe (2013, 249) make clear that the term *Rechtsrock* does not refer to a particular kind (in terms of genre) of music. It refers much more to “lyrics, which are based on nationalism, racism, Antisemitism or on the glorification of National/Socialism or Fascism”. Despite its high level of generality, Langebach and Raabe’s definition has the advantage of highlighting

three main elements: 1) extreme right music – independent of its country-specific definition – is not encoded within one definite music genre (Brown 2004, 157); 2) the content of extreme right lyrics reproduces the multifaceted ideological variations of extreme right ideology; 3) extreme right music directly or indirectly always makes reference to a fascist past.

Most authors agree as regards identifying the origins of extreme right music being in the late 1970s, when the fusion of racist lyrics and punk rock was promoted by Ian Stuart Donaldson, the singer and leader of the band *Skrewdriver*. Ian Stuart Donaldson is still seen as a heroic figure in the extreme right cultural environment. The leader of *Skrewdriver* is celebrated as the “architect” of a network of musicians sharing a common platform for the organization of activities and the production of extreme right music (Marchi 1997, 333). The cultural and political activities of *Skrewdriver* soon led to the creation of an influential network – *Blood & Honour* (founded in 1987) – which rapidly extended its influence at the international level as one of the first and most successful neo-Nazi promotion services. Initially founded as an association for music activities and as a publication for facilitating the networking of extreme right members and sympathizers, B&H soon revealed its more ambitious political aims. This combination of cultural, political and economic incentives to commitment in the extreme right milieu soon proved very successful.

The activities of B&H continued after the death of Ian Stuart Donaldson, facilitated by the opportunities offered by technological innovations and the increasingly evident digitization of extreme right activities online (Caiani and Parenti 2013). Research on the early development of extreme right music also emphasizes the oppositional nature of the new phenomenon. The birth of extreme right rock happened within the skinhead culture, which started developing in working class areas of England in the late 1960s (Pollard, 2016), without any precise political connotations. The original “rebel” character of the initial skinhead movement was reinterpreted by the *Skrewdriver* experience to move in the direction of a nationalistic and racist turn that openly celebrated National Socialism. As soon as cultural entrepreneurs like Ian Stuart Donaldson proved the existence of a political terrain of action for the new extreme right skinhead culture, the music scene was enriched with the creation of political/ cultural organizations. One of the most influential of these was “Rock against communism” (RAC). RAC directly opposed the “Rock against Racism” movement that had been developing within the skinhead original subculture since the late 1970s as a reaction to racist developments in its music scene (Funk Hennigs 1986). RAC included the organization of extreme right music festivals and networking activities for its members. The immediate success of concerts organized under the RAC label showed the existence of a fertile terrain for the

transformation of extreme right music into an economic business. The combination of cultural, political and economic incentives that emerged in the skinhead scene soon spread to other countries. With the help of the B&H platform, Ian Stuart Donaldson was able to establish contacts with other European countries. In particular, cooperation with the German label Rock O-Rama was crucial for the internationalization of the extreme right music scene and was the basis of its development into a profitable business (Flad 2006, 106). Since the early evolution described so far, extreme right music has become an institutionalized reality. As stated by Shekhovtsov (2013 291), “far right messages are even more explicit and unvarnished than those of more or less organized socio-political extreme-right groups”.

The next paragraphs will try to evaluate whether Shekhovtsov’s quote can be applied to the Italian and German extreme right music scenarios. The analysis will highlight the influence played *by* music within extreme right subcultures in Germany and Italy on one side, and the political investment *in* music by social and political entrepreneurs for socialization and recruitment purposes on the other. The diachronic reconstruction of the developments in the two countries will mainly rely on an investigation of the political variables that help to explain the role of extreme right parties and extreme right organizations over time in Germany and Italy. This analytical division is different from the common partition into decades usually adopted in the German (Flad 2002) and Italian (Marchi 1997, Di Giorgi 2008) literature on extreme right music. One methodological remark regarding secondary sources for the analysis of Italian music production is also necessary. While, in Germany, studies on extreme right music are an important part of the rich sociological and political literature on the German extreme right, in Italy, only a few scientific analyses – despite their political orientation (Marchi 1997) – focus on the rich Italian extreme right musical production. Most sources (Di Giorgi 2008, Di Giorgi and Ferrario 2010, Di Tullio, 2005) are enquiries and historical reconstructions conducted by insiders of the extreme right cultural and political scene.

4. The first wave (early 1970s – late 1980s)

As evidenced in the theoretical framework, extreme right music development is intrinsically linked with the structure of party systems, as well as with the emergence of new and oppositional subcultures. The first evidence of extreme right mobilization in the field of extreme right music in Europe started to appear in the 1970s, almost immediately after the 1968 movement. The most striking differences in the evolution of extreme right music between Germany and Italy are visible in the 1970s. In that period,

in Germany, the overwhelming visibility of the extreme left during the 1968 contestations went along with the subsequent process of electoral decline of the extreme right at the party level. In 1969, the NPD (National Democratic Party of Germany) enjoyed unprecedented success in parliamentary elections. With 4.6 per cent of the vote, the party had come close to the 5 per cent threshold that would have allowed the party to be represented in the Bundestag. After the banning of the extreme right party SRP (Socialist Reich Party) in 1952, the integration by mainstream parties of the issues presented by the NPD hampered the revitalization of the extreme right scene for at least a decade (Zimmermann 2003). In this context, the 1970s were marked in Germany by the hegemony of traditional parties. The residual space for the extreme-right subculture that had been developing until the banning of the SRP and which had started to re-emerge in tandem with the first signs of economic downturn and the initial investment in the issue of immigration, rapidly extinguished in both institutional and cultural terms. However, despite these unfavourable conditions, at the end of the 1970s the NPD seemed to recognize that a cultural revitalization could play a crucial role in the socialization of younger cohorts of sympathizers that had remained until that moment on the margins of NPD life (Farin and Flad 2011). It is in this context that the NPD made attempts to attract the attention of the potential segment of youth militants through the sponsorship of music bands like *Ragnaröck*, who started performing at the end of 1977. However, this cultural investment remained isolated and was soon bypassed by the skinhead cultural experience that would emerge in the following decade. In fact, the beginning of the 1980s was marked by the developing skinhead culture (Weiss, 2000 65). At the moment of its penetration into the German cultural (and only later political) scene, the skinhead movement had already lost the original traits that had marked its first development in Great Britain (Farin and Flad 2011, 12). The difference between the original skinheads and those that mobilized the cultural scene in Germany was also evident in the music they listened to: punk (Oi!) instead of Ska and Reggae; white music instead of the music of the Jamaican immigrants who had influenced the birth of the Skinhead culture in Great Britain in the late 1960s. Driven by their passion for football, leisure and music, German skinheads initially met in stadiums and pubs and at concerts (Funk Hennigs 1995, 88). The first skinhead groups listened to English skinhead music or the first German punk rock, whose main content dealt with everyday frustrations, rising unemployment, the rejection of bourgeois society and hatred of the police and other institutions (Dornbusch-Raabe 2002, 26). Despite the fact that German punk at the beginning of the 1980s had a leftist orientation, developments on the right soon emerged. Bands like the well-known *Böhse Onkelz* formed and influenced the extreme right music scene with explicit xenophobic content until their official

abandoning of the extreme right environment in the late 1980s. *Böhse Onkelz's* refusal to be officially associated with the NPD or other extreme right parties reflected the reluctance of punk and skin bands to be associated with the extreme right at the party level. The lyrics of the songs also reflected their cultural and political distrust in the organized extreme right (Flad 2002). At the beginning of the 1980s, skinhead culture also made its way in the GDR through informal groups (Dornbusch and Raabe 2007, 10) which tried to escape State repression through low aesthetisation, but high levels of group discipline (Dornbusch and Raabe 2002, 32). Despite the organizational difficulties due to State repression in the GDR, it is important to outline the persistence of this subcultural scene and its part in the developments that would happen after the crucial events of reunification.

The 1970s and '80s in Italy were marked by a completely different situation. It is possible to summarize these distinctions into three main phenomena: the first one is the influence of the extreme right party MSI (Movimento Sociale Italiano) on the cultural developments of the extreme right; the second one is the attempt of the MSI to strictly control the cultural manifestations of its youth sector; the third one deals with the content of the lyrics and their political and symbolic meaning. The dominant role of the MSI in the history of Italian neo-Fascism determined not only the mechanics of the Italian party system. It also influenced the cultural environment of the extreme right, particularly concerning the role of younger cohorts of members and sympathizers. Since the first years of the MSI, younger Italian neo-fascists were very active not only within the organization, but also on the cultural level (Baldoni 2009, 43). However, the broad autonomy left to the youth organization in the party statute only rarely translated into an autonomy of action. The feeling of ghettoization and auto-ghettoization (Germinario 1999, 71) of the political culture of the extreme right after the end of the Second World War affected the younger generation differently when compared to the nostalgic feelings of the older generation. Both sentiments were reflected in the extreme right music scene that started to develop in the 1970s. The late 1960s were characterized by the willingness of young members of the extreme right not to leave the phenomenon of the 1968 protests to the left (Mammone 2008, 214). During the well-known events of Valle Giulia (Panvini, 2009, 30-34), the party cadre of the MSI repudiated the activism of extreme right university students. The events of 1968 determined a deep fracture between younger militants and party leaders that characterized the later developments of the extreme right cultural scene. The dramatic events of the 1970s – marked by the radicalization of political activities and growing political violence – went along with a double process within younger cohorts of the Italian extreme right. Next to the passage to extra-parliamentary (and often violent) activities of extreme

right militants, inside the MSI the cultural revolution of the Nouvelle Droite started to gain in importance. The deep rethinking of the origins of the extreme right and of Neofascism were accompanied by an unprecedented emphasis on new issues, including environmentalism, the role of women in society and the very understanding of the concept of “community” (Tarchi 2010). These tendencies were expressed in publications like “La Voce della fogna” (*The voice of the sewer*), founded in 1974, where a regular “pop” column described and commented on the rock production of the 1960s and ’70s (Marchi 1997, 45-58). The cultural revolution of the ND went hand in hand with requests for new forms of expression, in which music played a major role. The setting where the new issues promoted by the ND were discussed within an innovative political and cultural framework was the Hobbit Camps. The Hobbit Camps (1977, 1978 and 1980) were cultural festivals organized by younger MSI members who intended to promote a metapolitical understanding of the ND. Hosted in a rural environment, the festivals organized public debates on issues promoted by the ND. Music bands that would mark the beginnings of the so-called “musica alternativa” (alternative music) (Di Giorgi and Ferrario, 2010 37) not only animated the activities of the Hobbit Camps, but also testified to the new general cultural expression that extreme right youth aimed to achieve. The announcement of the first Hobbit camp in “Voce della Fogna” made clear how music represented a constitutive element of cultural events (Tarchi 2010).

According to Di Giorgi and Ferrario (2010, 37), elements common to alternative music were the internal coherence of the contents of songs, their non-commercial character, and their duration over time. Music bands such as *La Compagnia dell’Anello* (*The Company of the Ring*, a clear reference to the Tolkien saga), *Amici del Vento* belonging to the folk genre, *Janus* – representing the forerunner of the new rock penetration of the extreme right scene that would develop in the 1980s and ’90s – and songwriters such as Massimo Morsello started to perform on the occasions of the Hobbit Camps. They described the “rage of those years, the ideal roots, the feelings, the problems and emotions of everyday life ... no longer the songs of the Ventennio, but something new and understandable to the contemporary era” (ibid.). Regarding the issues contained in the lyrics, direct references to fascist and Nazi regimes were sporadic. Myths of the “fatherland, the *Blut und Boden*, elitism, the betrayals of the masses and the “few but pure”” (Marchi 1997, 61) were instead represented.

Different from the German context, the evolution of extreme right music in Italy was not primarily affected by cultural phenomena such as the irruption of new cultural lifestyles, like that of the skinheads into the cultural “status quo”. On the contrary, the influence of the political doctrine of the ND was facilitated by the existence of an organized extreme right political and party scene. Italy, where pre-existing attempts to lib-

erate extreme right music from the nostalgia of the Fascist regime had already occurred, was only partially and later influenced by the birth of the Rock Against Communism circuit that offered the possibility of internationalization in many other European countries. Some evolution towards the Oi! and punk genres took place during the 1980s, when groups like *Intolleranza (Intolerance)*, *Rommel Skins* and *Settimo Sigillo (Seventh Seal)* got closer to the extreme right bands circulating in Europe, not only from the point of view of the music genre, but also with regard to the issues contained in the lyrics. The prevailing climate of political retreat following the 1970s, characterized by the escalation of political violence, is reflected in some of the lyrics of the bands of the late 1980s. During the 1980s, despite the rising quality of extreme right music production, the circulation of alternative music decreased. The free radio stations (Di Giorgi Ferrario 2010, 44), self-managed broadcasters that started to be founded in different Italian cities for the exchange of ideas, cassettes and innovative cultural projects, were closed down during the 1980s, as well as cultural fanzines that had always been looked at with suspicion by the MSI.

The first wave of expansion of extreme right music evidences the greater influence of cultural developments in Germany, when compared to the Italian situation. In Italy, the effects of the early developments of the organized extreme right were reflected both in the attempt of the MSI to control the cultural expression of the younger cohorts of party members and in the cultural rebellion of the extreme right militants who had not been socialized during the fascist regime. The Italian extreme right music scene has been marked for two decades by these tensions that coexisted with a musical production influenced by nostalgic content typical of a political subculture perceiving itself as constrained in a ghetto.

5. The second wave (1990s to 2000s)

While the first wave is characterized by deep differences between the German and Italian contexts, the early 1990s show growing similarities in the evolution of the extreme right music scenes in the two countries. This realignment was determined by political events that profoundly influenced the German and Italian contexts. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the process of reunification created an opportunity for the evolution of the German extreme right in its organization at the party level and in further structuring of the cultural and music scene. At the party level, the domination of the extreme right by the NPD was challenged by parties founded in the late 1980s and early '90s (die Republikaner, Deutsche Volks-Union), which started to mobilize on issues

typical of other radical right populist parties in Europe. Migration and law and order were the main themes of a new form of radicalization, which soon transferred from the political level to the society. The same issues started to be represented in the extreme right music scene, albeit in a different frame and autonomously via the evolution of the party-based extreme right. The fall of the Berlin Wall also had major effects on extreme right music for another reason: it created opportunities for Eastern and Western political and cultural subcultures to meet, with the consequent opening up of a much broader market for the extreme right music scene. In the uncertain conditions following the November 1989 events, the State organs of the GDR no longer monitored the extreme right subcultural scene, which consequently profited from the free space left to it to establish contacts with its Western counterparts. On the eve of 1990, about 20 extreme right music bands existed in Germany, and about the same number of specialized fanzines organized around national and international platforms such as *Rock O' Rama*. In the early 1990s the number of bands had grown, and the numbers of albums and concerts doubled from 1995 to 1996 (Dornbusch and Raabe 2002, 36). The consistency of this growth must not be seen only in terms of numbers. The intensification of violence and the transformation in the lyrics of extreme right bands centred more and more on recurrent images of an enemy (Farin and Flad 2011), provoking increasing hostility towards migrants, which was reflected in xenophobic attacks in Hoyerswerda in 1991 and Rostock in 1992. The neo-Nazi firebomb attack in Mölln (1992) – where three Turkish citizens were killed – was a turning point in this escalation of violence. In the following years, at least 12 extreme right groups were banned and more than 90 labels and publications indexed (Farin and Flad 2011). In this context of legal repression, youth organizations – among them music bands – took on a growing role in the propagation of extreme right political culture. The resistance to censorship was expressed on the one side through the lyrics of the bands, on the other through the organization of the market that pushed sympathizers to buy albums before they were indexed. However, as reported by Dyck (2016, 44), albums that appeared on the lists of banned bands became more desirable than others. The traditional parties vainly tried to reorganize their youth organizations – like the NPD did with the *Junge Nationaldemokraten* (JN). However, neo-Nazi skin bands were able to more efficiently control the socialization of young extreme right sympathizers, particularly in the Eastern regions. The international network of B&H was of great help in the management of this growing informal organization of the extreme right. The extreme right music landscape expanded its frontiers in terms of genres and lifestyle. Regarding the first aspect, numerous bands were founded, rapidly reaching high levels of notoriety: after *Böhse Onkelz*, the most famous bands of the 1990s – *Landser*, *Noie Werte*, *Storkraft* – evidenced the ex-

istence of rich and fragmented extreme right music that varied in terms of genres and issues. Flad (2002) divides the content of band lyrics into “love” and “hate” references. Germany, the German flag, alcohol, Rudolf Hess, Ian Stuart Donaldson, the Wikings and the Northern divinities belonged to the first group, while migrants, Jews, political opponents and the police belonged to the second.

In Italy, the passage from the First to the Second Republic in the 1990s brought about the transformation (1995) of the MSI into Alleanza Nazionale (AN), and subsequent fragmentation of the organized extreme right (Tarchi 1997). The development of the extreme right signified the end of Italian neo-fascism under the sign of the MSI and opened up a new political era. In particular, at the Congress of Fiuggi, MSI party delegates decided to give birth to Alleanza Nazionale. The decision was not agreed by all delegates and several subsequent scissions occurred. In 1997, the party Forza Nuova was created from a scission of Movimento Sociale Fiamma Tricolore, one of the main fractions that had not followed the creation of Alleanza Nazionale. The founders were Roberto Fiore and Massimo Morsello (Rao 2006). The biographies of Fiore and Morsello evidence the linkage between political and cultural developments on the Italian extreme right. Roberto Fiore and Massimo Morsello were among the founders of Terza Posizione, an extreme right organization established in Rome in 1978. In 1980, after the Bologna massacre of 2 August, they fled to Germany and later reached Great Britain, where they set up a business and lived without interruption for nearly 20 years (Baldoni 2009, 251). At the moment of his escape, Morsello had already started to perform and register music. He had played on the occasion of Hobbit Camp 2, and during his years of the exile he produced some of the most influential extreme right songs. The songs written and released by Morsello during his years spent in London count as a perfect example of the typical content of Italian alternative music: political commitment, the reflections of a generation socialized in an era of political fight, violence and radicalization. Next to this ideological continuity, during the 1990s, a new political era of extreme right music started to develop. Beside the traditional sounds of “musica alternativa”, the growing influence of Ska-punk and Oi! was expressed not only in musical transformations, but also in the creation of new organizational structures. The group Veneto Fronte Skinhead was founded in 1986 and the following year took charge of *Blood & Honour Italy* (Dyck 2016, 74). Many other smaller organizations were founded in this period. In terms of bands and magazines being founded, concert organization and label structuring, the early 1990s was a period when Italy reached a stage of development in its extreme right music scene comparable with other European countries (Marchi 1997, 211). Compared to the German situation, in Italy the effect of state repression was much more limited. The police repression operation known as

“Operazione Runa” was carried out in 1993 to apply the Mancino Law and resulted in the arrest of 66 militants from various groups and the closure of dozens of sections of extreme right groups (Bull 2005, 262, Marchi 1997, 230-231). However, different from Germany, state repression did not affect the music scene. On the contrary, as stated by Marchi (1997), the activities of the national revolutionary right would spread in the following decade precisely via the music scene. Organizational developments also occurred at the organizational-economic level: three main Italian labels promoting and producing extreme right music were founded during the 1990s: *Tuono Records* was established in 1993 in the area of the Veneto Fronte Skinhead; *Rupe Tarpea* operated around Rome and published the newsletter “Nonconforme”; and the label *Assalto Sonoro* was based in Milan and acted as the operations base for the *Hammerskin* network. Finally, the cultural association *Lorien* was founded in 1997 as the historical archives of Italian alternative music with political support from Mirko Tremaglia, an influential representative of the former MSI who joined the Alleanza Nazionale in 1995. The website of the association is an important source of information about the variety of extreme right music production in Italy and the intensity of concert organization. By analyzing the production of the most influential labels, it is possible to identify the evolution of the music genres of the extreme right music scene in Italy. While *Lorien* produces most of the traditional alternative music (*Compagnia dell’Anello*, *Amici del Vento*), *Tuono Records* produces bands like *Gesta Bellica*, *Legittima Offesa*, *Peggior Amico* and *ADL 122* (named after the 122/1993 Mancino Law) that belong to the Rock Against Communism skin tradition. *Rupe Tarpea* produces *Intolleranza*, *Delenda Carthago*, *Skoll* and *ZetaZero Alfa*, which belong to the “Rock identitario” genre that started to develop at the beginning of the 2000s.

6. Current developments

As analyzed in the previous two sections, the first wave evidences an evolution pattern that differentiates the German and Italian contexts from many different perspectives, including the role of the party-based extreme right, the development of youth subcultures and the prevailing national or international influence on the extreme right music scene. All these differences were reflected in the lyrics of the bands, but mainly centred on issues of skin subculture in Germany and the experiences of extreme right youth political engagement in Italy. The second wave presents a certain homogenization of the two scenes, facilitated by the growing influence of skin culture in Italy which saw a reduction in party influence, differentiation in the music genres adopted, and the

growing influence of lyrics that started to abandon the issues of political engagement of the 1970s and '80s in favour of a realignment with German and international "standards" that primarily focused on the rejection of immigration, xenophobia, deep anti-institutional stances and populism (Marchi 1997, 202-203).

This homogenization trend has reached its apex in the current phase. Despite relevant differences between Germany and Italy that will be highlighted below, three main phenomena help to explain the reduction in differences between the two contexts: 1) a definitive detachment from the influence of the party-based extreme right; 2) the growing relevance of a lifestyle that presents elements of hybridization to include left wing political cultures; 3) the further internationalization of the extreme right music scene facilitated on the one side by the developing of digital networks on the Internet and social media and on the other by face-to-face socialization during concerts.

In Germany, these three dimensions are developing simultaneously, although the detachment from party organizations is not a novelty. Data presented in the 2018 Verfassungsschutz Bericht (BMI 2018) – a yearly monitoring report from the Interior Ministry on menaces to the German democratic order – show an increasing mobilization of the extreme right in its musical landscape. The report monitored the activities of 95 extreme right bands, the organization of 60 big concerts, and other contextual activities in the field of extreme right music. The biggest international events normally take place in the Eastern *Länder* of Saxony and Thuringia, which are also strongholds of the radical right populist party the AfD (Alternative for Germany), and these are attended by numerous participants, ranging from 800 to 1,300 (BMI 2018, 64). Activities carried out during these festivals are not limited to concerts. Political speeches by the organized extreme right – as in the case of the Ostritz (in Saxony) festival – evidence the interest of political parties (in this case the NPD) in the cultural coverage of the extreme right political offer. Other events, like the well-known festival of Themar in Thuringia ("Rock für Identität") – 6,000 participants in the 2017 event, coming from Germany, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary (BMI 2017 64) – mainly focus on music and concerts. Next to the big events, smaller happenings, like the so-called *Liederabende* (songs evenings) have become particularly popular in recent years (Raabe 2019, 34). The *Liederabende* are presented as political meetings, so as to obtain authorization under the law on free assembly. The highest emotional peaks reached during international festivals coexist with the more intimate atmosphere of these musical meetings, where the lyrics of the bands cover traditional content about the Nazi past (ibid.). The use of traditional nationalist songs following the folk music genre is typical of more circumstanced events like the PEGIDA marches, where gatherings of participants are accompanied by the singing of popular traditional chants (Bulli 2017).

Issues like veganism, protection of the environment and animal rights are instead to be found in “unexpected” music genres, such as nationalistic hard-core (Raabe 2019, 28).

The internationalization of extreme right music and its hybridization through issues that have only recently been included in the songs repertoire should not hide the development of other forms of music production that have started to achieve importance and a wider audience amongst the general public. The public and commercial success of rock bands like *Frei.Wild* –from South-Tirol but performing in German – evidences the existence of immense potential between extremism and right wing populism (Bruns, Strobl 2015). With their texts containing references to immigration, love of the Heimat, explicit allusions to the colour of the skin of members of the German football team, *Frei.Wild* seems to fill a gap between extreme right Rechtsrock and the successful nationalist “Identitätsrock” that had been left available since the abandoning of the *Böhse Onkelz* of the extreme right scene and its successful passage to the commercial stage. The band declares itself apolitical, and it denounces the media for being responsible for the distortion of its public image, all typical elements of right wing populist rhetoric.

Developments towards the growing importance of “rock identitario” are also taking place in Italy. Although monitored less, big extreme right music festivals regularly take place in Italian cities. The most important novelty of the last decade is, however, represented by new forms of political mobilization on the extreme right introduced by the political activities of CasaPound Italia (CPI), an organization that openly refers to historical fascism (Froio, Castelli Gattinara, Bulli, Albanese 2020). The founding circumstances of CPI (2008) evidence the detachment from the party-based extreme right by a group of young members of Movimento Sociale – Fiamma Tricolore, which had started to be active in the city of Rome with practices belonging to the extreme left repertoire, notably squatting in apartments. A prominent figure in this group of people, and later leader of CPI, was Gianluca Inannone, frontman of *ZetaZero Alfa*, which is currently one of the most important rock bands of the so-called “rock identitario”. The rich literature on CPI evidences the role played by music in the cultural offering of CPI, as well as its origins (Di Nunzio and Toscano 2011, Rosati 2018). Inannone himself describes the birth of CasaPound Italia as the creation of a community around the activities of a pub, the militant commitment of a group of people around it and the founding of the ZZA (Inannone quoted in Caldiron 2013, 128). In an insider’s representation of the band, the circumstances of the creation of the band evidence the linkage between politics, aesthetics and lifestyle – including a rhetoric and the practice of violence (Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2014) mentioned in the opening section of the paper. The band’s ability to gain access to a wide circuit merchandising and diffusing symbols of political opposition

and resistance granted ZZA privileged contact with youth, as testified by the growing attendance of young people at the band's concerts and subsequent recruitment to the youth organization of CPI, Blocco Studentesco. Young members of CPI describe their participation in ZZA concerts as an overwhelming passion (Albanese et al. 2014). The settings of the concerts also play a role in the recruitment ability of the band. Besides the typical stages of extreme right concerts, ZZA performed in squatting areas, like the well-known Area 19, thus reinforcing the hybridization of symbolic codes of behaviour typical of CPI (Koch 2013). On the occasion of festivals, ZZA performs with other bands of the identitarian scene. Moreover, in order to grant the greatest access to extreme right music, CPI can count on its own online radio channel, "Radio Bandiera Nera" (RBN: *Black Flag radio*), created in 2007. Like the texts of the songs, issues of political commitment accompany criticism of globalization and descriptions of everyday life on the periphery typical of the first albums. Love, goliardic activities and violence are also included in a diverse repertoire that can satisfy the ideological and "pop" needs of extreme right sympathizers.

In Germany and Italy, the third wave of extreme music development shows comparable elements. "Cultural space winning", which is a typical achievement of rock music in times of cultural change, expands in the case of extreme right music to the frontiers of the diffusion of extreme right ideological content to a growing public. The current development of extreme right music in Germany and Italy points to a popularization of extreme right music within the extreme right subculture and – even if only to a limited extent so far – beyond it, as evidenced by the case of *Frei.Wild*. Despite different evolutionary patterns in Italy and Germany, the popularization of some extreme right music goes along with the popularization of populist rhetoric, which has resulted in a profound transformation of the language adopted and a deep rethinking of symbols and practices associated with its performance.

7. Conclusion

In Europe, academic attention to music within the extreme right environment started to develop in the late 1990s. Despite this late scientific reflection, the functions of extreme right music – recruiting new members; issue-framing in the field of extreme right ideology; fundraising and building financial resources (Corte and Edwards 2008, 5) – have been displaying their effects since the late 1960s.

A comparative assessment of the extreme right music scene in Germany and Italy was conducted through a diachronic analysis of the evolution stages of extreme right

music in both countries, starting from the post-Second World War restructuring of the respective party systems. Taken one by one and evaluated in terms of their mutual correlation, the three phases display the relevance of variables related to: the *construction of collective identities*, the *symbolic representation of new communities*, and the *strategic use of emotions* by extreme right and populist radical right political entrepreneurs. In being able to influence the development of new cultural collective identities – especially in times of deep political change – extreme right music constituted both the value-background for old extreme right members and the ideological soundtrack for the political engagement of new sympathizers. The “musical incentives” to this political commitment varied over time and from country to country, mainly depending on the level of structuring of the organized extreme right.

The analysis conducted in this paper highlights three main differences between the two countries. The first element of differentiation deals with the characteristics of party systems and the political space for extreme right parties in Italy and Germany. If in Italy the MSI had constant influence on the cultural expressions of the extreme right youth sector, in Germany the banning of the extreme right party the SRP in the early 1950s was the first step in persistent institutional monitoring of extreme right organizations. The initial constitutional and party system setting played a considerable role in the first phase of evolution, determining initially unfavourable conditions for the development of “domestic” extreme right music in Germany, which – meanwhile – was developed in Italy with a combination of nostalgia for the past and cultural novelty. Here, the influence of the “internal” doctrine of the Nouvelle Droite within the extreme right milieu had a visible impact on extreme right youth and on their cultural expression – music included.

The second element of differentiation deals with the political systems’ “acceptance” of extreme right cultural manifestations in the two countries. In Italy, despite the deep reluctance of the MSI’s party leadership, music was acknowledged as one of the means of cultural expression of the younger cohorts of MSI members (Tarchi 2010, Antonucci 2011). On the other side, in Germany, the evolution of the extreme right music scene was much more influenced by international variables, like the impact of English subculture (Dornbusch and Raabe 2004). It is particularly during this second phase that the variables dealing with the influence of music in the creation of new cultural collectivities display their crucial role. In Germany, these manifestations coincided with the influence of the skinhead movement in a prevailing international context. In Italy, the modifications to the party system that occurred in the early 1990s also influenced the extreme right. The transformation of the MSI into Alleanza Nazionale left space open

both for the restructuring of the party system on the extreme right, and for musical expression that started to show elements of internationalization, market orientation and influence by the skin culture that had been long developing in the German context.

The third difference has to do with the recent transformations of the populist radical right in the two countries. In Italy, the affirmation of the so-called Rock Identitario came as a reaction to a sclerotized scenario of the parties of the extreme right, particularly evident starting from the early 2000s. In Germany, cultural bridges are more visible than in the past between the political and cultural dimensions of the extreme right (Grabow 2016). Facilitating factors for a sort of “realignment” to comparable standards in both countries are elements related to the phenomenon of mainstreaming of the extreme right, as well as the growing impact of ideological hybridization and symbolic appropriation by extreme right music of cultural repertoires once unfamiliar to their political culture.

Despite these major differences, the analysis evidences the role of music within a broad repertoire of collective action (Della Porta, Caiani, Wagemann 2012) in the extreme right environment. The effects of music mobilization responded in the three outlined phases to differentiated needs of affirmation of the extreme right in its cultural expression. At the same time, the structuring of a stable and internationalized extreme music scene in the two countries opened up new opportunities for further development of the extreme right. These developments occurred within the extreme right at the organization level, and in its cultural expression. The impact of extreme right music is therefore evident in the ideological dimensions of communication, mobilization and recruitment. At the end of the 1990s, Marchi (1997, 336) raised a crucial methodological question regarding the necessary elements to define extreme right music actors. Should these elements emphasize stylistic or political components? The comparative analysis carried out in this paper demonstrates that an interplay of political and cultural variables has been adopted since the early development of extreme right music in Germany and Italy – although with different procedures – and it is still a winning formula for a political and cultural offering that combines political commitment, aesthetics and cultural belonging.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

VOICING CHANGE

The popular subject of protest music in revolutionary Cairo (2011–2013)

Valeria Dessi

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ABSTRACT: Since the outbreak of protests in January 2011, arts have been central to the ongoing Egyptian revolution. In this article, I focus on protest music in Cairo in between 2011 and 2013 as a way to capture a specific interplay of popular culture and political engagement. Through examples of popular protest music and chants, I unpack the cultural and political construction of *el sha'ab* (the people) as a process in flux throughout the ongoing protests. Performances of popular protest music and chants in the square voiced grievances and pride, built solidarity, and helped shape the ideal of a unified and leaderless collective “we” against the oppressive regime. Older and newly composed protest songs articulated a genealogy of the revolutionary popular subject that was at once cultural and political. The last section reflects on the post-2013 era, focusing on the different political genealogy deployed by the state to redirect the revolutionary “popular will” into an authoritarian project.

KEYWORDS: Egypt, Populism, Popular Music, Protest, Revolution

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1. Introduction: a silent prelude

When the curfew was suddenly imposed all over Egypt in mid-August 2013 – a consequence of the reestablishment of emergency law after the horrific, bloody explosion of state violence against the pro-Morsy protesters camped in Rabea'a Square, a junction in Nasr City, eastern Cairo – it came with an eerie silence. I was in a café in my neighborhood of central Cairo when the curfew was announced. The radio was turned off, abruptly cutting off the smooth voice of Umm Kulthum (1898–1975), a mega-diva of Egyptian popular song. I walked home, the sound of my footsteps punctuating the buzz leaking from the air-conditioning units of the residential buildings around me in a rhythmic flow that was unusual insofar as I could hear distinctly. There was no traffic noise; for the first time since the beginning of my fieldwork on young women activists in Cairo eight months before, I saw hardly any cars or people. Was this the end of the collective protests and chants? The subsequent nights, uncannily dark and quiet after the rushed mornings of normalized life, brought a distant answer. A few times I heard a rhythmic banging: someone joining Masmou3 (Abdalla 2013), the leftist initiative that invited us to keep alive the protest against all authoritarianisms by banging on cooking pots at night from inside the homes we had all been caged in. As chants and collective protests were suspended or crushed and the violent polarization between pro- and anti-Morsy protesters dramatically intensified, these sparse sounds broke for a few moments into the pause that was a prelude to the celebratory tunes of a new, and yet familiar, militarist regime.

2. "I am the people, in march, and I know my way"¹

The collective subject: music and politics

It is not sounds but their chilling forced absence at a time of halted protests that offers an opening into the intimate connection between music and popular protest in Egypt since the popular upheavals of 2011. Between 2011 and 2013, music, chants, and performances were central to the ongoing public revolutionary protests in the city of Cairo.²

¹ The title quotes in translation the first line of the song *Ana al-sha'ab* ("I am the people") written by vernacular poet Fouad Negm and recorded by musician Sheikh Imam in 1985: *Ana al-sha'ab mashy we 'arif tariqi*.

² Looking at the revolution as a critical shift in social and political reproduction, I am aware of the difficulty of defining the Egyptian revolution as such. Nine years on, the current situation of full authoritarian

Anthropologists have documented how recent protest vocal and music performances can address oppressive power relations and define subjectivities (Manabe 2015, 2017, 2019; Sonevytsky 2016; Kunreuther 2014, 2018) looking at "the voice" beyond the political metaphor of participation and representation to include sounds, noise, silence, embodiments, materiality, affects (Weidman 2014; Kunreuther 2018). In this article I explore the sound of the popular Egyptian protests in between 2011 and 2013 - songs, chants, embodiments - to investigate affectively the cultural and political dimensions of the "voice" of "the people" (*al-sha'ab*) and its will (*iradat al-sha'ab*) during times of social and political unrest. The people's will was invoked in the synchronized chants of the protesting leaderless collective (Gerbaudo 2012; Chalcraft 2016). It was also called in by El Sisi to depose Morsy on the 3rd July 2013, and to announce his 2014 candidacy.

This preeminency of the popular will, an assumption ambiguously shared by democracy, populism, and nationalism alike (Laclau 2005), highlights the opacity of the "popular" in the production of cultural and political subjectivities. In Arabic, *sha'abi* means "being of the people", but also folkloric, populist, and enjoying great popularity. These semantic differences rest upon an affective interpretation of popular aesthetics as both representative of the Egyptian lower-class authenticity (*asala*), and rejected by elites and state institutions for its anti-modernity and vulgarity (Mitchell 1991; Armbrust 1996; Jacobs 2011). *Sha'abi* musicians in the last century have exploited this ambivalent aesthetic discourse (Armbrust 1992, 1996) to produce music on everyday life as a tool of political dissent (Grippio 2006).

Popular protests between 2011 and 2013 affectively reactivated a popular aesthetics of anti-regime dissent through protest songs and performances whose embodiments, feelings, symbols and materialities were integral to the political and cultural subjectification of "the people" - highlighting how the "constitutive role of aesthetics in politics" (Mazzarella 2019, 51), which populism as a political-cultural style underlines (Ostiguy 2017), is affective. The blurring of the boundaries between art and politics in between 2011 and 2013 (Mehrez 2012; El Hamamsy and Soliman 2013, 157; Tripp 2013a, 2013b; Valassopoulos and Mostafa 2014; LeVine and Reynolds 2016) is also a blurring between unmediated and mediated political and cultural experiences. The popular upheavals,

restoration is the exact opposite of the popular demands for social justice, freedom, and dignity that overthrew Mubarak in 2011. In all of the accounts I collected from the activists I met during my fieldwork, January 2011 was uncontested as "the revolution" because (albeit for too brief a time) it had changed the ways of producing gender, politics, and national identity. Its affective persistence – political, cultural, and personal – endures, despite the absence of the substantial structural change implied by "revolution." For these reasons, I use the term "revolution" in this article to maintain the affective resonance of January 2011, rather than to denote the factual sociopolitical outcome of the protests. outcome of the protests.

with its sounds, music and voices, offered intense corporeal, unmediated experiences of the collective body as a political subject - a key characteristic of populism, again (Ostiguy 2017; Mazzarella 2019).

I argue that in between January 2011 and the rise of El Sisi, protest music, chants, sounds foregrounded the affective labor invested in the already-existing, and at times oblique, enmeshment of cultural and political labor. During this time of upheaval, popular music helped coalescing an affective repository of emotional and bodily experiences generated around the experiences and relations with other protesters, sites, objects - activating what Mazzarella (2019), in discussing populist mobilization, calls archives: "the potentialities embedded in shared histories, memories, and forms of life" (Mazzarella 2019: 53) - which vivified a particular type of political and cultural subjectivity: *el sha'ab* ("the people"). I focus on the "sound" of popular subjectification during the unrest in three affective aspects: as an affective training towards a collective body; as transgressions and familiarity; as a craft of popular genealogies. My analysis follows anthropologists working on the affective production of political subjectivities at the intersection of embodiments, senses, spaces, institutions, discourses (Mazzarella 2015, 2019; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Samet 2019), as well as on protests, affects, and sound in different contemporary contexts (Manabe 2015, 2017, 2019; Sonevsky 2016; Kunreuther 2014, 2018).

These reflections are based on ethnographic observations of practices of protest, which I joined mostly in Tahrir Square in between late November 2012 and July 2013. Although my research in Cairo focused on an affective analysis of gender politics, the nation-state, and secular feminist and women's rights' strategies - for which I conducted in-depth, unstructured interviews with young feminist and rights' activists, attended events and protests, did digital ethnography - I became increasingly fascinated and affected by the sound of protests, recording my observations on protest songs in parallel to my fieldwork. As the field violently deteriorated, the "remote ethnography" ambivalently enabled by digital media (Postill 2017) led me as well as my collaborators and acquaintances to rely on digital material to join the protests: songs, once again, filled any spatial distance with the immediacy enabled ambivalently by digital media (Postill 2017). To reflect this shift in the field, I have examined about 50 videos on popular protest music uploaded on YouTube by media groups, individuals, and artists in between 2011 and 2013, and of 2013 songs celebrating El Sisi, focusing on their patterns of affective intensity and of popular recognition. I have also incorporated comments about protests and music made by a few of my collaborators during extended interviews, to offer reflexive insights about the affective relationships between popular protest music and political subjectification.

The collective subject: singing grievances and joys

To understand the affective intensity of popular protest music in the context of the ongoing revolutionary protests and of its popular subject, I place the 2011 protests and their demands in the context of grievances and constraints. The uprising began on January 25, National Police Day. The choice of day was not accidental. It worked on popular sentiment about abuses perpetrated for decades by members of the security forces – the police and army – in the everyday lives of ordinary citizens. The case of Khaled Said, a young Alexandrian tortured to death by police officers in June 2010, had coalesced a diffuse sentiment against wrongdoing a few months before the beginning of the revolts. Furthermore, young activists had been creating networks of mobilization since the early 2000s (Gunning and Baron 2013), bringing groups together to protest against social injustice and oppression. As noted by Chalcraft (2016), the long-standing work of a number of groups severely affected by the Mubarak regime – the political Islamist group the Muslim Brotherhood, Copts, the Ultras, groups of disenfranchised youth and the urban poor, workers' associations, women's and feminist groups, together with groups and organizations in the making – all converged into an active participation in the protests, without designating a leader since the leader were the people themselves.

Protest music during this period helped reshaping the people affectively: not only as a political subject of grievance, as in the Chilean double populism (Samet 2019), but also, at least until 2013, as a subject of enjoyment against the "otherness" of the state, which had inflicted violence and controlled enjoyment for decades. Protest showed that "the people" was inflamed by individual and social grievances, and by pride and love for its national heritage. But if at first it was a subject injured by Mubarak's crony regime, while proudly protesting, in 2012 it sided against the Muslim Brotherhood and its elected representative, President Morsy. The active expression of simultaneous pain and joy was a central feature of national belonging during the revolutionary struggle, as musical performances made clear, and was instrumental to the later counterrevolutionary strategies.

The collective subject: voice, body, spaces

To express collectively its grievances and pride, a collective subject needs to feel and move as one. In Tahrir Square – one of the key sites of the protests in Cairo, although not the only one – the chant I heard most often, from the first protests I attended in November 2012 onward, made this clear for me. It was *As-sha'b yurid isqat an-nizzam!*: "the people want the fall of the regime!" Although it was not sufficiently structured to become

ideological, its catchiness and simplicity offered an affective device that allowed people to navigate everyday life in a particular historical moment through the categories it expressed: *el sha'ab* against the regime. The protesters chanting and identifying themselves as the people formed a diverse multitude, from children to old men and women, from deprived urban youth to famous intellectuals and the sellers of *V for Vendetta* masks. The ordinary, "authentic" nuances of "popular" (*sha'abi*) were displayed without classist inflections.

When the first anti-Morsy protests started to be held on Fridays in November 2013, using a similar format and the best-known chants from the 18 days of January 2011, such as the very simple *irhal* ("leave"), the people in the square were expressing the wounded popular subject as representative of "true Egyptianness" against the foreignness of the Muslim Brotherhood, just as they had posited themselves as the people against Mubarak the year before: this time, the Islamists were not welcomed as protesters. The power of the collective voice remained mesmerizing. There were several moments of fatigue and rage in 2012 and 2013; music was difficult to hear, for instance, in several parts of Tahrir square, not least because moving was discouraged by the presence of paid thugs (*belt-ageyya*) who could suddenly initiate violence. Yet, when someone started a known chant, even if it was repetitive, or if they began to chant following a known rhythmic pattern, it was impossible not to follow along and feel joy in the unity. Even the choice to call one short-lived 2013 initiative *Masmou3*, meaning "heard/listened to," implicitly assumed the strategic role of the angry, protesting collective sound – even if it was pure wordless noise – in the process of political subjectification: the process of becoming one body of sound in a dense crowd, learning, rehearsing, proposing musical performances, improvising with material constraints.

Seeing group singing and performing as a tactic (De Certeau 1988), beyond its content, placed it alongside more explicit tactics of resistance (such as forming human chains, distributing anti-teargas remedies, rescuing survivors of violence). It built a sense of unity, enjoyment, and solidarity among singers/protesters that was necessary to sustain the long-term struggle. As Abd El Hameed (2015) underlines in her study of the Al Ahly Ultras in Cairo, in this sense the voice is essential for identification with the group. For the Ultras, learning to sing in a synchronized manner is part of being a member of the community. Songs and chants, which are available online and on CD, create collective ties: "The fan learns how to fade into the group vocally. It is no longer his individual voice but rather the roar of the crowd" (Abd El Hameed 2015, 54). The sense of belonging overcomes the differences that may exist among Ultras such as class, age, or origin. Similarly, during the protests, the singers and chant leaders would change, and the practice

of collective voicing implied that chants were performed by a leaderless collective mass that was choosing its own choreography (Gerbaudo 2012).

As sound filled the protests, it accompanied each gesture: the clapping of hands, the movement of feet on the ground. When one entered the protests in Tahrir Square especially, this collective movement charged the spatial sense of organization: the individual level of choosing specific clothes (which ranged from ironic costumes to festive headscarves, from severe garments to military-inspired outfits), and the set-up of a museum of martyrs of the revolution and a stage for singers and speaker. The affective reappropriation of space as a protest site and shared place of joy and grievances led to its vernacular remapping. The sense of being part of a crowd, which one can experience when walking through Cairo, had expanded: it was no longer just the noisy city that gave meaning to the body, but the resonating, collective popular body now also gave meaning to the city, affectively redefining its political and social expansiveness. I still remember vividly the pavement trembling under the weight of the mass, the sound propagating its messages for a hundred meters, traveling outside of the square, transformed into ringtones, hummed in the streets. Whenever I was in a protest, surrounded by chants that I was invited to join, the impact of the mass of sound – the proximity of uncountable bodies moving together, their active movements, their heat, their volume and enthusiasm – was extremely touching.

This types of training happened in a less and less consistent manner as the months passed, and the rampant repression and political violence forced the protests increasingly to rely on known repertoires and improvisation, and to become more fragmented. Organization morphed into other shapes: a group of activists belonging to different initiatives decided to form emergency teams focused on square protests, named Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment. As the protest spaces continued to be filled with resonating bodies acting as one, particularly with shared chants and songs, terror was deployed institutionally. The visceral experience when musical, social, and political dimensions converged into a cohesive bodily and vocal expression (Turino 2008, 28–51; Manabe 2019) became much more frightening and deadly, further provoking the already enraged protesters to demand justice, but also disseminating mistrust. By breaking the unity among protesters and their collective body, the state and security apparatuses highlighted that the collective voice in the context of Egypt was embodied politics and culture in and of itself, intensely affective.

2. Power and "the people"

Between censorship and nationalism

The training of the collective body at the protests happened in the context of other complex cultural and political propaedeutic processes, which worked affectively around another collective body: nationalist unity and dissent. As the square was completely immersed in the sound of thousands of voices calling themselves one people, the nationalist unity was refracted in the Egyptian flags being sold and waved at different points, and in the many signs claiming a place in today's Egypt. The "popular" that emerged through the chants seemed to depict the authentic people versus the inauthentic regime. How has this been prepared?

The collective capacity to voice suffering and belonging simultaneously, especially through protest songs, assumes a different relevance when we think about the heavy policing, censorship, and cultural control that characterized Egypt under Mubarak. Political and cultural dissidents were forcibly discouraged; the government engaged with popular culture as a tool of the ideological apparatus. Institutional attacks against different genres and scenes painted as immoral or of low aesthetic quality, such as popular and "alternative" music, were deployed during the Mubarak era and continued under Morsy and El Sisi. When the protests broke out in 2011, singers close to the regime, such as Amr Mostafa, released songs in defense of Mubarak, going on TV to accuse demonstrators of espionage, immorality, and treachery. Accusations of immorality were regularly moved against survivors of political violence in between 2011 and 2013, as well as against opponents, from metal bands to the writer Ahmed Najji, to discourage and discredit political participation and divide protesters.

Transgressions opened other ways to feel the grieving and joyful popular body. Certain musical genres and performers had for some time already been responding to the concerns of the political hegemony and to injustice with bottom-up attempts at cultural transformation, particularly by adopting non-mainstream genres and various forms of group singing. Before the beginning of the 2011 protests, an initiative called the Choir Project focused on choral songwriting sessions for youth in Cairo as a subcultural vehicle through which they could establish their voice on personal and political topics. The plot of the independent movie *Microphone* (2010) by Ahmad Abdalla focused on the pre-revolutionary lively "alternative scene" of real-life rock musicians, including Massive Scar Era, one of the most famous Egyptian metal rock bands (LeVine 2008), as well as hip-hop artists, street artists, and skateboarders in Alexandria. The Egyptian band Eskenderella was founded in 2005 to revive the tradition of historical political songs. The band's

repertoire focused on Sheikh Imam and Ahmed Fouad Negm's songs, on the communist poets Fouad Haddad (1927–1985) and Salah Jaheen (1930–1986), and on original compositions by Haddad's son and grandson. Eskenderella's leader, Hazem Shaheen, released a solo album in 2009 celebrating new political songs. Such practices were propaedeutic to the mass protests in that they cultivated a challenge to dominant ideologies while forming their own repertoire and content as a way to flip the cultural game, already political, and struggling, before the revolution.

Music and transgressions

Once the protests exploded in January 2011 as a result of these processes, bringing up the sense of a popular collective unity defying the regime, protest music in the squares of Cairo in 2011 highlighted further transgressions that would be sanctioned by moral, social and political censorship. Music developed themes that were common to other contemporary ongoing protests (Anderson 2018; Manabe 2017). The slogans chanted rhythmically in Tahrir Square – especially “bread, freedom, social justice” (*'aish, horreya, 'adalah egtema'eyah*) and “the people want the fall of the regime” – focused on two main aspects: redistribution and social justice, and the right to free, direct expression of the popular will, which was antagonistic to the political regime. The specificity of Egypt developed from the convergence of these threads. The sound of the collective voice in chants and songs was both a weapon of resistance and an act of artistic and political affirmation as much as of subjectification, corporeality, affect.

“I played the drums like a man,” Nahla told me proudly and joyfully during a meeting in late 2012. She was a young, prominent feminist activist who would play giant drums at the marches in 2011 and 2012, and who helped founding Operation Anti-Harassment. Leading the protesters' voices and movements by beating the tempo of chants and slogans on a massive drum marked a momentous political, social, and cultural experience of collective and individual subjectification. For many like Nahla, this experience of collective belonging - whose voice was, at times, painfully gendered - was transformative, especially for young protesters who were receiving social approval for the first time. Nahla's comparison to manhood was not a rhetorical device. As other activists discussed with me, gender, age, class, and religious “transgressions” that would barely be tolerated in everyday life were often socially accepted at the protests in 2011. A construction of resistance, and of imagined political possibilities, could emerge in the chaos of the protests, even if only briefly. “I was staying in the same tent next to a Salafi man and a young liberal student, and we were singing, and the Salafi man was ok!” Aya,

another prominent young feminist, told me with joy and nostalgia at the beginning of my fieldwork, reflecting on the exceptionality of January 2011.

But in 2012 and 2013, the popular subject of protest music and chants was no longer so politically and socially transversal. It separated the opponents of the Islamist government from its minority of supporters, the subject of wrongdoings from the immoral perpetrators. The protests against Morsy, which had started as protests against constitutional reforms in November 2012, progressed into the anniversary of the 2011 revolution and throughout the spring with a strong anti-Muslim Brotherhood stance. Singing became a political statement against the conservative attitude. Maya, an older activist and educator I met at end of my fieldwork, explained to me that she carried a flag at the protests bearing a picture of Umm Kulthum, a legendary Egyptian musical icon whose image was often used on women's marches together with those of other women artists and famous feminists. To reluctant protesters Maya would explain that if they wanted to continue to enjoy listening to Umm Kulthum and to dance, they must protest. In these shifts of the popular will between anti-authoritarian and pro-militarist positions, protest music – together with other types of artistic and creative performance – continued to affectively enable possibilities that had hitherto been unthinkable, revealing the protests as liminal transitions created by a ritual (Turner 2017) that fostered processes of collective subjectification along the lines of individual and social grievance and enjoyment.

Turner (2017) theorizes ritual as a rupture in the temporal continuity of everyday life that allows a temporary suspension and reshuffling of the usual social structures. The performance aspects of the revolutionary rituals in the square were much less sacred, and much more spectacular and metamorphic, than Turner's original view (Tripp 2013a, 2013b; Abd El Hameed 2015; Levine and Reynolds 2016). These performance formed a wide and transversal range of acts (LeVine and Reynolds 2016) – from the Ultras and the Black Bloc, to feminist initiatives such as Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment and individual acts of bearing witness to political sexual assaults on TV – which also included the "audience" of protesters in a call-and-response to join, propose, create, and lead chants and songs. There was a liberating affective enjoyment, as people relieved the tension of their grievances and expressed them publicly, with nationalist pride, as a transgressive collective body: parents holding their children, showing them how to chant and how to record videos of the protests, were a familiar sight for me in 2012. After June 30, 2013, El Sisi became the embodiment of the popular will: he promised to deliver the justice demanded by the revolutionaries. In June and August 2013, this nationalist joy was expressed instead by taking family pictures with tanks, by omnipresent songs celebrating the Army, and, more often than not, it passed through the individual consumption of El Sisi-branded commercial products.

Music transgressions in the square thus flagged up the disruption of established power and social hierarchies, as well as of imposed cultural choices. It voiced a historical rearrangement of age, class, religion, gender, racial divisions, and socioeconomic and cultural trajectories. At the same time, this porosity relied on two competing affective repositories, rooted in familiarity: the revolutionary experience, whose transgressions marked a transformative subjective and collective moment especially for the youth; and the attachment to a nationalist history shaped by the military intervention. Ultimately, the divisions within the seemingly neutral popular subject were symptomatic of the ambiguity of the popular and of its affective relationships to nationalism and immediacy, which could be mobilized toward trajectories of the political restoration of the status quo ante in the name of the revolution itself.

3. Familiar genealogies: lines and turns

The familiarity of protest songs

During the uprisings in 2011, and until at least the first half of 2012, newly written and older protest music made possible for these transgressions to become not only accepted but also incredibly familiar. In late 2013, a young and engaged activist, Marina, who worked for a large NGO and had co-founded a local women's rights' group, commented during our interview that by joining the protests she felt she was doing what her grandmother had done before her, bringing back to life a political change she had only read about in history books. The anthropological ear could not miss the reference to reimagined genealogies, which are the very substance of nationalism (Anderson 2006). Following a similar trail, the historical pan-Arab and nationalist slogans led by the drumming groups, and the songs performed onstage and often recorded on cell phones, had the capacity to evoke renewed genealogical arrangements by referring to previous struggles (Swedenburg 2012b; Valassopoulos and Mostafa 2014). Grievances and pride were thematically prevalent in the chosen repertoire: the origin and continuity of the popular subject. Songs dedicated to martyrs, such as *Baladi ya Baladi, ana bahebek ya baladi* (My country, my country, I love you my country), now reclaimed as an anti-regime song, and *Folan El-Folany* ("anonymous person"), underlined nationalism both as kinship and as loyal, sacrificial (and prevalently masculine) love. Other performances included Sayyed Darwish's *Oum, ya Masri* ("Rise, oh Egyptian") – the anthem of the 1952 revolution, written in the early 1900s against the British colonizers, which calls on Egyptians to rise up and confront the enemy.

Throughout the winter of 2012, songs such as these were sometimes listened to in crowded but quiet moments during the square protests on Fridays, when the recordings would be played onstage, and at times briefly improvised in small groups at night. One afternoon in 2013, in a less hectic moment during the anti-Morsy protests, I happened to see a seemingly popular singer, surrounded by a small group of protesters, singing *Baladi ya Baladi* accompanied by the clapping hands of the people around her. During quieter moments on the recurring Friday protests, I heard playing Mohamed Mounir's pop-rock song *Ezay*, about nationalist love and the thirst for justice.

South el Horreya ("voice of freedom") had emerged as one of the first successful songs performed in the square and inspired by the events. In 2012, however, I never heard it during the protests, although it remained a beloved song among the young activists I met. A pop-rock ballad with background vocal effects, the song had been born out of a collaboration between Amr Eid – lead singer of the band later known as Cairokee – and the producer of the band Wust el Balad. The official video for the song was shot in the square among the protesters, ordinary Egyptians who sang along with the song from lyrics on posters. This video is familiar to anyone who has been in the square: the posters, the cheering children and families, the clashes, the batata sellers, the activists, the flags, the street art, the energy of the people moving, praying, and singing together, the security controls. There is no distance between the artists and the audience: they are all protesters. The diverse groups in the square sing, united in nationalist solidarity, with the same collective voice of freedom

The choice to use older and newly composed political chants and songs, and the more limited uses of other, genre-crossing instruments and languages – such as the hip-hop song *Rebel, Rebel* by the Arabian Knightz, released in February 2011 (see also Swedenburg 2012b) – helped to publicly trace a long tradition of revolutionary political song, thematically driven by grievances and nationalist pride, as part and parcel of the history of Egypt. The lute, a traditional instrument, was played regularly by Eskenderella members, and also featured in Cairokee's postrevolutionary song *Ya El Midan* ("Oh, Square"), a nostalgic piece about the bygone days of the square. The well-known group Al Tamboura performed regularly in the square (Swedenburg 2011) in 2011 with a *symsyia* (lyre) and musicians from the traditional music center El Mastaba. But while I saw many drummers several times, such traditional performances were a rare sight, at least in my experience, during the very violent protests of 2012 and 2013. There was simply a different sense of urgency and constraint; even if the streets and squares were the same, when access to them was not blocked, the times were different – and the digital uploads were a revealing symptom of that. Injuries were always imminent; protesters, activists and passers-by lived the angst of not knowing if the protesting neighbor was a thug.

Familiarity articulated through music did not disappear, however: it was reoriented differently, inside the exclusions promoted under the nationalist unity, claiming with increasing anger that the protests in 2013 were part of the same genealogical line the 2011 revolution had established. The bonds of kinship between different singers and eras meant redrawing generational ties, not hierarchically but as equally important. Art was engineered to promote political projects and to raise the flag of creative emancipation, with differing degrees of sophistication and professionalism, but still shaping the individual capacity to use tools of resistance and invention.

The craft of genealogies

As the construction of Egyptian identity was musically connected to popular nationalist protests, this imbued the current culture with political significance. It located politics and culture within a common historical matrix of subjectification. The birth of the revolutionary subject was reshaped by an event: the 2011 revolution became an opportunity to free oneself from being “just” an individual subject of wrongdoing, and to potentially become part of a collective subject committed to a cause. The unifying process of subjectification was a sort of craft: the cause advanced by the “popular will” varied in between 2012 and 2013, with protests against the new Constitution followed by anti-governmental insurgencies, as did music and other artistic performances. Discussing visual street art, El Hamamsy and Soliman (2013) categorize performances in the square as artistic street engagement (mostly spontaneous), assimilation (elaborations on previous artists with some original incorporations), and mobilization, where “art is taken to a higher level of consciousness raising, mobilization and social criticism, and the goal here is to ensure the continuation of the revolution, constantly reminding the masses that what was achieved is considerable but not yet complete” (El Hamamsy and Soliman 2013, 252).

Certainly, the level of sophistication depended on professionalism and (albeit not absolutely) social and cultural capital. However, in the 2011 square and protests more generally, the fluctuation in the levels of these factors was continuous, and different performances could be enacted simultaneously, depending on the moment of the day and the activities done on that day: the affective texture of the moment was crucial. There was no predetermined aesthetic, but rather the different types of sound – drums, pop/rock, rhythmic chants, older protest songs, new ones – beat the rhythm of the square, where different groups mingled by learning and chanting.

Within the different aims of the respective protests in 2011 and 2013, and the multiple types of protests and groups joining the uprisings, the mix of genres heard and repeated by the crowd always privileged forms that could be easily sung, remembered, shared, and repeated: both to form and familiarize again with a “revolutionary subject”, and to legitimize the current protests. Popular protest music, like street art, took into account elements to facilitate sharing and recomposing differences, and these elements were familiar to the activists I met in the square: an improvisational aspect, due to the precarious and temporary nature of the protests; simplicity of form, sometimes as simple as a rhythmic pattern; the use of familiar icons, patterns, slogans or melodies performed as they were written or assembled together to craft a new piece, as in the case of *contrafacta*.

This popular dynamic relied on a number of familiar and already established themes – the pharaonic past, popular cinema icons, Ultras’ strategies – to carry messages artistically, since these messages affectively exceeded verbal forms and analytical discourses. Activists often scavenged music lyrics to create poster and street art pieces, such as in the the gender-inflected line *Al-bint ezay al-walad* (“a girl is like a boy”), originally sung in 1985 by actress Soad Hosny in a popular Egyptian TV series, *Howa wa Heya* (Him and Her) and stenciled by the NooNeswa collective in 2012 for their project *Graffiti Harimi* (Female Graffiti) against gender discrimination, which included quotes by singers Umm Kulthum and Shadia. The Egyptian singer and Nasserist supporter Umm Kulthum was probably the most common artistic icon at feminist and women’s protests. Popular culture in this way built an idiom of belonging to the nation that opposed, at least until the rise of El Sisi, institutional discourses, not as an alternative but by creating its own legitimacy in the spaces of protests. The power of popular protest music, and of street art, included a variety of genres and musicians under the same collective subject. Their definition of revolutionary culture did not depend on institutional imposition or legitimization: it challenged that frame by creating its own.

Contrafacta – familiar songs whose lyrics have been rewritten, in part or entirely, to suit the contingent situation – were part of the protest repertoire in 2011 and 2012 in Cairo, a feature shared with other protests historically (Manabe 2017). Singer Salma Sabahi, daughter of Nasserite presidential candidate Hameed Sabahi, shared a *contrafacta* of a famous song online: *Al Soura* (“the picture”), which had been performed during the Nasserite era by the star singer Abdel Halim Hafez, and had been written by the vernacular poet Salah Jaheen, a supporter of the revolutionary ideology. The original song had celebrated the unity of Egyptian social classes in their struggle for freedom and justice, and it brought back deep-seated collective memories of the 1952 revolution. Sabahi’s version compared the picture described in the original version with the new picture of

police and army brutality against protesters (Valassopoulos and Mostafa 2014). Looking at crafted lyrics, playing jokingly with the most famous slogan in Tahrir Square, and on the everyday needs of the urban poor, two popular *mahraganat* artists, DJ Amr Haha and DJ Figo, released a piece entitled “The people want five pounds of phone credit” (Swedenburg 2012a): the artists sung live at Tahrir Square celebrations for El Sisi in 2013.

Ramy Essam, the most famous singer of the 2011 revolution, wrote a celebrated *contrafacta*. A student from Mansoura, north of Cairo, and a member of the metal scene, he joined the protests in Tahrir Square on February 2, 2011 (LeVine 2012). He composed his most famous song, *Irhal* (“leave”), using chants from the revolution as lyrics: “Leave; the people want the fall of the regime [*Al sha’ab youreed isqat al nizam*]; he must go, we will not leave [*Howa yemshi, mesh hanimshi*].” As the “voice of the revolution,” Essam – despite being tortured in March 2011 – captured the infectious syncopation of the chants, providing a simple yet effective acoustic accompaniment with his guitar. Giving the chant a frame, the song transformed the familiar single chants into a newly structured piece, facilitating its circulation while building on a sense of collective construction. Its use of repetitive harmonies and its distribution online made it accessible and easy to repeat for a crowd, but still open to incremental innovations from vernacular revolutionary practices.

The selective, “crafty” reuse of genealogical protest songs, icons, and slogans, underlined that the bonds of kinship between different singers and protesters meant redrawing generational, cultural and sociopolitical ties, not hierarchically but as equally important. This connected the 2011 revolution to a previous affective repository of peoplehood, reviving its potentialities. Art was engineered to promote political projects and to raise the flag of creative emancipation, with differing degrees of sophistication and professionalism, but still shaping the individual capacity to use tools of resistance and invention. The composite character of this craft allowed, however, for its reappropriating and reuse, as it revealed the affective stitches - thus, potential breakages - in the fabric of the apparently compact popular will. This was the case, for instance, of the clapping and whistling typical of Ultras’ performances, used both to incite, mourn, complain, and express joy. The Ultras’ presence in the square remained a recognizable spectacle, but it was not as dominant in 2012 and 2013 compared with 2011. While initially they had brought the same vivacious spirit to the 2011 protest (Abd El Hameed 2015, 78), by June 30, 2013 some elements – the whistles, chants, trumpets, and flags – had been learnt and incorporated into a different scenario directed by the army, where flying helicopters and green lasers interacted with the choirs of joyful protesters.

The genealogical turn of authoritarianism

The songs introduced in this article were enveloped in the affective power of familiarity, nurtured and crafted by practicing, listening, and rehearsing in the streets and in private spaces. The sense of continuity and familiarity with the 2011 revolutionary struggle permeated the very different waves of anti-Muslim Brotherhood protests in 2012 and 2013, which led to the toppling of the government led by Morsy and returned the military to power. Once again the square and the streets were filled by different groups, united as the people against the elected government, and now led by Freedom and Justice, the political party of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. The excessive control over enjoyment and the horrific level of violence at the protests, coupled with heavy privations (electricity cuts, a lack of basic necessities such as subsidized bread, the unavailability of gasoline) and patriarchal measures, led to calls for a new revolution.

Ramy Essam's song *Irhal* was sung again a few times in 2012 and 2013, resonating with the widespread *Inzil* ("go down"), the slogan of the 2013 Tamarrod poster campaign and chants. The Tamarrod campaign claimed to have collected millions of signatures demanding the ousting of President Mohammed Morsy, and it called for the mass protest on June 30, 2013. Through a performative repetition of the 2011 revolution, the largest postrevolutionary uprising witnessed the continued singing of the same chant. The atmosphere in the square seemed festive and brave, but fear was equally palpable, and it was impossible to forget that the road to it was paved with sexual assaults, mass rapes, and the infiltration of plainclothes police and thugs in the square. The counterrevolutionary forces learnt the same lesson to play a different tune.

Although it was framed as a second revolution whose acts had been choreographed in 2011, it followed a different playbook. The familiarity of practices of protest, including chants, was exploited by the security forces, who played on the heavy affective power of populism and on the lack of leadership. The actions on June 30, 2013 ended what had begun on January 25, 2011, as was explicated in a government campaign for a yes vote on the 2014 Constitution. The four days that led to the fall of the government, the ousting of President Morsy, and the rise of the Minister of Defense, now President El Sisi, did not allow the same number of performances.

The performative repetition of familiar chants and protest tactics followed another trajectory of political and cultural familiarity. Instead of a singer with a ponytail voicing the popular will as a protester among protesters, Minister of Defense El Sisi stepped up, promising to put the popular demands into action. Rather than presenting himself as a figure of political resistance, he deployed affective continuity and political kinship with the legendary figure of President Nasser, and introduced himself as the people's guide:

a paradoxical representative of the political immediacy and unmediated presence of the popular will experienced during the protests. It was a quick maneuver, which prevented the protests to coalesce into something more threatening for the institutional powers and did not leave enough time for new songs to be written and performed. It required the mobilization of a revolutionary genealogy strong enough to capitalize on the popular experience of 2011 and to obtain widespread support for the military intervention: to leverage affectively on the ambiguity of the popular will, which had been shifting considerably during 2012 and was angered by the lack of electricity, gas, primary goods. The familiar figure of the first Egyptian President Nasser, whose old-fashioned posters were always visible during the protests I attended, catalyzed a different genealogy. The love for the masculine, military leader articulated grievances and pride as a passage of power between the people and the army against the terrorist Islamists. The ambiguous primacy of the popular will shifted into a delegative, uneven modality, inscribed into a patriarchal hierarchy of power. Proclaiming himself the fatherly leader who listened to the will of the people, El Sisi deposed Morsy and called the protests to a halt. The popular subject was lured towards a patriarchal militarist stance that claimed to side with its quest for social and political justice, and promised at once violent crackdowns and celebrations.

Only then came music. A number of celebratory songs about the army in Egypt flooded digital spaces and radios, using techniques already familiar to the singing protesters. Two songs in particular put the ultimate seal on the future president's masculine mystique. The first song, *Teslam al Ayadi* ("bless your hands"), was a contrafacta (described as an operetta) by the singer Mostafa Kamel, the head of the Musicians' Union. It depicted gratitude toward the army with lyrics over the melody of a well-known 1960s song about the holy month of Ramadan, subtly adding a mystical undertone. It could be heard everywhere, from shops to phone ringtones, taxis, and wedding parties, to celebrate in every moment of the day the new nationalist rebirth under the military leadership. The second song, *Fawadnak* ("we delegate you"), written by the singers Gharam and Hanin, exalted the popular leadership of the army as a decision taken by the popular will. These popular political songs rearticulated a familiar presidential genealogy that gave the people a supporting role in the celebrations by mobilizing the affective capital of Nasserism together with the specter of Islamist terrorism. Nationalist grievances and pride were declined as a matter of (patriarchal) family love and as self-defense against a perceived threat to the national body, whose violence was popularly reconciled by celebratory songs like *Teslam al Ayadi*.

4. The afterlife of protest songs: a finale?

Genealogies imply death. Was that the end of protest songs in Egypt? Over nine years have passed since January 2011, seven years since the 2013 protests and subsequent coup, and six years since the election of President El Sisi. The revolution is unfinished. The more the government led by Field Marshal El Sisi turns to populist, militarist authoritarianism, the more the disenfranchised, the working class, the young, and the poorest strata of society (Kandil 2016) will make economic demands on him and the military. New protests and their suppression in late September 2019 proved that the government was not strong enough to survive without heavy violence and repression. The silence that accompanied the beginning of the curfew in the summer of 2013, described in my introduction, turned into a large-scale plan of oppression against dissenters and simple citizens alike.

With legal bans on protests, assemblies, and concerts, and continuous abuses, performances of protest songs survive differently. Already in 2013, Soraya, an artist and outspoken activist against gender-based violence, joked on artistic resistance: "People now ask me about my activism, but I am a musician!". The band supported by Nazra for Feminist Studies, Bnt al Masarwa, has worked on feminist music until 2018, despite the heavy crackdown on feminist and human rights' organizations.³ Metal and the "alternative scene" resist the attempts to erase them culturally, economically, and politically, and there are new *mahraganat* records. Ramy Essam left Egypt and lives in northern Europe, from where he releases online new songs highly critical of the current regime. Bands such as Cairokee keep writing political songs, which are released online since their albums – such as their last one, *The Ugly Ducklings* – are not approved by the censors. "Sing cheesy songs, your voice is muffled, or even better make it unheard," says one of the lines in *Kan Lak Ma'aya* ("We have lived the most beautiful love story"), an electropop piece that uses a distorted sample from a romantic hit by Um Kulthum to talk about the revolution as a lost love. Struggling performers feel the pressure from commercial brands that approach them as sponsors to capitalize on their popularity. The afterlife of protest music continues on the ground and especially in digital spaces, fighting against the loss of the gleaming possibilities and potential that were glimpsed during the protests.

With the global rise of right-wing populisms, and the responsibility of anthropologists and social scientists in offering critical approaches to it, the terrain of the struggle seems to be defined by whatever affectively orientates the popular toward certain genealogies,

³ Since 2017 Nazra was imposed an asset freeze. Her Director, Mozn Hassan, is banned from traveling.

repositories and forms in culture and politics, shaping the substance of its subject: the people. If it is suffering, or joy, or both, whose are these? What fosters them on the ground? While protest music and chants did not provoke a revolution, the Egyptian revolutionaries showed that the cultivation of censored and subcultural genres, together with a familiar repository of protest chants and songs, is instrumental in mobilizing and giving shape – tactically, bodily and especially affectively – to a seemingly homogeneous collective popular subject connected to the frame of nationalism. I have suggested in this piece that the crafty use of music and songs from other eras of political protest in Egypt – simultaneously with new music and musical practices – charged the presence in the square with the affective weight of a transgenerational, horizontal history of political rebellion producing a different popular subject. This genealogical value was also key to the counterrevolution in 2013, when then Minister of Defense El Sisi presented himself as a successor to President Nasser, the mythical father of the nation. This form of “masculinist restoration”, as Kandiyoti (2013) put it - by claiming to rectify the wrongdoings of the previous government and defeat terrorism - for the love of “the people” - led to a violent, hyper-controlling patriarchal authoritarianism.

In this article, what marked the substantial differences among January 2011, the anti-Morsy protests, and the 2013 celebration of El Sisi was that this familiarity was affectively capitalized under different terms on by the authoritarian power embodied by the army to reinforce its own legitimacy and recover from the popular distrust towards it. The familiarity of protest songs and chants had fostered a popular sense of what the people were, building a much-needed sense of safety and solidarity outside of the policing imposed by the regime. To give birth to “the people” thus required performing acts and trainings - such as singing and writing protest songs - whose efficacy depended on their affective qualities and on the activation of their repositories of experiences, stories, memories, embodiments. But it also needs attention to the affective excesses that other, competing repositories may activate, as happened with the intervention of the charismatic figure of El Sisi and its reclamation of the 2011 revolution.

The vivacity of popular protest music emphasized the historical legacy of political art in Egypt and it experimented with creative outputs to ground the legitimacy of the people outside of the established order. The affective labor of protest – with its emotional solicitation of gestures, of bodily movements in urban spaces – leveraged this enormous preparation and knowledge that had been formed over time in everyday life. Culture in the square, as in other areas of the Middle East and North Africa region revealed performances as political training (Tripp 2013a), by means especially of affects. Protest songs highlighted the instability and malleability of political and cultural formations that seemed rock solid: the regime of Hosni Mubarak, the first elected Egyptian government,

the subjected people. Revealing the fragility of these apparently unbreakable structures, they used impermanence as a tool for mobilization. When I was in Cairo, the square changed its face with every protest. Tahrir Square was filled with temporary museums to revolutionary martyrs, stages, tents, visual art in the surrounding streets, spilling over into other areas. It was a laboratory of performances (Tripp 2013b) that culturally renegotiated the social order. The upload of songs online also came from the sense of celebration and the need to preserve, and possibly reproduce, a fleeting moment of historical change in its urgency, immediacy and emergency (LeVine and Reynolds 2016).

I interpret these creative, intrinsically artistic forms as more than mediums, as exceeding the plain verbal articulation of discontent and solidarity: they were performatively effective acts against a prolonged political exceptionalism. These acts understood popular culture to be the affective core of political struggle. The flux of composition, performance, and sharing was the only constant, with frequent online releases and playlists that overcame the obstacles of censorship or radio control motivated by political or commercial concerns. Articles collecting the best protest songs surfaced online, demonstrating the popularity of the phenomenon and its enlarging repertoire to such a point that it required selection. The formidable mix of joys and grievances – of revolutionary ideology and institutional oppression – put music at the center of the body politic, where familiar and less familiar songs were shared together with newly composed ones. Learning and teaching songs to sing together was a fundamental part of being, becoming and *feeling* as a protester for most participants, notwithstanding the resistance of ultra-conservatives and the demagogical misuse of culture (Sabry 2010).

The social and political demand for change brought about by the revolution emerged in a variety of cultural efforts and are not forgotten by those who experienced them. These experiences, which are deeply political, enrich analyses of art and activism in the Middle East, such as those by Jessica Winegar (2006). Winegar underlines that the aesthetics of art pieces in Egypt is discursively framed in different ways by artists and audiences (Winegar 2006, 13) – but always consistently using the trope of the nation as a stylistic tool. It can often be the case, as aptly Winegar (2006) comments, that the use of familiar iconographic idioms belonging to the nation is not meant to express special nationalist sentiments, and is more of a practical device for an artist to find an alternative “place” between colonialism, authenticity, and modernity. Yet, in the seemingly identical repetition of genealogical cultural and political forms during the protests, nationalism and its subject – the people – are, I would add, neither stable nor neutral. While artists narrate their own memories and experiences in order to connect affectively with a wider community, as shown by genealogical lines traced by protest music, the gendered, race and class discourses that subtend these narrations and cross conscious and unconscious

values, unspeakable symbols and affects, cannot be overlooked, especially in the light of the violent events attached to nationalist love after January 2011. The practicality of nationalist idioms is to be artistically questioned and challenged as part of the creation of alternatives to all patriarchal authoritarianisms, neoliberalisms and repressive populisms.⁴

In this tense and still complex context, where also geopolitical, transnational interests have an enormous impact which needs to be considered critically, politics – and the conflict between different cultural-political dimensions – continues to be part of the fabric of everyday life. Although the control over protests and the policing of society is tighter than ever, the (mostly digital) existence of popular protest music flags up the possibility of a critical space to give shape to the popular will, and its affective repositories, while producing what the people can be. The engagement between popular culture and politics fostered affectively by protest songs created a version of the popular will, and of its collective body and genealogy, as a crucial element of contemporary political subjectification in Egypt, which is still present, even if we cannot hear it, and whose future performances are being prepared.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

POPULISM AS SYMBOLIC CLASS STRUGGLE

Homology, Metaphor, and English Ale

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ABSTRACT: This contribution links the study of populism as a stylistic repertoire with Bourdieusian class analysis. The starting point is Ostiguy and Moffitt's observation that the populist repertoire draws on symbols of the 'sociocultural low' and 'the popular' produced in non-political fields like food and leisure. Borrowing from Lévi-Strauss and Bourdieu, the article proposes to view these elements as *metaphors* for positions in vertical and horizontal class relations. Metaphorical signification rests on *homologies* between the symbolic sphere ('culture') and politics grounded in the divisions of social space ('the class structure'). This perspective allows us to situate the populist repertoire in social structure and analyze its entanglement in struggles over the classification of groups, or *symbolic class struggles*.

KEYWORDS: Populism, Class Analysis, Culture, Bourdieu, Lévi-Strauss, Structuralism, Homology

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“A large proportion of our most commonplace thoughts make use of an extensive but unconscious system of metaphorical concepts, that is, concepts from a typically concrete realm of thought that are used to comprehend another, completely different domain.”

(Lakoff, 1995, 178)

“If, notwithstanding their incoherences and uncertainties [...] notions belonging to the family of the ‘popular’ are frequently used, even in scholarly discourse, it is because they are deeply embedded in the network of confused and quasi-mythical representations which social subjects create to meet the needs of an everyday knowledge of the social world. The vision of the social world [is] organized according to interconnected and partially independent oppositions which one can begin to grasp by examining [...] the *system of paired adjectives* employed by users of the legitimate language.”

(Bourdieu 1991, 93; original emphases)

1. ‘A drop of English Ale’¹

When inspecting the kitchen of a rented house in Italy with a friend from a former British colony, we came across a pint glass with a print of the English beer brand *Bombardier*. Its label showed a large and a small St. George’s cross, as well as the claim ‘ENGLISH ALE’ in capital letters between the names of the brand and brewery. As the company website informs, ‘bombardier’ was the military rank of Billy Wells, a famous Heavyweight boxer in the early 20th century, who, coming from an East London working class family, had risen in the ranks of the colonial army. The brewery, now part of a large listed corporation, co-sponsors military flight shows until this day. In 1980 it named its beer after Wells to designate it as, “a beer for people who don't give a damn about fads or fashion. A beer that pint by pint, drop by drop, stays true to itself” (Eagle Brewery 2018).

“Ugh”, exclaimed my friend, turning the glass in his hand, “let’s put this away, this reminds me of Brexit.” Nor was he the only one to make that connection. When in 2018 the company redesigned its logo and dropped the letters ‘English’, a pub landlord refused to serve *Bombardier* and on an internet forum, cascades of angry comments continue to accumulate by the time of writing this, over one year later. One complaint reads, “I have always enjoyed a drop of English Ale, nothing like it in the world and when ordering my pint of Bombardier it always gave me a sense of pride in the logo on the pump clip. I don’t

¹ I thank Yannis Stavrakakis, Pierre Ostiguy, Koen Damhuis, Måns Lundstedt, Rosalie Allain, and the reviewers for wonderful feedback that to do honor would have meant writing another article. The biggest thanks go to Giorgos Venizelos, for the long nightly discussions in which the arguments sketched here took form.

feel that any more. The new labelling no longer looks English it looks European!" (Drinks Business 2018)

A shift from banal to hot nationalism, a commercialized vision of working class culture with heroic and violent, colonial masculinities lurking in the background, a 'sense of pride' prompted in one man and disgust in another, all this connected with the 'populist' upheaval of the Brexit vote. As contemporaries, we likely recognize these scenes instantly, but imagining looking at them through the eyes of another epoch, we would surely be impressed by the visceral emotional power of a small label on a pint of beer, and the allusions and positionings it evokes.

What I mean to introduce by this story is a tricky question which has remained surprisingly implicit in the recent onslaught of populism research, namely how the cultural symbols deployed in and against populist mobilizations link with positions in social structure. Where do intuitive associations, like the one in this story, between a *symbol*, ideas about *social groups and classes*, and a *political positioning* towards 'populist' projects come from?

The question is tricky, because populist rhetoric – quasi by definition – totalizes its reference group, 'the people', and obscures its specific class or group character.² As Margaret Canovan notes, "'the people' is undoubtedly one of the least precise and most promiscuous of concepts. [It] cannot be restricted to a group with definite characteristics, boundaries, structure or permanence, although it is quite capable of carrying these senses" (Canovan 2002:140), underscored by its polyvalent use as a political (the people as sovereign), cultural (the people as a nation) and economic signifier (the people as a class) (Mény and Surel 2002); or in a slight variation, 'plebs', 'demos', or 'ethnos' (Brubaker 2017).

At the same time, populist projects *do* of course have anchorings among populations whose specific range of class positions shows up quite consistently in empirical studies (e.g. Alexandre, Gonthier, and Guerra 2019; Bornschier and Kriesi 2012; Oesch 2008). And these are more than statistical truths: many people believe to 'know' intuitively – viscerally even – what populist supporters are like, and there has been a strange return of images of the working class in public discourses around populism, echoing through my friend's association of 'Brexit' with a beer branded to signal traditional masculinity (see Bergfeld 2019). Obviously, the populist deployment of symbols alludes to, mobilizes, and actively constructs social group structures beneath the veneer of the unitary, socially unmarked 'people'. In their critique of political exclusion and social devaluation, populists appeal not just to 'everyone', but to a 'true core' of society whose deservingness is well established.

² Incidentally, this seems to be a rare point in which approaches concur (e.g. Germani, 1978; Taggart, 2000, 91ff. Moffitt, 2016, p. 95ff.; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Schmitter, 2019). Laclauians would perhaps maintain that totalization is inherent in all political identities, but that too does not contradict the point.

But how do we conceptualize the indirect link between populist symbolism and social structure? What to make of the fact populism is steeped in class dynamics, particularly in the misrecognition of dominated classes, while largely disavowing class vocabulary? What is the nature of the ambivalent link between symbolic and social structures that populism mobilizes? More than offering answers, this contribution articulates a conceptual strategy with which to approach these questions. Seeking to deepen the so-called sociocultural approach to populism developed by Pierre Ostiguy (Ostiguy 2017), I present a structuralist perspective on the problem gleaned from the work of Lévi-Strauss and Bourdieu.

Noting how the populist repertoire draws on elements of ‘the popular’ produced in non-political fields like music, sports, gastronomy, and culture, this approach proposes to analyze these elements as sets of *metaphors* for vertical and, crucially, horizontal class relations, resting on a structural correspondence, or *homology*, between differentiations of the symbolic sphere (‘culture’) and politics, grounded in divisions of social space (‘the class structure’). This makes it possible to situate the populist symbolic repertoire in social structure and analyze it as a tool deployed in struggles over the classification of social groups, or *symbolic class struggles*.

2. The populist repertoire

Any analysis of the social underpinnings of populist symbolic politics must begin with the advances made in the sociocultural approach to populism, which understands populism as a discursive and stylistic repertoire.³ Repertoires are sets of classificatory principles that people draw on to bring order and meaning into the world (Steinberg 1995; Lamont and Thévenot 2000). Speaking of repertoires means that within empirical social settings (like classes, regions, or political camps) we expect a variegated but ultimately limited set of shared cultural forms of meaning-making, that can be described and compared across contexts (see Bonikowski 2017; Jansen 2011). The repertoire concept lets us grasp how cognitive and symbolic structures historically pre-date and circumscribe any individual cultural performance, while also leaving space for the agency of selecting from a multiplicity of repertoires, or meaning sets.

Applied to populism, this allows the sociocultural approach to study the contours of the populist repertoire and the cultural sources it draws on (Brubaker 2017). Beginning with the former, Moffitt (2016) identifies three elements within the repertoire of populist performances: appeals to the will of “the people” against an elite, contrasted with anti-populist appeals to expertise; the conspicuous display of “bad manners”, contrasted

³ As Moffitt specifies, ‘the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life’ (2016, 38).

with professional, tamed, and institutionally appropriate “good manners”; and the performance of crisis, breakdown, or threat, contrasted with the performance of stability (Moffitt 2016, 45; see also Stavrakakis et al., 2018).

According to Moffitt, this repertoire of “embodied, symbolically mediated performance” (2016, 38) is more central to contemporary mass political appeals than ideology or party identification. Populist performances function relationally, with reference to the dominant cultural code of normal politics. By breaking the expectations of professionalism and propriety, populist actors perform a distance from established politics as proximity to ‘the people’. This is often achieved by rudeness and swearing, sexual references, theatrical postures, and the conspicuous breaking of the protocol of professional politics.

The social subtext of these performances is summarized by Ostiguy as a populist affectual narrative of ‘flaunting the sociocultural low’ (Ostiguy 2009, 2017): the populist cultural repertoire conspicuously parades a sociocultural style on the devalued side of a stratified symbolic sphere. Defined by degrees of sublimation, the ‘low’ is associated with informality, physical proximity, slang and dialect, rawness, as well as, in the political realm, personal authority of expressive, virile or affectionate leaders, speaking ‘from the gut’. Populists flaunt this sociocultural style as that of the truest and most deserving core of the majority people, defending it against devaluation by the artificial or foreign cultures of the elites and their allies among nefarious minorities and global institutions.

The ‘low’ is the flipside, or “unrepresentable Other’ [...] of a specific ‘proper’ civilizational project” such as liberalism, multi-culturalism, colonial culture, or neo-classical economic orthodoxy (Ostiguy 2017, 75). Appeals to the low crucially rely on the outrage of *anti*-populist fractions of the establishment defending the well-mannered and proper, rational, expertise-based sociocultural ‘high’ and its political ideal of institutionally mediated, impersonal authority and proceduralism, as Moffitt nicely illustrates:

“[Witness] the visceral distaste those from the anti-populist high in the United States have for Donald Trump’s taste for McDonald’s, KFC and Diet Coke, and the media attention these tastes have garnered. This distaste has little to do with ideology, but rather, codes of what is “appropriate” in sociocultural terms in the US: the implication, here, being that Trump’s – and his followers’ – tastes are vulgar, inappropriate and childish. Their “lowness” marks them as populist, against a far more refined and proper anti-populist high” (Moffitt 2018, 7).

Another example was Matteo Salvini’s Mojito-sipping, speedo-clad tour of Southern Italian beaches in the summer of 2019, slammed by his ‘high’ opponents as unserious and lacking the dignity of political office (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2019). Salvini’s half naked poses, revealing a healthy belly, also were a good example of the central role of the body in populist performances, highlighted among others by Paula Diehl and Maria Esperanza Casullo (Diehl 2017; Casullo 2018). The body is “a generator of symbolic

meaning” (Diehl 201, 361) whose appearance, activity, and interaction – hugging, gesticulating, etc. – is implicated in the production of a sense of ‘the popular’.

Transposed to the political realm, food, relations to the body, etc. expressing ‘down-to-earthness’ and proximity to the people are what Roland Barthes calls a ‘reality effect’ (Barthes 2006), a stylistic device creating within an institutional performance the impression of a ‘truer’, less mediated reality outside of it.⁴ Yet it is also palpable that to understand these *symbolic* politics of ‘the popular’ we require a sense of relations in *social structure*, i.e. class and group relations. How does this indexical type of linkage work?

In line with the obscuring of class in the study of populism that Jäger (2019) reconstructs, this question remains outside the scope of most current analyses. Interested in the performative and mediatized character of the populist repertoire, Moffitt, for instance, mainly highlights the gap between claims to the ‘low’ and the claimants’ socioeconomic positions; as in the case of the “blue collar millionaire” Donald Trump (see also Ostiguy and Roberts, 2016). Equally, Moffitt recognizes the centrality of *audiences* as a demand side of the populist style (Moffitt 2016, 95ff.), but does not sociologically situate these, or populist performances more generally.⁵

In contrast, Ostiguy’s thick descriptions of the high-low distinction, often exploring Latin American contexts with very strong and overt demarcations of the poor and popular classes, clearly imply a cultural materialist analysis.⁶ But this analysis is not developed anywhere. In the following, I want to suggest one way of doing so, beginning with an analogy noted by Ostiguy himself: namely that of the ‘high’ and ‘low’ and the “powerfully accurate typological metaphor [of] ‘the raw’ and ‘the cooked’” as proffered by the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss (Ostiguy 2017, 83).

3. Homology and metaphor: The structuralist approach

In his 1962 book of that title, Lévi-Strauss deconstructed the theory of *totemism*, which had been central to early anthropology (Lévi-Strauss 1991, also 1966). The theory postulated a universal pattern in ‘primitive societies’ by which social groups, like clans, tribes, or phratries would adopt the names of spirit-beings, like kangaroos or eagles, which they believed to be their ancestors. Anthropologists like Malinowski and Lévi-Bruhl had explained these as utilitarian practices related to food procurement and predators, or as testament to the illogical, emotional and mystic nature of the ‘primitive’

⁴ Populists inherit this device from much of non-populist politics: One of Barack Obama’s speechwriters recounts his team’s obsession with “real people (RPs)”, trying to litter speeches with “RP stories” to make them relatable (Litt, 2017 cit. in Robinson 2019). But while here the point is to reconcile the ‘popular’ and the ‘proper’, populist symbolic politics antagonistically wields the former against the latter.

⁵ The same is true for most studies of political identities, such as Meléndez and Kaltwasser (2017).

⁶ As when noting the historical emergence of the ‘high’ and ‘low’ in the course of ‘civilizing projects’, a trail that would deserve to be explored more thoroughly.

mind, oblivious to the workings of human procreation and the boundary between human beings and animals (Lévy-Bruhl 1926; Malinowski 1948, 27ff. see Lévi-Strauss 2013, ch. 2).

Lévi-Strauss' forcefully rebuked such interpretations. His analyses of indigenous systems of social and religious organization reconstructed their basic relation as that between the order of natural species and the order of social groups. He then showed that it is not the substantial meaning of totems, in the sense of a direct, or 'vertical' relation of similarity or believed kinship between group and natural species, that is primary to the totemistic phenomenon, but the relation between 'horizontally' differentiated systems of differences in the two orders:

"Not the resemblances but the differences resemble each other. [...] On the one hand there are animals which differ from each other [...], and on the other are men [...] who also differ from each other. [...] The resemblance proposed by so-called totemistic systems is between these systems of differences" (Lévi-Strauss 1991, 77, original emphases).

Classifications of differences occurring in nature, like those of 'high flying birds' and 'low flying birds', are used as *metaphors* for the classification of social differences. This is based on a correspondence of structures of symbolic classification and social differences, a *homology* between the symbolic and social spheres. The metaphorical use of natural species for social classification is an intellectual operation not reducible to mystic beliefs or utilitarian function: "Natural species", Lévi-Strauss claimed, "are chosen [as totems] not because they are 'good to eat' but because they are 'good to think'" (ibid, p. 89).

Seen from this perspective, 'totemism' ceases to be a discrete phenomenon located in the religious order of 'primitive' society, instead appearing as an instance of a universal and enduring feature of human cognition in all societies: that of *metaphorical thought*, by which one object comes to stand for another, including the symbolization of social group differences by culturalized objects of the external world (see also Lakoff 1993; Lévi-Strauss 1991, 2013, 15ff.).⁷

These cultural objects, be they birds or brands of ale, do not inherently carry meanings but derive them from their relative position in a system of symbolic differences, whose *social* meaning derives from homologies to another system of differences, that of social groups and classes. To return to our introductory example, there is nothing inherently 'working class', 'populist', or 'masculine' about English ale. We could well imagine a time and place where the same drink was served only to kings or used as medicine for women in labour. But within the symbolic system of our societies, beer is positioned in difference

⁷ This perspective was inspired by Durkheim and Mauss (Durkheim 2008; Durkheim and Mauss 1963; see also Fourcade 2016), although Lévi-Strauss objected to their view of the symbolic order as *derived* from the social order.

to, say, prosecco or whiskey, a difference that comes to be metaphorically used as proxy for distinctions on the social plane.

Since both systems are organized differentially (or relationally, i.e. every element attains meaning by being different from other elements), the most basic level of structuralist analysis is that of pairs of opposites. It is through the homology of these systems (beer: male, plain, popular; prosecco: female, sophisticated, posh), that symbols acquire their social significance. Hence we are able to intuitively decipher accusations leveled against Nigel Farage of only drinking beer in public, while preferring Cava (!) behind closed doors (Daily Star 2019)⁸ – an accusation deemed serious enough for a spokesperson of the Brexit Party to repudiate – as a scandalization of Farage’s upper class background, and the fraudulent nature of his pint-swigging ‘man of the people’ performance. Under conditions of homology, cultural objects become metaphors for social positions. The pint becomes a totem.

4. Laclau and the post-structuralist challenge

Applying this ‘totemistic’ analysis in Lévi-Strauss’ extended sense to the populist cultural repertoire means to document the system of differences which gives the sociocultural distinction of ‘high’ and ‘low’ its meaning (as Ostiguy does), and to then reconstruct how this distinction comes to metaphorically represent differences of sociostructural location. Ideally, this type of analysis would reveal an underlying group structure of symbolic distinction, that is, homologies of the symbolic and social orders. Such a structural analysis of populist symbolic politics would allow us to ‘crack the code’ of the implicit group symbolization of populism, below the literal wording of political appeals or the social background of leaders, uniting cultural, sociological, and political aspects of the populist phenomenon.

But what are the equivalents to ‘clans’ and ‘totems’ in populism? Can we seriously assume homological relations between cultural symbols on the one hand and classes and groups on the other in our complex societies? While mainstream populism research simply ‘forgets’ this question, the connection is outright *rejected* by the Laclauian approach. Laclau had developed his theory of populism in an explicit emancipation from structuralist Marxism, whose class reductionism clashed with the political experience of Peronism. Perón’s charismatic leadership had welded together a popular nationalist and corporatist cross-class alliance of a relatively dispersed working class and parts of the Argentine bourgeoisie against the local oligarchy. Laclau credits this first-hand experience of a successful populist project with introducing him to all the themes of his theoretical oeuvre: “the dispersal of subject positions, the hegemonic recomposition

⁸ Googling ‘Nigel Farage beer’ yields, among others, a 30 minutes video collage of Farage drinking beer to the tune of the British national anthem.

of fragmented identities, the reconstitution of social identities through the political imaginary” (Laclau, 1990, cit. in Stavrakakis and Galanopoulos 2018, p. 2).⁹

In the following, Laclau elaborated these observations of Argentine class consciousness into a theoretical revolution against the core tenet of structuralism, i.e. the assumption of a discernable basic and holistic set of relations (such as the class structure) pervading all of society. For Laclau such relations are a posterior fiction in the face of an insurmountable ‘heterogeneity’ of the social (Laclau and Zac 1994). Unmoored from structural positions, identities are constructed from performative social practices, or *discourses*, according to an autonomous logic of political signification (Laclau 2005, 129ff.). In the place of a society pervaded by class relations remains a boundless field of differences and demands, which empty or floating signifiers, like that of ‘the people’, can unite and subsume under a ‘logic of equivalence’ (Laclau 2014). Moving the focus from the economic to the political, slogans essentially produce the very groups they invoke.¹⁰

Perhaps justified in its time as a corrective to the theological discourse of dogmatic Marxism, this kind of anti-structuralism today has run its course. Empirically, it is at odds with identifiable and persistent class bases of populist projects. Theoretically, we run into tautologies by eliding structural foundations: deducing symbolic relations from symbolic actions, we are unable to account for the *conditions of success* of populist invocations of ‘the people’, the resonance of their appeals, and the shape of potential class alliances. All these only become explicable by reference to social relations logically prior to their symbolic representation, as focalized in the structuralist paradigm. The discursive approach overcomes this tautology either at the cost of overstretching the concept of ‘discourse’ to include material relations,¹¹ or by a voluntarism, which, after the fact, credits the rhetorical ploys of leaders and cunning strategists for single-handedly manufacturing identification from sheer psychological lack.

⁹ In Omar Acha’s words, the implicit center of Laclau’s theorizing was “a national-anti-imperialist alliance among progressive classes”, and the “critique of workerist, class-centred politics” (Acha 2019, 2).

¹⁰ “For the Essex school it is only through populism, and the rhetorical devices, i.e. ‘empty signifiers’, deployed by their leaders, that ‘the people’ can be constituted as a popular subject. In other words, the ‘people’ only emerge as a recognizable political collectivity when a series of unsatisfied demands congeal by means of the logic of equivalence and generate new political identities around which subjects can mobilize” (Dean and Maignashca 2020, 7). Interestingly, Laclau retains the concept of metaphor and sees the metaphorical substitution (as opposed to metonymic contiguity) as the highest level of equivalence in a chain of demands. But characteristically for his theory, the elements of metaphor all remain within the symbolic sphere (see Laclau 2014).

¹¹ “Economic practice itself should be considered as discourse” (Laclau 1980 cit. in Stavrakakis, 2004, FN 27).

5. Bourdieu: From clan structures to the social space

Still, it seems difficult to imagine an approach to contemporary politics inspired by Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology of segmentally differentiated societies that does not fall prey to journalistic clichés of a 'tribal' logic of politics (e.g. Goodhart, 2017). Functionally differentiated societies integrate the individual into more numerous and looser circles of socialization than tribal societies. The consequent breakdown of any 'natural', 'primordial' assignment of group membership *cum* integration into a cosmic symbolic order is a constitutive feature of modern societies (Luhmann 1992).

I think that these challenges are convincingly addressed and overcome in the theory of Lévi-Strauss' student Pierre Bourdieu, developed in the same historical conjuncture as the post-Marxism of Laclau and others. Bourdieu makes crucial advancements deviating from classical structuralism, while retaining its core analytical strategy of a structural, 'metaphorical' reading of cultural objects as embedded in systems of symbolic differences, and the search for homologies through the reconstruction of binary oppositional categories. In the following, I want to sketch some of Bourdieu's innovations in this analytical strategy, showing what it allows us to see in populist symbolic politics.

To recap: what a structural analysis of populist symbolic politics needs to establish is: a) the structure of groups symbolized in populism, i.e. an equivalent to the tribal group structure of 'totemism' that acknowledges the complexity and multi-dimensionality of contemporary social differentiation and accurately describes populist politics; b) in which sense the symbolic repertoire of populism 'metaphorically' indexes positions in this social structure.

Answers to these questions can be found in Bourdieu's class analysis, with its strong focus on symbolic dynamics. Bourdieu (2013) conceptualizes the class structure as a relational *social space* differentiated both vertically (into dominated and dominant positions) and horizontal (into class fractions). These class relations are active also without the existence of classes 'for themselves': While having classed positions 'on paper', populations are constituted as mobilized, self-aware groups and classes through struggles over symbolic *classifications*, principles of seeing and dividing society into groups and classes (Bourdieu 1985, 1987). These classification struggles are permanently ongoing in everyday practices of *distinction*, the relational demarcation of social identities, in which symbolic objects like food, clothes, cultural tastes, leisure activities, bodily postures, etc. take on the meaning of status markers. The ability to make and 'read' distinctions is grounded in the *habitus*, the embodied and hence wordless, intuitive, visceral knowledge of social space and one's place in it (Maton 2013). Let us explore these one by one.

6. Homologies

In the Bourdieusian update of the structural paradigm, the group relations, which in our totemistic example were formed by the structure of clans and phratries, are now recast as *vertical and horizontal class relations*. According to Bourdieu, class is constituted through relational means of appropriating and deploying social energy, or capitals. Importantly, besides economic capital in the form of property and monetary control over social energy, Bourdieu emphasizes the role of cultural capital, appropriated in the form of educational degrees, but also more subtly embodied forms of ‘cultivation’ and mastery of cultural codes and symbolic systems. ‘Culture’, in this sense, is not distinct from ‘economy’, but a central dimension of contemporary class domination, demarcating stratified chances of appropriation and status positions.

The acquisition and exploitation of cultural capital, both as education titles and the overall development of cultural mastery, is the core strategy of an increasingly important fraction of the dominant class (Bourdieu 1988, 2013), i.e. skilled white collar workers (in public administrations, the education system, the media and cultural industries, etc.). It is distinguished from, and overall less powerful than, an economic fraction of the dominant class whose ‘investive status work’ relies on property, wealth, and organizational power (e.g. as managers in private firms) (Savage et al. 1994; Groh-Samberg, Mau, and Schimank 2014; van de Werfhorst 2019). The horizontal division between dominant fractions, defined by the relative composition of cultural and economic capital types, is complemented by a vertical division based on the overall stock of capitals commanded, dividing society into a dominant and dominated pole. As the relative weight of economic and cultural capitals logically matters more the higher the overall volume of capital, this, at the most schematic level, creates a tripolar image of a dominated and two fractions of the dominant class, cultural and economic (see Fig. 1).¹²

The basic accuracy and predictive power of this type of spatial reconstruction has been confirmed in a number of large-scale studies across different countries (Bennett et al. 2009; Flemmen, Jarness, and Rosenlund 2018; Jodhka, Rehbein, and Souza 2017; De Keere 2018) which often reconstruct the social space with the help of the geometric

¹² “The distribution of political opinions between right and left should correspond fairly closely to the distribution of the classes and class fractions in the space whose first dimension is defined by overall volume of capital and the second by the composition of this capital: The propensity to vote on the right increases with the overall volume of the capital possessed and also with the relative weight of economic capital in the capital composition, and the propensity to vote on the left increases in the opposite direction in both cases. The homology between the oppositions established in these two respects - the fundamental opposition between the dominant and the dominated, and the secondary opposition between the dominant fractions and the dominated fractions of the dominant class - tends to favor encounters and alliances between the dominated fractions of the dominant class, intellectuals, artists or teachers, and the dominated classes, who each express their (objectively very different) relation to the same dominant fractions in a particular propensity to vote for the left.” (Bourdieu 2013, 438)

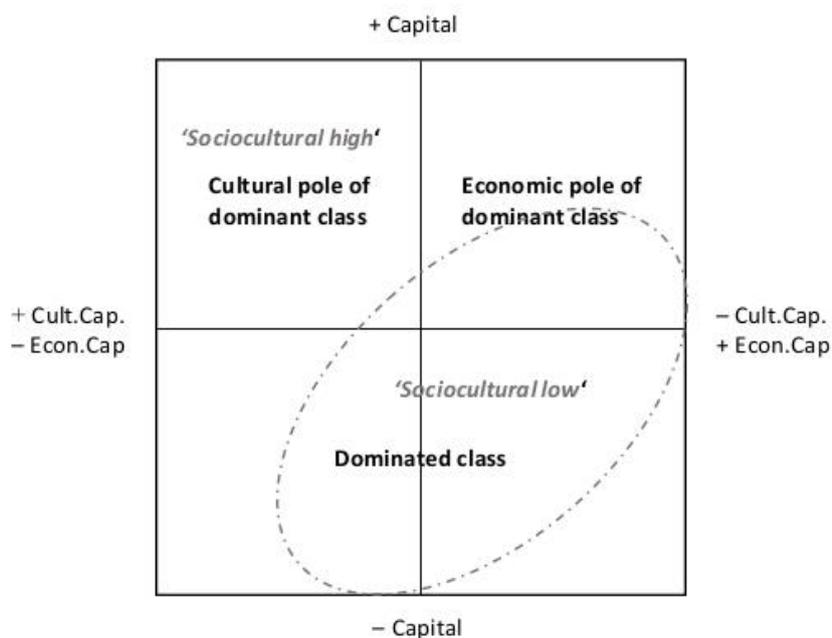
statistics of Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA). What MCA reveals are correspondences between clusters of responses to survey question on different substantive dimensions. Thus MCAs, like that produced by Flemmen et al. (2018), trace how responses to questions about cultural habits or political positionings cluster in similar regions of the social space. These analyses are interested in the dimensions in which patterns align with each other, that is, rendering visible the homologies between political and cultural forms of differentiation grounded in horizontal and vertical divisions of social structure.

The cultural and economic fractions of the upper regions of social space maintain distinct leisure styles from each other and those in the dominated regions. The same axes also structure differences in distinct dimensions of political positionings. Thus, the division of left and right on economic issues is mainly found to be one between the cultural (left) and economic (right) fractions of the dominant class, while divisions over 'new politics' map onto differences in the volume of capital (more 'liberal' views predominating in the higher regions of social space).

The finding of a homology of social divisions with symbolic and political differentiation is the key to a structural analysis of the populist symbolic repertoire. Indeed, the flaunting of the sociocultural 'low' contains both a revaluation of devalued 'popular' styles, that is, an upward, 'usurpatory' strategy vindicating dominated regions of social space (Murphy 1986; Jarness and Flemmen 2019), and an explicit refusal of behavioral expectations like 'good manners', sublimation, self-control, subtlety, etc. directly related to the inculcation of cultural capital.

This double boundary work against elites above and horizontally against the cultural pole of the dominant class corresponds with the populist class alliances described in the case of the European radical right (Rydgren 2013; Oesch 2012; Bornschieer and Kriesi 2012; Kriesi et al. 2012): These particular populist formations have their bases among production workers, middle class fractions on the economic pole, like small owners, as well as, at times, traditional fractions of the economic elites (see Damhuis 2019).

Figure 1: Simple model of social space (Fractions of the dominant class, social locations of 'sociocultural high' / 'low'; Y: Capital volume; X: Capital composition)



The cross-cutting nature of this class alliance on the economic side of social space explains why income rarely shows up as a clear predictor of populist support, but its location on the economic pole of social space explains why comparatively lower levels of *education* are virtually always among the strongest structural predictors (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2013; Stubager 2013). The reverse is true for anti-populist attitudes, as well as support for the left-liberal forces of the 'New Left' most visibly opposing the populist radical right, which is increasingly based among the cultural middle class members employed in sociocultural professions (Oesch and Rennwald 2018). Adding a horizontal axis of distinction between dominant class fractions to the vertical axis most commonly associated with talk of class politics reveals the basic structure of social differences, whose homologies with cultural and political differentiation explain the metaphorical function of cultural objects deployed in the repertoires of symbolic politics.

7. Class alliances

Koppetsch (2019) offers an insightful analysis from this point of departure. In her interpretation, the struggle between politicized versions of traditional, demarcation-oriented ‘communitarianism’ and libertarian, opening-oriented ‘cosmopolitanism’ – often mistaken for a vertical conflict of the disgruntled and left-behind periphery dwellers versus the urban, educated winners of globalization – is more accurately described as a ‘horizontal struggle of positions’ between two fractions of the middle class: “conservative against cosmopolitan, ethno-national against transnational, welfare chauvinistic against cosmopolitan-neoliberal milieus” (Koppetsch 2019, 121, my translation). The populist symbolic repertoire offers a tool by which traditional middle class fractions integrate the demands of dominated populations to lend authenticity to their own status struggles.

When Matteo Salvini kisses the rosary and invokes the Immaculate Heart of the Virgin Mary in the name of the people and against laical parliamentary customs (Il Post 2019), he flaunts the symbolic language of an affective and emotional folk religiosity against the cool professionalism of parliamentary conduct, but he also speaks to the reactionary wing of political Catholicism located among the traditional middle class. And in a remarkable piece then-*Alternative für Deutschland* leader Alexander Gauland lays out the populist right’s class analysis, when he describes how the ‘new urban elite’ of the ‘culturally colorful’ ‘globalist class’, that ‘dreams of one world’ in their apartments and restaurants in ‘Berlin, London or Singapore’,

“is opposed by two heterogeneous groups [...]: the traditional middle class, including small business owners, who cannot just move their production to India to cut costs; and many so-called common people, whose jobs are paid miserably or have disappeared, who have toiled for a lifetime and now live off paltry pensions.” (Gauland 2018, my translation).

Gauland’s intervention is striking for the clarity in which the populist right’s appeals to ‘traditional’ and ‘common’ people are named as a strategy of cross-class alliance.¹³ Though usually less explicit, the heterogeneous makeup of populist class alliances and the sociostructural ambiguity of its appeals are by no means arguments against the sociostructural embeddedness of populist symbolic language. Instead, this language is part and parcel of a cross-class politics rooted among distinct class fractions. As Erik Olin Wright notes,

¹³ As Stuart Hall reminds us, “this is no rhetorical device or trick, for this populism is operating on genuine contradictions, [...] it addresses real problems, real and lived experiences, real contradictions – and yet is able to represent them within a logic of discourse which pulls them systematically into line with policies and class strategies of the Right.” (Hall 1979, 20)

“‘populism’, to the extent that it provides a context for the pursuit of certain class interests, can be viewed as a form of class formation that forges solidaristic ties between the working class and certain other class locations, typically the petty bourgeoisie” (Wright, 1997, 381).

A useful left populist point of comparison is Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s speech at the Marseille harbor, a central moment in his 2017 presidential run. Demarcating his followers from both “the extreme right that debases our grand multi-colored people” and “the extreme market, this type of black magic that transforms suffering [...] into gold and silver”, he addressed his audience as “you, the central people, who aspire to live off their work, their inventions, their poems, their taste for loving the others” (Mélenchon 2017, 3:12ff.).¹⁴ As even in France hardly anyone can hope to live off their poems, the references to this cultural object, as well as ‘inventions’ and ‘the love of others’ are to be read as metaphors for the cultural, scientific, and social professionals that formed part of the left-populist alliance Mélenchon attempted to unite with a working class following.

In Ostiguy’s typology, poetry would clearly appear on the ‘high’ end of the spectrum.¹⁵ Yet, Mélenchon clearly draws on the populist repertoire of defending a ‘popular’ life-world against enemies of the people and a nefarious elite (including the ever so subtly antisemitic trope of the ‘black magic’ of money). His intervention transposes the authoritative core of peoplehood (see White and Ypi 2017) to represent a diverse coalition of workers and sociocultural professionals. From this perspective, the symbolic politics of populism should be understood as reflecting the class alliances it attempts to assemble; its metaphorical invocations of ‘the people’ as reflecting the idealized self understandings of populations in specific sociostructural locations.

Like this, Ostiguy’s sociocultural approach to populism could be extended into a full-blown theory of populist symbolic class politics. ‘Flaunting the low’ here is only one type of performance in the populist repertoire, though one displaying its general form: an antagonistic elaboration of symbols of ‘the popular’ channeling class positions *sans phrase* with the aim of forging cross-class alliances. The point is not that populists win over populations low in social status by performances mimicking their ‘lowness’, but that populists organize cross-class appeals around symbols demarcating ‘the popular’ from various other cultural symbols of social position, including – at times – high, or elite culture.

¹⁴ “L’extrême droite, condamnant notre grand peuple multicolore, [...] l’extrême marché, sorte de magie noire, qui transforme la souffrance [...] en or et en argent. Vous voici, vous autres, le peuple central, celui qui aspire à vivre de son travail, de ses inventions, de ses poèmes, de son goût d’amour pour les autres, vous avez laissé allumé la braise qui dorénavant incendie de nouveau nos clameurs et nos enthousiasmes.” Thanks to Adrià Porta Caballé for pointing out this passage.

¹⁵ Appeals to ‘love’ and ‘poetry’ are also references to a romanticized self-perception of Frenchness.

8. Symbolic class struggles

'Populism' then appears as a fuzzily demarcated sub-genre of a more fundamental process: that of the political construction and mobilization of group categories redescribing positions in class relations, or *symbolic class struggles*. Here, Bourdieu helps us get another step further. As mentioned, his model of social space is based on class relations, but not necessarily of classes, as in pre-existing and bounded groups (such as 'the workers', 'the petty bourgeoisie', or 'the capitalists') (Bourdieu 1987). The formation of classes on paper into mobilized groups instead is an object of symbolic struggles:

"The social world is both the product and the stake of inseparably cognitive and political symbolic struggles over knowledge and recognition, in which each pursues not only the imposition of an advantageous representation of himself or herself, [...] but also the power to impose as legitimate the principles of construction of social reality most favourable to his or her social being – individual and collective." (Bourdieu 2000, 187)

The populist symbolic repertoire is an intervention in these struggles over the construction of groups and the production of a sense of 'groupness' (Brubaker 2004). In Luc Boltanski's words, the taxonomies of the social implicit in populist symbols of 'the low' or 'the popular' are a 'travail de regroupement' (Boltanski 1979), an attempt to impose as obvious and self-evident a way of viewing and dividing society into groups, as we glimpsed in the introductory association of an English Ale, working class masculinity, and Brexit. As we saw here too, the sense of 'the popular' which populist symbolic politics draws on is an artefact co-produced by many entrepreneurs, from corporate advertising to the military and political mobilizations (Bourdieu 1991).

While the specific 'principles of vision and division' (Bourdieu 1985) differ, the populist 'flaunting of the low' has some characteristics that inform its uses in classification struggles throughout. As mentioned, the 'low' has the potential to be used both as a vindication of dominated lifestyles and/or an attack on the legitimacy of cultural capital (reversely, cultural capital forms the strongest structural base of anti-populism). Performances of the 'low' primarily rely on *culturalized* notions of social stratification, that is, regarding the recognition and status of lifestyles, customs, and demeanours (rather than, for example, relations of exploitation or oppression), often befitting blurry economic policies (Rovny and Polk 2019; Afonso 2015).

In line with this, populist symbolic revaluation is based on a form of moral protest linked to deservingness, revaluing a sense of 'the popular' as the 'from here', the familiar, authentic, unrefined, and real, in comparison with social others (above and/or below). With these characteristics, the populist symbolic repertoire is not only situated *in* social space, it also consists of a specific image *of* social space. The populist cultural

repertoire de-thematizes, culturalizes, and localizes class divisions, enabling insurgent and ambiguous, internally differentiated appeals to specific types of cross-class coalitions.¹⁶

9. Distinction

Bourdieu's double emphasis on structural situatedness of symbolic objects and the contested nature of symbolic representations of society makes his approach well suited for uncovering the subtext of class from beneath the headlines of 'the people' (Kalb 2011). But this could seem like a contradiction to the aspect discussed before: If 'objective' positions in social space are unavailable and contingent enough to be the object of classification struggles, why should sociostructural positions be the starting point for understanding symbolic appeals? Put differently, why should people's sociostructural position matter for the way they understand the 'metaphorical' language of populist symbolic appeals, if the very understanding of social positions is the object of symbolic struggles?¹⁷

Bourdieu's answer adds another vantage point: Going back to the principle of homologies, he contends that the divisions of social space are mirrored in real life by everyday cultural practices of *distinction*, and are internalized in a pre-reflexive, embodied sense of social position, the *habitus*. Because the distribution of leisure activities, cultural tastes, and the presentation of the body are specific to different regions of the social space, these cultural objects become positional markers. By learning to read these markers, individuals are socialized into 'knowing one's place' and 'finding one's way' in social space in a practical, pre-reflexive way (Boltanski and Thévenot 1983; Bourdieu 2013). Because it is formed in interaction with the minute signals of the social world, the habitus is an internalized version of the principles structuring society, telling us what is appropriate for 'people like us'.

For structurally locating the populist repertoire this is significant in two ways: Firstly, we understand how the social metaphors of this repertoire are grasped intuitively, viscerally even, without the necessity of class consciousness, ideology, the identification with groups or parties, nor the reflexive availability of the social space. Again we

¹⁶ This type of strategy competes with hegemonic modes of cross-class incorporation, as well as with the mobilization of class consciousness proper, letting us conjecture that the resonance of the populist cultural repertoire is predicated on crises in hegemonic class coalitions (Fraser 2017; Kumkar 2018), as well as low levels of class consciousness (Dörre et al. 2018; Kalb 2011).

¹⁷ We remember that there were doubts as to whether we could apply the logic of a homology between symbolic and social differences to societies in which – different from clan societies – there is a multitude of symbolic systems signaling group membership. Bourdieu's more elaborate answer underlying the aspects presented in this section consists of a double role of the habitus as incorporated structure and generator of symbolic distinctions that by and large repeat these structures: 'structured structure' and 'structuring structure' (Bourdieu 1990; Maton 2013).

encounter here the instinctive disgust and pride over our pint glass, as well as the deeper reason for the centrality of the body, its public presentation, sublimation, cultivation, and use as a metaphor for class positions (including middle class imaginaries of ‘white working class’ bodies and tastes (Lawler 2005)).

Secondly, the mechanism of distinction – the sense of ‘what is (not) appropriate for people like me’ – can reveal how specific symbolic objects deployed in the populist repertoire derive their appeal from the relational demarcation of social identities localizable in social space. The structural focus on meaning created by systems of *difference* can refocus our understanding of why certain symbolic objects become the center of symbolic struggles. We would expect them to be defined by the lines of distinction that stabilize the social identities of constituent parts of populist class alliances; either as objects allowing for a positive symbolic revaluation common to heterogeneous class constituencies, or as metaphors for social positions that are the object of common boundary drawing.

10. What is gained by viewing populism as symbolic class struggle?

Such a differential, or relational perspective might help overcome certain impasses and inconsistencies encountered in the attempt to isolate the populist element of the ‘attitudes’ and ‘values’ of populist sympathizers (Fatke 2019; Castanho Silva et al. 2019). These efforts, though often insightful in their own right, are at times reminiscent of older theories of ‘totemism’, searching for a direct link between discrete social groups and their symbolic representations by similarity or irrational beliefs. The structural perspective helps us to widen the angle, proposing instead to look at the populist repertoire as a means by which populations impose distinctions and classifications of the social world favorable to their own social being and self understandings; and as a set of positional metaphors that are primarily differentiated from *other* symbolic representations of social position.

Operationalizing this type of understanding for empirical research certainly requires a deeper knowledge of the social, cultural, and political cleavages structuring the context under study. But the search for homologies and metaphors sketched here is perfectly compatible with conventional quantitative frameworks and designs. This is shown in a highly original survey-based study by Bornschieer et al. (2019) who gauge the subjective closeness of Swiss voters with a set of culturally demarcated social groups, such as ‘cosmopolitans’, ‘culturally interested people’, or ‘rural residents’; as well as their distance from other groups.

The authors firstly show that there is a strong correspondence between structural locations and culturally connotated group identities: Highly educated respondents and those belonging to the occupational class of sociocultural professionals (i.e. the cultural fraction of the dominant class) identify with ‘cosmopolitans’, ‘culturally interested

people', and 'people with migration background' but not 'with Swiss people' (although all survey participants were Swiss nationals). The opposite is true for workers.

Secondly, these expressions of closeness mediate the effect of class locations on political support for the populist right and 'New Left': The probability of voting for the populist right is less than 15% for someone who feels 'very close to culturally interested people', while it is 50% for someone who feels 'not at all close' to this group (Bornschieer et al. 2019, 23-4). Lastly, the cultural identity categories associated with structural positions and political camps do not simply reflect respondents' circumstances of living. There is, for instance, a high identification with 'rural residents' among supporters of the populist right, including those *not* living in the countryside themselves.

In this way, the authors reveal the striking centrality of class-based cultural distinctions for political realignments in the 'populist moment'. Systems of symbolic differences on the level of social geography (center – periphery), cultural consumption (interested – not interested), group categories (migrants and cosmopolitans – Swiss nationals) and political camps exhibit a large degree of homology. They are organized by the symbolic distinctions of the Swiss populist repertoire, associating the 'popular' with the rural, down-to-earth, unrefined, 'from here'. Cultural elements (like feeling close to rural dwellers) attain their meaning as metaphors for locations in a relational social space.¹⁸

On the side of populist performances, revisiting Bourdieu's update of structuralist analysis gives us a clearer picture of the populist 'totemism' at work around an innocent pint of English Ale, Salvini on the beach, Farage enjoying Spanish champagne, or Trump eating burgers, that is, their involvement in symbolic struggles over and within definite class relations. These struggles are waged both between dominant and dominated positions, as well as, perhaps more importantly, between fractions of the dominant class. Their objects result from social practices of distinction, a visceral form of metaphorical thought based on an embodied and habitual sense for social differences. The populist symbolic repertoire's double structure allows for both usurpatory boundary drawing against higher regions of social space and horizontal ones, e.g. against the cultural pole of the dominant class, predisposing it for specific forms of class alliances.

Investigations of all these elements could help extend the insights of the sociocultural approach to populism developed by Ostiguy, Moffitt, and others. We could begin by picking apart elements of the populist symbolic repertoire and clarifying empirically how they resonate with the relational self-understandings of various class fractions. My intention in this article was to provide some theoretical indications as to what a sociologically grounded sociocultural approach to populism could be founded upon, first and

¹⁸ Seen from the vantage point of the 'ideational approach' to populism (Mudde 2007), such identifications appear also as ripe with *ideology*. But once connected with its structural locations, 'ideology' would here perhaps take on a more classical sense: less mental system of normative propositions about a 'society' divided in parts or the primacy of the '*volonté general*', more "imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 1970), i.e. their social position.

foremost by inviting a more fearless re-appropriation of the structuralist tradition, which has been unduly sidelined both by mainstream research on populism and the Laclauian camp.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FEMINISM GOES MAINSTREAM?

Feminist Themes in Mainstream Popular Music in Sweden and Denmark

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ABSTRACT: In recent years, feminist scholars have turned their attention to the seeming resurgence of feminism in mainstream culture. This resurgence coincides with a rise in feminist activism, as testified by the many campaigns that have mobilized millions of people around the issues of violence against women, sexual harassment, reproductive injustice, and abortion rights. This article draws on the literature on the cultural consequences of social movements to explore if and how the new wave of grassroots feminist activism influenced feminist themes in top-charting mainstream popular music. We conducted a thematic analysis of the lyrics of all female-performed songs in the Swedish Top-60 and Danish Top-40 between 2017 and 2018. Our results show that neoliberal feminist themes count for the majority of the feminist themes detected. However, performers also employed themes ascribable to radical and liberal feminist traditions. We conclude with some reflections on the commercialization of feminist messages, pointing to openings for further research.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Outcomes; Feminisms; Mainstream Popular Music; Neoliberal feminism; Social Movements; Thematic Analysis.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, scholars have called attention to a resurgence of feminism in mainstream culture. In opposition to the rather fierce repudiation of feminism performed by at least two generations of young women at the turn of the 1990s (Butler 1992; McRobbie 2004) it seems we moved back to a feminist moment, in which feminism not only still seems necessary but also increasingly mainstream (Rottenberg 2018). Contributing to this revival is the fact that feminism has been presented proudly by popular icons like Beyoncé and Lady Gaga. A heated debate sprung up around the performances of such artists, the strengths or contradictions of their articulation and embodiment of feminism (Halberstam 2012; Weidhase, 2015; Martínez-Jiménez, Gálvez-Muñoz and Solano-Caballero, 2018) Co-occurring with the resurgence of “celebrity feminism” (Hollows 2000), the last decade has also seen the rise of feminist campaigns across the globe, such as the “Ni Una Menos” campaign started in Argentina in 2015 that quickly propagated in neighbour countries and Europe; protests following in the wake of the #metoo initiative; mobilizations against reproductive injustice and the denial of abortion rights; and many others.

These two contemporary manifestations of feminism are often described – by artists and activists themselves – by imagining a “spectrum of feminism” (Annie Lennox, in Weidhase 2015) where celebrity feminists stay at one end and feminists working at the grassroots represent the other. In fact, the new “pop”, “mainstream” version of feminism has been highly criticized for urging women to “lean in”, “find their true potential” and “let go of their inhibitions”, rather than act collectively for political change, thus repackaging the critique of unequal gender relations as an individual grievance. The critical argument goes on, highlighting how claims for individual-based empowerment coexist with all kinds of inequalities, including, paradoxically, gender inequalities (Farhall 2015; Keller and Ringrose 2015; Gill 2016; McRobbie 2004; Miller and Plencner 2018; Rivers 2017; Rottenberg 2018). In explaining the emergence of what has been defined as neoliberal feminism some critics have argued that its success is the result of a mechanism of co-optation, through which certain aspects of feminist discourse have been included in the strategy of social legitimation and cultural hegemony artfully crafted by the project of cognitive capitalism. In the words of Nancy Fraser, this “dangerous liaison” between feminism and neoliberalism was “an

unfortunate coincidence” in history forced by the hegemony of the neoliberal project (Fraser 2013; 2016).

We foresee at least two ways of approaching *how* neoliberalism has co-opted feminism in mainstream culture. As already anticipated, authors coming from critical traditions argue that in a moment of prominent liberalization of the capitalist economy, neoliberalism has found its ally in a liberalized form of feminism, which has dissolved its solidaristic vision of emancipation into a “female individualism”, namely the idea that women are free to emancipate themselves by *competing* –in education, in the workplace and everywhere – as new privileged subjects of meritocracy (McRobbie 2004). Thus, neoliberal feminism is a by-product of capitalism, as it furnishes ideological legitimation for the exploitation of (mainly) middle-class, professional women (Rottenberg, 2018). A simple adaptation to a new context, if we consider that since its onset, capitalism has exploited and mobilized gender inequalities for its own ends, at the same time influencing social gender norms (Federici 2015 [1998]). The needs of liberalized market and economic growth during the neoliberal period has loosened some patriarchal chains to allow, on the one hand new forms of women’s exploitation, on the other hand the construction of a veil of legitimation around the neoliberal project.

Taking a different perspective, research on the cultural outcomes of social movements posits that social movements may affect cultural production indirectly, e.g. by creating market demand and by attracting performers to draw from new themes and discourses (Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Isaac 2009). As Caiani and Padoan noted in the introduction of this special issue, “music can also, sometimes decisively, contribute to the dissemination of knowledge produced by a movement (della Porta and Pavan, 2017), and it is often a substantial part of such knowledge” (intro SI: 16). In this way, neoliberal feminism can be seen as a partial and unintended consequence of feminist mobilization, to the extent that discourses created within social movement spheres of action are then propagated within the cultural field through the actions of cultural entrepreneurs. Neoliberal feminism can thus be seen as emerging within the space between movement, performers and markets that has been opened by more radical forms of feminist activism. While the latter argument does not deny the structural

basis of contemporary neoliberal feminism, it also allows us to see how progressive social movements impact on the dynamics of the cultural mainstream, thus moving beyond a tradition that locate social movements' cultural outcomes only in the subcultural scene. As such, it allows for a more complex understanding of how feminism is manifested in mainstream culture, one that does not perceive it simply as a legitimizing discourse, but as a contradictory combination of reactive and emancipatory themes.

There is no inherent contradiction between the two lines of argument. In fact, in the last decades, social movement theory has increasingly abandoned linear understandings of the consequences of social movements. Instead, contemporary authors consider social movements to produce effects through complex interactions among contenders and authorities, thereby blurring the distinction between movements' intended effects and those produced by co-optation (Bosi, Giugni & Uba 2016). On the other hand, this opens up new avenues for research on how social movement messages are embedded in popular culture, despite the reality of commercialization and co-optation effects. Such research is important for gaining a better understanding of the cultural implications of contemporary feminisms outside of politicized subcultures, and for avoiding monolithic and stereotypical depictions of mainstream culture.

This paper explores the variation of pop cultural feminism in political environments characterized by a long and successful trajectories of feminist movements, by examining the thematic content of top-charting songs in Sweden and Denmark in 2017 and 2018. We purposefully choose the two cases since they are characterized by a configuration of factors that, we assume, can influence the presence and varieties of feminist themes in the popular musical fields: long histories of comparatively successful feminist mobilization within and outside cultural and political institutions (Peterson, Thörn & Wahlström 2018), large domestic cultural production, and recent cycles of feminist mobilization.

First, we ask: are feminist themes present in mainstream pop music, as the literature on neoliberal feminism suggests? Second, if present, what types of feminist themes are there, and how do they connect to existing feminist traditions? We find that feminist themes are a minor presence in both countries, although more prominently in Sweden.

In line with existing literature on feminism and popular culture, we also find that the themes used in the lyrics are dominated by neoliberal appeals to self-empowerment, although intersecting with themes attributable to liberal and radical feminist traditions. Future research should determine whether this can be attributed to the potential influence of contemporary activism, and extend the comparative breadth of the project.

The paper begins with a background section in which we develop our argument on the connection between the mainstream cultural sphere and social movement cultural outcomes, taking into consideration two different literatures: the cultural sociology of popular music, and the literature on social movement consequences. We then present our original dataset and analytical method, including emergent themes. The fourth section presents the empirical analysis. We conclude with some reflections and suggestions for future research.

2. Background: Mainstream culture as a social movement outcome

2.1 Mainstream?

What are we talking about, when diagnosing the penetration of feminist themes into “the mainstream”? In the vernacular use of the term, “mainstream culture” refers to the ideas, attitudes, or activities that are shared by most people and regarded as normal or conventional, with a certain degree of conformity. We draw from this common understanding of the mainstream when we refer to “mainstream culture” as, in the last instance, a field of cultural consumption and production catering to large and varied audiences. Beyond differences in size, consumption in the mainstream requires few cultural resources (such as the knowledge of subcultural codes), and it is thereby accessible to larger sections of the population (Laing 2015). Speaking of mainstream popular music, we refer to “popular forms of music, usually stylistically heterogeneous, situated in the sociocultural context of a late modern global capitalism” (Baker, Bennett and Taylor 2013: viii). For its heterogeneity and flexibility,

the mainstream is sometimes criticized as a valid category for cultural studies (Thornton 1995), to the extent that its usefulness lies only in its opposition to the “subcultural” field (Huber 2013).

In empirical and historical terms, the boundaries between “subculture” and “mainstream” are often blurred. The question of how cultural and political subversion is commercialized and sold as mainstream products, and what happens to them in the process, has long engaged Marxist scholars. Researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCSS) at the University of Birmingham explored at length the mainstream-subculture dialectic, or “class struggle in and over culture” (Hall 2009). Rejecting the pessimistic claims of the Frankfurt School, considering the mass-produced aspects of popular music as cultural hegemonic elements in the hands of the bourgeoisie, the CCCS re-evaluated popular music as a “potentially subversive resource when placed in the hands of working-class audiences” (Bennett 2008: 423). Even though the field broadened significantly over the years, popular music studies’ main focus remains subcultures and their style, meaning, practices and reception (e.g. Bennett 1999; Duncombe 1997; Rose 1994; Thornton 1995;)¹.

In contrast to this tendency, recent scholarship re-validated the mainstream as a central site within the popular cultural field, with significant cultural value, and “thus one that is in urgent need of detailed consideration” (Baker, Bennett and Taylor 2013: ix; see also Appen et al., 2015); also observing a dynamic interplay between subcultural and mainstream cultural forms. An account of this dynamic was already provided by classical works on subcultures. For example, Dick Hebdige (1979) illustrates the constant traffic through which the mainstream borrows from subcultural expressions, and how this inclusion triggers the creation of new alternative cultures. More recent contributions have shown how this ‘traffic’ usually does not take place on equal terms but rather asserts mainstream dominance. As Maskell notes in her analysis on the controversial feminist legacy of the Riot Grrrls “historically, subcultures and social

¹ For works on music and feminist subcultures see Morris (2015) on the women’s music movement and the DIY experience of the Olivia Records; also, on the Riot Grrrls and the feminist third wave see Maskell (2013).

movements, [...] have been ‘adopted’ by the mainstream in order to negate the power or threat such marginalized communities held” (Maskell 2013, p. 195). But there is also an arrow of influence pointing in the other direction, from movements to the mainstream.

2.2 Cultural consequences of social movements

The broader and often unintentional impact social movements have on beliefs, identities and symbolic production is addressed by research on the cultural consequences of social movements (Amenta and Polletta 2019). This sub-field forms part of the wider study of social movement outcomes, which also includes research on how social movements shape politics and policy, and how social movements shape individual biographies (see Amenta, Caren, Chiarello and Su 2010; Bosi, Giugni and Uba 2016; Vestergren, Drury and Hammar Chiriac 2017). In the literature, cultural outcomes are often considered the least researched. This is due in part to its “harrowly enigmatic dependent variable” (Earl, 2004: 511), owing to the “limited and fragmented” use of concepts of culture in the social movement literature more broadly (Ullrich, Daphi and Baumgarten 2015: 5). Even within the literature on cultural consequences, there is thus a range of individual areas of study, including social movements’ impact on collectively held beliefs, values, and memories (e.g. Banaszak and Ondercin 2016; Daphi and Zamponi 2019), broader worldviews and identities (Rochon 1998), and cultural and symbolic production, such as literary genres and styles of language (Earl 2004).

Our current focus is on social movements’ impact on mainstream popular music, i.e. an instance of cultural production. We will briefly review those major contributions that have pushed forward the research agenda on this specific topic, broadening our gaze beyond mainstream popular music to include other cultural media. Within this very limited literature, authors have studied the US labour movement’s impact on realist fiction (Isaac, 2009), second wave feminism and lifestyle magazines (Farrell 1995), popular music and 20th century social movements (Eyerman and Jamison 1998), and the civil rights movement and American children’s books (Pescosolido, Grauerholz and Milkie 1997). Without direct reference to social movement theory, but with similar

understanding of the link between political mobilization and cultural production, are Kaplan (1992) on art and social protest in early 20th century Catalonia, Peloff (2011) on female public profiles in US mass media and second wave feminism, and Friedman (2013) on protest songs and their connection with social movements since the nineteenth century to date.

Isaac's (2009) account of the American Labour Problem Novel (LPN) makes the most sophisticated contribution to a theory of how social movements affect cultural genres. Combining the theories of ecologist and institutionalist cultural sociology with social movement theory, he links the emergence of the LPN to changes in publishing laws, the growth and growing contentiousness of the labour movement, and the increasing prominence of realist aesthetics, which combined in a dialogical relationship between writers, the literature market, and contentious politics. Isaac argues that the "labour movement, and the collective resistance it encountered, induced a new discursive 'space'" (Isaac 2009: 946), which attracted pro- and anti-labour writers to portray workplace conflict. It thereby "constructed and circulated movement grievances, strategies, collective characterizations, and identities in ways that were relatively autonomous of social movement organizations" (Ibidem: 957).

Eyerman and Jamison (1998) agree that social movements open up cultural spaces, i.e. "creative, or experimental, arenas for the practicing of new forms of social and cognitive action", "carved out of existent contexts" (p. 21). This act of opening spaces occurs dialogically between movements, markets, and artists, the latter ranging from "movement intellectuals" such as Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie to countercultural performers such as Janis Joplin or Jimi Hendrix. "In both form and content", the authors argue, "some popular music in the 1960s could function as another kind of social theory, translating the political radicalism that was expressed by relatively small coterie of critical intellectuals and political activists into a much different and far more accessible idiom. Like theory, the best popular songs of the time identified social problems, gave names to vague feelings of alienation and oppression, and even offered explanations, albeit in poetic terms" (ibidem: 139). Similarly, Friedman's (2013) contribution addresses the impact of social protest music on society, considering the latter as functions of broader political movements. The musical movements covered in the edited volume vary greatly according to the context – from nineteenth-century African American anti-slavery music, to the 1990s Riot Grrrls – and the degree of direct connection to protest, but they all share a leitmotif, that is "addressing societal wrongs

whether based on race, gender, or class and at the same time offering solutions or comfort” (ibidem: IV). In summing up the results of the different contributions, Friedman concludes that “[p]erformance is clearly a potent medium for spreading and making accessible what otherwise might be problematic and unpopular. [protest] song’s poetry and music can change reality, maybe not by immediately resulting in changes in law, but by having a deeper impact on the society that makes laws” (ibidem: XV).

In summary, the literature views the impact of social movements on cultural production as an unintentional consequence of contention, as social movements open up creative spaces between contention, cultural fields, and markets. Thus, Pescosolido and colleagues (1997) linked the decline of Black representation in children’s books in the 1960s to market uncertainty in the context of intense contention on racial issues, while the unprecedented growth of Black representation after the peak of contention relates to the increasing acknowledgement of Black writers as legitimate artists. Farrell, in turn, related the collapse of *Ms. Magazine* to its failure to balance a feminist readership with an increasingly conservative commercial environment (2015). It is therefore crucial not only to see *if* social movements have an impact on cultural production, but if so, *how* their impact is translated into cultural products.

3. Analytical strategy and data

We purposefully focus on Sweden and Denmark because the two countries present an influential configuration of factors that may give a leeway for a variety of feminist themes to resonate in popular music, a cultural medium frequently described as mainstream (Baker, Bennett and Taylor, 2013). Both countries present long histories of feminist mobilization, although in recent years Denmark has experienced a waning in interest for feminism (Peterson, Thörn and Wahlström 2018; Mikkelsen 2018, but see Dahlerup 2018). Indicators usually consider the two countries at the forefront for pursuing gender equality and human development, and both are characterized by a long-lasting political commitment to women’s rights in high-profile political statements

and programs, partially as a consequence of the early institutionalization of some strands of the feminist movement (Peterson, Thörn and Wahlström 2018). Most importantly, feminist mobilizations continue to be present in both countries. In particular, during the period under study the #metoo protests were salient in both countries and present in public opinion (if more so in Sweden, see Askanius and Møller 2019), alongside domestic feminist mobilizations. Particularly active in the cultural field, in 2018 Swedish feminists organized the country's first women's and queer-only mainstream music festival in response to reports of sexual violence at public gatherings and cultural events². The same year, the Swedish government passed a law on sexual consent, long fought for by feminist activists (Carlsson Tenitskaja and Svensson 2018; Thurfjell 2018). Finally, both countries have considerable domestic cultural industries (the Atlantic 2013). The two cases, thus, can be considered as two "influential cases" (Seawright and Gerring, 2008), in that they present a influential, not common, configurations of independent variables that can likely influence the presence of our outcome, i.e., the variety of feminist themes.

The empirical section is based on a qualitative thematic analysis of lyrics performed by Nordic female-identified artists (or female-fronted groups) appearing on Swedish and Danish weekly charts for sales and streams in 2017 and 2018, as reported by each country's recording industry association. The restriction of the sample to Nordic and female-identified artists is based on two theoretical assumptions. First, we assume that it is primarily among domestic artists that the impact of domestic social movements will be most prominent. Thus, while feminist movements exist worldwide, their current state in the given settings will be most likely to affect the production and consumption of artists active within that country. Second, we assume that it is among female artists that feminist themes will be most visible. In doing so, we are not excluding the possibility that men artists are precluded to adopt a feminist discourse. Simply, we draw on the evidence that in most of the cases, it's female artists that tend to portray themselves as feminist. By making these restrictions, we also keep the dataset manageable for qualitative analysis.

² Info available at <https://www.statementfestival.se/en>. Accessed on 3rd January 2020.

To produce the sample of songs, we first collected the weekly top-40 rankings (top-60 for Sweden) for aggregated sales and streams as reported by the recording industry association in each country³. We then compiled a list of every unique song appearing at least once in each chart. Finally, we sampled songs performed – in full or in part – by female-identified Nordic (i.e. Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic and Finnish) artists and groups. In total, Nordic artists were represented in approximately one third of all songs in the dataset. The number was slightly higher in Denmark (40 %) than in Sweden (26 %). Out of the 371 songs performed by Nordic artists, 86, or 23 %, were performed by female or female-fronted performers. Among these, 72 were Swedish, 13 were Danish, and one was Norwegian.

We employ thematic analysis on our corpus of songs. As defined by Boyatzis (1999) thematic analysis is a “process for encoding qualitative information” (ibidem: 4), where the identifications of “themes”, serves as a way to identify, encode and interpret different patterns in heterogeneous data. More than a method *per se*, thematic analysis is well understood as an analytical strategy, which allows for a lot of flexibility in the analysis, as well as to keep together both deductive and inductive approaches to qualitative data analysis. In addition, thematic analysis it is not bounded to the semantic interpretation of the text, but it admits the identification of latent themes and the employment of both during the coding procedure (ibidem: 16).

In the first step, we did a line by line coding of the entire dataset, using NVivo software. We then aggregated all the codes inductively produced into a smaller number of thematic categories, subnodes. The subnodes included expressions of economic insecurity, of heartbreak, political oppression, and so on (see table 1 below). Each of these subnodes, we found, could also be coded into particular relational

³ For Sweden, we have used Digilistan (<https://sverigesradio.se/sida/topplista.aspx?programid=2697>), which is based on reporting from IFPI Sweden. For Denmark, we have used Hitlisten (<http://www.hitlisten.nu/>), based on reporting from IFPI Denmark.

settings, as e.g. economic insecurity could be located to individual experience, the experience of a couple, or something more general. Finally, we coded whether each subnode made use of gendered categories, e.g. if a romantic relationship was gendered or not.

Table 1. Themes detected in the lyrics

"Problems" themes	"Solutions" themes
1) Being wronged (e.g. cheating, mistrust)	1) Economic empowerment
2) Fatalism, hopelessness, inevitability	2) Loyalty, dedication
3) Jealousy	3) Mutual support
4) Loneliness, depression	4) Personal empowerment, self-assertion
5) Mutual hurt	5) Collective action
6) Other's weakness	6) Recklessness, abandon
7) Structural inequalities, political inefficacy	7) Self-objectification
8) Self-depreciation	8) Sexual and physical release
9) Sexual dissatisfaction	9) Sexual empowerment
10) Submission, subjection	10) Political action
11) Trapped, wanting out (of relationship)	

Sources: Authors' elaboration

Having concluded the first round of coding, we aggregated the various subnodes into two mutually exclusive nodes, which we dubbed "problems" and "solutions". Thus, a song could portray a feeling of loneliness, and propose that it be solved through submission to a heterosexual partner. However, the same problem could also be solved through (female) homosociality, or by more lasting forms of social change, depending on the authors' intention. Thus, the distinction between problems and solutions is similar to the distinction between *diagnostic* and *prognostic* frames in social movement studies (Benford and Snow 2000), albeit with a broader meaning. We found that this general sorting of the data was useful for the in-depth analysis, as it allowed us to better situate particular themes, and how they related to each other within the narrative of the overall lyric structure (for a similar approach, see James

2017). Notably, the problem/solution was almost universally present in the material. Table 1 shows the final distribution of subnodes into the two major nodes.

In the last part of the analysis, we employed the different combinations of the problems and solutions themes presented in each lyric to trace back the elements of different feminist traditions. In doing so, we considered the narrative of the lyric, its structure as well as the official music videos (if available) following Appen et al.'s (2015) approach to songs' interpretation. By feminist traditions, we mean different systems of explanation for the pervasiveness of and potential solutions to gender inequality and oppression. To come up with this set of ideal typical traditions we essentially proceeded inductively again, first approaching the different combinations of subcodes in the sample with a wide range of feminist schools in mind (e.g. Dhamoon 2013), and then eliminating those not found to be relevant for the musical field under study. What remained were three theories: neoliberal, liberal and radical feminism.

Neoliberal feminism is characterized by "broad support for individual achievement in business, government, and other areas of society, and a dismissal of the collective goals' of the women's movement's agenda" (Eisenstein 2016). Strategically, neoliberal feminism rests on the empowerment of individual women, either through the promotion of "talent cultivation" and investment targeted toward female business-owners, or through the promotion of an ideology of individual advancement and entrepreneurship (Eisenstein 2016; Rottenberg 2018). In the view of neoliberal feminism, the best strategy to produce gender equality is completely disconnected from any idea of social and collective justice, and instead revolves around meritocracy and personal achievement. As such, neoliberal feminism is congruent with a conception that makes "the competitive individual responsible for her own welfare, [so that] any failures such as poverty and crime can be sheeted home to her individual inadequacies, rather than those of society as a whole" (Eisenstein 2016). The most critical voices in the debates have even dismissed the possibility of considering neoliberal feminism as a proper form of feminism. From this perspective, feminism is at its core a form of social critique with an "ethical commitment to egalitarian social relations" (Sandoval 2000: 61–63). Given its tight entanglement with neoliberal ideology, neoliberal feminism lacks any reference to social justice (Fraser 2013). The

ideal thematic configuration of neoliberal feminism thus combines the stipulation of collective issues of gender inequality with individual solutions, especially when concerning “empowerment”, be it sexual, economic or political.

Like its neoliberal variant, *liberal feminism* builds its critique of gender inequality on individualistic assumptions, drawing on contract theory and individual rights. It employs rights-based frames to underline the lack of basis for the unequal treatment reserved to women and men in the public sphere, and seeks to integrate women where they are absent, maintaining that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men (Mill and Mill 1970 [1869]). Liberal feminism seeks gradual change and considers the state a suitable agent of change, as it becomes the legal guarantor of gender equality. Differing from neoliberal feminism, change is demanded on the institutional level: By, for instance, the quest for women’s inclusion into male-dominated professions and equal wages, anti-discrimination legislation and affirmative action, liberal feminists seek to overcome institutionalized misogyny through reforms. Thus, liberal feminism is relevant when both the problem and the solution are put in gendered and structural terms, but when solutions do not question gender relations as such.

In the words of feminist journalist and musical critic Ellen Willis *radical feminism* “began as a political movement to end male supremacy in all areas of social and economic life” (Willis 1984: 81). The theory of gender inequality elaborated by radical feminists shifts from discrimination to oppression. At the centre of this is the concept of patriarchy, which entered into the common imaginary of second wave feminism together with other terms and practices like consciousness-raising groups, “the personal is political,” and “sisterhood”. Radical feminists argue that the oppression of women is hard to eradicate, because male domination is deeply ingrained in social structure. Its prime tool is violence against women, as in rape, sexual harassment, or more subtle forms of control over women’s bodies. Radical feminists propose a gender politics of resistance to the dominant gender order (Lorber 2012). This consists in sexual liberation, as an autonomous use of the body defying male control; and the quest for separate, diversified social arrangements specifically for women, instead of their inclusion into patriarchal systems (e.g. Morris 2015). Radical feminism is relevant when problems are posed in terms of patriarchal relations, and when solutions involve a wider critique of gender and sexual relations.

Of course, very few songs in all, within or outside of the absolute mainstream, fit perfectly under either of the feminist theories listed above. However, as we will show below, there are certainly a number of lyrics that do approximate the ideal type. On the other hand, there are also a great many that cannot be located within any of them. Before proceeding into the results section, we will therefore briefly go through two songs that, for different reasons, do not belong to either of the feminist theories: Zara Larsson's *TG4M* (2017) and Loreen's *Statements* (2017). These songs allow us to define the outer boundaries of what we mean by feminist themes. They also allow us to briefly illustrate the logic of analysis.

Zara Larsson's *TG4M* ("Too good for me") has the narrator going back and forth between yearning and acting dismissively toward a male lover. On one hand, it appears that the lover is "all that [she] needs" in order to be complete. On the other, her unpredictable behaviour and self-destructive lifestyle makes her feel undeserving of his attention, love, and esteem. In the end, she does not appear to come to any solution apart from urging him to chase her down anyway.

TGFM - Verse 1

I get high all the time
I get drunk out my mind and call you at five
in the morning
And I say what I like
And I don't like playing nice
I might pick a fight without warning
But it gets boring
I try to keep it cool
And turn it down for you
But I'm never gonna change
And that's why I be saying, boy

Chorus 1

You're too good for me, but I want, but I
want you anyway
And I know that I don't fit in, but I want,
but I want you anyway

Only you, only me, and that is all that I
need
Only you, only me, only you
Boy, you're too good for me but I want, but
I want you anyway

Verse 2

I don't pick up the phone
Take an hour or longer
To write something back when you text me
Tell you, "leave me alone"
Need some time on my own
But soon as you gone, come and get me
Oh, baby, come and get me, uh

Chorus 2

And that's why I be saying, boy [...]

Loreen's *Statements* exemplifies a song that draws upon a politicized discourse, but without matching our criteria. *Statements* locates its problem in the oppression and deception of an unnamed collective subject. What is more, the oppressive force is attempting to stifle opposition by the production of "empty words" and the titular statements. The narrator speaks from a point just before an anticipated insurgency, during which the collective subject is "building up for war", irrespective of the cost.

Statements is clearly set in a world of considerable and considerably unjust social forces. It is an unequal world, in which the subjects are experiencing oppression and persistent attempts at disarmament. However, these relations remain unmarked within the lyrics, and it is thereby impossible to say what the grounds of injustice are. Instead, it appears as a call to action against injustice in general.

Statement – Verse 1

Karma, karma, come and dance with me

Read between the lies and set me free
Imagine the beginning of the end
And we don't need to ever talk again

Chorus 1

We don't need your way out
We don't need your way out
We don't need your way out
Words cut but I don't care how much it
hurts
Shades for the blind
Can't hear your empty words
We don't need no

We don't need no
Statements
Statements

Verse 2

Mother Mary try to keep it real
Save your prayers for peace and let us heal
Did our best but you say otherwise
We're building up for war in paradise

To summarize, TG4M frequently draws on gendered themes in its problem formulation, as well as in its proposed solutions. However, these themes are altogether kept within the private sphere of individual or monogamous couple relations. Furthermore, the solution that Larsson's narrator proposes consists wholly in a concession of agency, the very agency that she appears to assert through her reckless and dismissive behaviour. *Statements*, on the other hand, draws strongly on a politicized discourse, albeit one in which gendered themes are never openly present.

4. Case study: Feminism at the top of the charts in Sweden and Denmark

Unsurprisingly, very few songs contain themes that we could understand as feminist. The vast majority (55 songs in total) moves entirely within the realm of love songs, whose main themes are (heterosexual) monogamous romances, without any reference to gendered power relations or inequalities. Beyond these, there are also a number of others, such as Christmas songs and songs like Loreen's *statements*, that go beyond conventional themes, without however touching upon any feminist themes or tradition (e.g. Fjällgren and Aninia 2017; Lundell, Lazee and Miinou 2018). In the handful of cases where we see traces of feminist themes, neoliberal feminism prevails. However,

it is not as homogeneous as it is often depicted in existing accounts of neoliberal hegemony (see Farhall 2015). Instead, it is often articulated in incomplete form, at the intersection of other theories. In the following, we will therefore focus on four songs, which we identify as coming the closest to the ideal types. Zara Larsson's *Make that money girl* (2017) represents neoliberal feminism, Icona Pop's *Girls, Girls* (2017) and Gabrielle's *5 fine frøkner* (2014) (Five posh young women) will exemplify the uneasy intersection of neoliberal and radical feminism, while Linnea Henriksson's (2018) *Småtjejer* (Little girls) illustrates the intersection between neoliberal and liberal feminism.

Zara Larsson's *Make that Money Girl* is structured around the narrator's attempts to make an unnamed young girl realize her potential to reach economic and social success. Throughout the song, however, there are multiple markers of ambiguity, which makes it possible to read the unnamed "other" simultaneously as an actual individual and as a representative of the generic category of "girls". For instance, the song is dense [with](#) references to "pop" feminist tropes such as female business leaders (name-checking record label executives Sylvia Rhone and Julie Swidler) and female presidents. The core message is that the song's protagonist can become whatever she wants to be ("get up on the throne, that's where you belong"), by believing in her own capacities, letting go of her inhibitions, fighting hecklers ("why you so hesitant?"; "conquer hate"). Still, the song also includes a call for solidarity among women, as Larsson urges the protagonist not to figuratively "work for the police".

Make that money – Verse 1

Get up on the throne (Queen)
 Get up on the throne, that's where you
 belong
 So get up on the throne (Queen)
 Sylvia Rhone, can you hear me say
 Floor to the ceilin' (Slay)
 Stack money, stack millions (Slay)
 Oh, what a feelin' (Slay)
 Julie Swidler run the buildin' everyday

Pre-chorus

We don't run from the devil, don't work
 for the police
 Stay up on a level so high they can't
 reach (Queen)
 So get up on the throne (Queen)
 'Cause you know, they call you one in a
 million
 So get you all of that millions, yeah eh
 Now make that money, girl

Chorus 1

Make that money, girl
Make that money
Make that money, girl
Make that money

Verse 2

Why you so hesitant?
You can be the next female President
Livin' proof, check the evidence
Me and you, yeah, heaven sent

Bridge

(Put the money in my hand, money in my hand)
Time's up, runnin' 'round me in my truck
We gon' celebrate, party everyday
One love, that's all I ever wanted
We can conquer hate (Conquer hate)
Time's up, runnin' 'round me in my truck
We gon' celebrate, party everyday
Don't judge, have a little trust
Ain't nobody brave
Now make that money, girl [...]

Make that money girl is close to a perfect representation of the neoliberal feminist framework as it has been elaborated by recent scholarship. In the very logic of problem formulations and solutions, there is an overwhelming focus on personal (economic) success, which is a viable aim to be achieved through personal responsibility. The unnamed girl is told to overcome her inhibitions, pull herself up by her bootstraps, and thus get on top of those factors trying to keep her down. There is no mention of social change, even in the cumulative sense. Further, the song establishes its narrative through multiple references to neoliberal feminist tropes such as female presidents, female business leaders, and the symbol of the “queen”.

Linnea Henriksson's *Småtjejer* (Little girls) takes a broad view on gender relations in contemporary Sweden. Rather than sticking to one specific narrative, the two rapped verses seemed to us as an itinerary of contemporary feminist critiques. In verse 1, Henriksson makes reference to common gendered stereotypes regarding women, starting from those working in corporate workplaces. In this respect, she refers to the stereotype that see women reaching positions of power only through personal (sexual, in this case) favours. Also, the corporation environment requires women leaders to

conform to a masculine style of power exertion. As a second stereotype, she compares the fate of this successful woman to the one of a schoolmate of hers, who got stuck in a very conventional life because of “her laziness”. Another emerging theme is the social pressure put on women, which have to perform according to multiple gender roles (the desirability of motherhood, the necessity to reconcile their careers with their role as family caregivers). The verse 2 then adds, in specific terms, a critique of: workplace relations, payment inequality, the gender blindness rooted in (male)meritocratic rhetoric, showing how men are at the same time benefiting from maintaining the status quo. The #metoo movement is also specifically mentioned in this section. In the choruses, Henriksson calls for young women (identified as her own fans) to “do what you want, and the world will never be the same”, although the bridge shows her doubting whether this will actually lead to lasting change.

Småtjejer – Verse 1

I know a woman, she runs this giant corporation
She reaps bodies with her heels, she's really dangerous
She was shy when we were young, so it's a little strange
Everyone says she's spread her legs
Another girl in the same class, she turned into nothing
She lives in the same city, got a house, a family
You know she works in nursing, complains that it's too much
No one is surprised, we all think it's so typical
She sounds pretty lazy right?
I don't sound like a feminist
I'm just kidding, can't offend anyone
Got to be careful
Little girl takes it easy
Don't act so important

I know my watch is saying tick-tick
Maybe I don't want to have kids
Can I say this without risk?
Stick to your business.

Chorus 1

Young girls love my music
Do what you want, the world won't be the same
Revolutionary, revolutionary

Verse 2

Young girls always get labelled with something
Label them back, the way it goes
I am the quality stamp for swedish pop
But if a woman dares to dream, then it always stops
A queen at the top
The others fight at the bottom

You won't get a second chance if you've
got one
You have to sharpen your claws
Because everyone follows trends
Me too, #metoo
"We don't see gender we see competence"
They make it sound like we all agree
But the woman works when the men's
gone home
No pay between four and five
It will be better for my little sister
But our big brother, his friends, they're not
feminists

They can afford it, they benefit from
ignoring it
As long as a woman is bound
None of us are free

Bridge

You have to say it again, say it again
Say it over and over again
If I say it again, say it again
Does something happen, does it ever
happen?

Småtjejer moves in the overlap between neoliberal and liberal feminism. It is clear from Henriksson's verses that the problems are generic, and structurally rooted ("But if a woman dares to dream, then it always stops; A queen at the top, the others fight at the bottom,") and that they require some form of collective action. This allows us to locate the song within the proximity of liberal feminism. Unlike the more radical feminist theories, these problems are not related to the gender system *as such*, but only to its surface inequalities. However, when she does propose solutions, these consist mostly of individual behaviours, in doing "what you want" and being true to oneself, and in developing individual resistances to perceived status of discriminations ("You have to sharpen your claws"). In the melancholy bridge, it even appears that Henriksson is suspicious of her own role as a feminist voice, and whether her critique really does matter. Thus, while her problem formulations are easily located within the liberal ideal type, the solutions on offer appear closer to a neoliberal framework, with its resigned attitude toward collective action and emphasis on individual empowerment.

The final two songs, Iona Pop's *Girls, Girls* and Gabrielle's *5 fine frøkner* (Five posh young women) both appear as incomplete examples at the intersections of radical and neoliberal feminist frames. They are also remarkably similar in themes, tones, and even

in the setting of their narratives (the club). We will therefore discuss them simultaneously.

Icona Pop, a duo of women DJs, take the club scene as a location where women are allowed to "crash and burn", to "dance off" the experience of hardship and heartbreak through sexual liberation ("Girls, girls, wanna feel it / [...] / Girls, girls, live and breathe it / Hearts broke a million times around"; "Some nights I remember / some nights I forget / there's boys I like better / but there's no regrets"). Between the verses and the chorus, the subject shifts from first person singular to a third person plural "girls", locating the duo's experience in that of an abstract womanhood. However, Icona Pop do not propose any clearly feminist solution, ending on the notion that while the club scene allows temporary release, everything will soon return to normal ("if I fall, I'll deal with that tomorrow maybe"; Even if it's for one night"). The lack to both semantic and latent reference to any sort of "solution" and the ambiguous problem formulation makes it difficult to place *Girls, Girls* within any of the established feminist theories. Its lack of structural analysis places it outside of liberal feminist theories, while its nihilism –its lack of reference to potential strategies of (individual) empowerment – puts it aside from neoliberal feminism. In fact, their construction of a world populated almost solely by women, in a narrative structured around broad female experiences, the reference to sexual liberation as a way of subverting traditional gender role, draws most prominently on the narrative styles of radical feminism, even if it does so within the confines of a conventional heterosexual framework.

Girls, girls - verse 1

Don't see your name, I bet you have a cool
one baby
You wanna play, just whisper in my ear and
maybe

Pre-chorus

Some nights I remember, some nights I
forget
There's boys I like better but there's no
regrets

Chorus

Girls, girls, wanna feel it
Hearts pumping, overheating
Girls, girls, live and breathe it
Hearts broke a million times, around
We dance it off
Girls, girls, wanna feel it
Never get enough, yeah

Verse 2

I lose control, I spin around in circles baby
And if I fall, I'll deal with that tomorrow,
maybe

Boy, you gotta do it right
Even if it's for one night
Boy, you gotta do it right

Bridge

Even if it's for one night

Like Icona Pop, Norwegian singer Gabrielle's *5 Fine Frøkner* (Five posh young women) set up a narrative of partial and temporary female emancipation within a club setting. Through deep female friendships the women, self-identified as members of a team, are safe to assert power onto the male crowd, offset accusations of inappropriate behaviour, and go beyond general problems of inadequacy and weakness. As poor and powerless as they are on the everyday life, the company makes it "feel as if we are flying over our entire city". However, this sense of empowerment and emancipation has a limited duration. Although the women claim that they will "never go home", and that they can always "put on another record", it is clear that their mode of emancipation only works within the scene of the club setting. When the night ends, it's back to whatever everyday life is like. In everyday life, the girls no longer have power over the male crowd, they are back to being broke and, because of it, located at the social margins.

Fine Frøkner – Verse 1

Oh Hosianna, Annotate Hevenu Shalom
Five pretty girls are never going home
The sound of something, setting us free
We don't have any money but that doesn't
mean a thing
And we don't want the world, because you
and me we are the world
The sound of something, setting us free
We don't have any money but we have
everything

Pre-chorus

You bring me up
Can't nothing bring me down

Chorus 1

No one else I'd rather be with
Five pretty girls up in the club, we're
deciding
Take it all the way into the sky

If there are five pretty boys it doesn't
matter
No one else I'd rather be with

Verse 2

Pass me that thing that makes us feel our
bodies burning
It's like flying over our entire city

This song's so good we put it on again
My girls are so stunning
Maybe we are not appropriate
But what does it matter when it's not
daylight anymore
Five pretty girls, three in a row
They stand alone, but we do it as a team
[...]

Icona Pop and Gabrielle's songs share many similarities. For women, either in the generic sense or for the particular group of friends of the latter, emancipation is provisional and place-bound. Outside of the club, there is the looming presence of patriarchal relations and generic social pressures, which can only be inverted at night. If we are correct in assuming that both songs make some claims on describing a female situation in the generic sense (albeit to different degrees), then it appears that both propose a radical feminist problem, but without any lasting solution. For Icona Pop, the narrative almost falls back on the neoliberal trope of personal empowerment, while Gabrielle relies on sisterhood and solidarity.

The four songs just mentioned represent the best examples of how feminist themes are present in contemporary mainstream pop music in Sweden and Denmark. This makes them proper material for showing how feminist themes, in very different ways, make their way into mainstream culture, but it does not mean that they are the sole examples of feminist critiques in the genre. The attention to social advance through sexual or emotional self-assertion reoccurs in other lyrics, most prominently Zara Larsson's *Lush Life*(2017), and Jessica Andersson's *Party Voice*(2018). In a few of these, there is also an implicit critique of patriarchal notions of chastity and female sexuality, e.g. as Zara Larsson praises her own masturbatory skills in *Only You*(2017), or as Amanda asserts her sexual agency against upper-class men in *Tror vi er nem* (They think we are "easy") (2018). Clearly, all of these can be read as drawing on different strands of feminism, and on the cultural impact of social movement activism more generally (as Eyerman and Jamison, 1998, argue with regards to rock and pop music's tendency toward cultural transgression). Like the examples examined in-depth above,

these songs point toward the contradictory combinations of emancipatory and co-opted feminist themes that coexist in contemporary mainstream culture.

5. Conclusion

We began the paper by noting the contemporary co-existence of revitalized and emancipatory feminist mobilization on one hand, and mainstream neoliberal feminist discourses on the other. While the existing literature primarily looks at neoliberal feminism as a hegemonic discourse that reflects and legitimizes unequal power relations in the contemporary gender and capitalist structure, we suggested perceiving neoliberal feminist discourses as the combined effect of social movement activism and its commercial co-optation. We noted that the dynamics through which the mainstream co-opt themes and musical genres from the cultural expressions of social movements are not always linear. As such, we expected to find a range of feminist themes besides the neoliberal ones, which contradict and problematize the monolithic understanding of commercial feminist discourses. We explored this idea empirically through a thematic analysis of song lyrics by top-charting female artists in Sweden and Denmark. In the analysis, we posed two questions. First, are feminist themes present in mainstream pop music, as the literature on neoliberal feminism suggests? Second, if present, what types of feminist themes are there, and how do they connect to existing feminist traditions? While feminist themes make up only a small fraction of a population dominated by uncritical depictions of (heterosexual) monogamous romance and sexuality, neoliberal feminist themes were present in the majority of relevant lyrics. The results thereby resonate with existing contemporary research on mainstream feminism. However, they typically do not appear in pure form. Instead, neoliberal themes often intersect with other feminist traditions. This points to more lasting influence of feminist mobilization, and for a more nuanced understanding of a mechanism of hegemonic cooptation, as emancipatory feminist themes find some space amongst their neoliberal, co-opted form. Lastly, we think that the study offers an example for a different approach to study manifestations of feminism in popular music, which could be applied to other studies with a broader scope. Rather than focusing on individual artists and judging how their individual performances express or defy certain feminist standards, we gave priority to songs, convinced that they contain important

clues about the wider social context in which they were conceived. Songs, as suggested by Appen et al (2015), are mirrors-ball reflecting their surroundings. This indeed is what makes them attractive for listeners and worthy of sociological study.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

VISUAL ANALYSIS AND RIGHT WING (POPULIST) GROUPS

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ABSTRACT: The following article main contribution falls within the domain of methodology as it draws attention on the strength of visual analysis within the field of study of populism. The work elaborates on a visual analysis of the posters published to advertise two events – a concert in memory of Jan Palach and the World Congress of Families – organized in Verona in the early months of 2019 by a set of organizations linked to the right and the extreme right and to conservative catholic stances. These politicized organizations carry out a specific type of cultural-political work and operate at the edge of the political sphere, by building alliances with (extreme) right-wing political actors and by lobbying political institutions. The visual analysis is geared at bringing agencies and ambivalences to the fore and allows to uncover (a) the ‘communicative camouflage’ of these organizations who spread radical right and catholic conservative messages, traditionally marked by highly recognizable communication features and symbols, in more neutral, moderate and positive forms; (b) the deployment of some populist elements in their communication strategy, such as the reference to welfare chauvinism, to the first Conte government as well as the identification of the ‘natural family’ as an homogenizing category associated with the good and moral side of society. While these features are per se not sufficient to define these organizations as fully populist actors, they are nonetheless important to underscore the role played by these organizations in spreading extremely polarized messages in a more digestible way for broader audiences by means of a communicative camouflage and of populist elements in their communication strategy.

KEYWORDS: Visual analysis, visual semiotics, communicative camouflage, catholic fundamentalism, populist radical right

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1. Introduction

This article main contribution falls within the domain of methodology as it draws attention on the strength of visual analysis within the field of study of populism. As Stocchetti and Kukkonen point out “visual communication is powerful because it binds the viewer in a communicative relation where agency is hidden and meaning ambivalent” (2011, 4), thus the task of visual analysis is not merely descriptive, but rather is geared at bringing agencies and ambivalences to the fore. Populist agency has been mostly attached to charismatic leaders (Kitschelt 2000) and populist parties both on the left and on the right side of the political spectrum (Caiani and della Porta 2011; Caiani and Graziانو 2019; Mudde 2007; Muis and Immerzeel 2017; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). More recently, scholars conceiving of populism as a communication strategy have pointed to the role of media as populist actors for themselves, rather than as sheer reporters of populist messages from politicians (De Vreese, C. H., Esser, F., Aalberg, T., Reinemann, C., Stanyer, J. 2018; Chatterje-Doody and Crilley 2019; Reinemann, C., Stanyer, J., Aalber, T., Esser, F., De Vreese, C. H. (eds.) 2019). Within the scope of this analysis, the main actors are not political in the strictest institutional sense: they are politicized organizations operating at the edge of the political sphere, building alliances with (extreme) right political actors and lobbying political institutions, and which carry out specific type of cultural-political work. The aim of this analysis is not to parallel such organizations to fully populist actors, but rather to emphasize the ways in which they deploy some populist elements in their communication strategy as well as to underscore the role they play in spreading extreme right and fundamentalist catholic stances through a communicative camouflage, a strategy that aims at expressing extremely polarized contents through a pretended moderation – provided via a mild, non-divisive and progressive-like communication style – which is very clearly noticeable when focusing on the visual aspects of communication.

Notwithstanding theoretical disputes over the definition of populism, when it comes to the operationalization phase most analyses rely on the study of textual communication and discourses produced by populist leaders or on party manifestos (Kriesi 2018). With due exceptions (among which Wodak and Forchtner 2014; Richardson and Colombo 2013; Schmuck and Matthes 2017), studies that combine the analysis of visual communication and populism remain limited in number. This work elaborate a visual analysis of the posters published in occasion of two events held in Verona in the early months of 2019 by a set of organizations linked to the right and the extreme right political sphere and to fundamentalist religious stances. The first is *Nomos – Terra e Identità*

(Nomos – Land and Identity), a local cultural association closely related to the institutional and non-institutional extreme right which organized a concert in which neo-fascist bands played in memory of Jan Palash. The second case concerns a set of organizations, headed by the International Organization for the Family (IOF), which organized the World Congress of Families (WCF), coupling fundamentalist catholic and (extreme) right political stances. The analysis of the posters draws attention to the potential of visual analysis in providing important insights on the ways in which the message is constructed and conveyed, uncovering the communication strategy of these actors. In particular, the analysis shows how these organizations (1) deploy some populist elements in their communication strategy, for instance they make reference to welfare chauvinism (Muis and Immerzeel 2017), to the 5 Star Movement-Northern League populist 'government of change' (Governo del cambiamento) and make use of the term family to identify a homogenizing category associated with the good, moral and integer side of society (Meret and Siim 2013); (2) they put in place a communicative camouflage aimed at spreading radical right and catholic conservative messages in a neutral and positive way, while leaving behind the highly recognizable symbols that traditionally marked their communication style. This communicative camouflage can be partly related to the concept of 'calculated ambivalence' (Wodak and Forchtner 2014; see also Engel and Wodak 2012) developed in the study of the right-wing populist discourses via a visual analyses of the comics 'Embattled Vienna 1683/2010' published by the Austrian Freedom Party. Calculated ambivalence emphasizes the strategic attempt to convey divergent meanings through an ambivalent use of visual communication, which carries two or more contradictory meanings at the same time, thus addressing different audiences and evading responsibility for the messages expressed. While calculated ambivalence points at the attempt to mix up fiction-like elements with hate-speech from the part of right-wing populists, the concept of 'communicative camouflage' rather emphasizes the attempt made by these organizations to use visuals as moderating containers of extreme right and fundamentalist messages. As in the case of calculated ambivalence, the visual strategy aims at broadening the set of audiences addressed. However, the communicative camouflage suggest a further step in the attempt of these organizations to bring extremely polarized political stances to a mainstream diffusion, not by moderating the content of their messages, but rather by watering down their communication style and leaving behind highly recognizable and divisive symbols.

2. Case selection

The posters selected within the scope of this work share a set of relevant features that oriented the choice. Primarily, *Verona is characterized by a long-term extreme right tradition, within both institutional settings and sub-cultural ones, to the point that it has been referred to as a laboratory of the radical right (Franzina ed. 2009). Furthermore, Verona is marked by a deeply rooted Catholic conservative tradition. Indeed, it is not by chance that several anti-abortion, anti-feminist, and anti-LGBTQ+ political initiatives are conceived and experimented in the city, before being spread to other cities at the national level and beyond.* These two tendencies have altogether forged a religious fundamentalist right (Minkenberg 2017) that has found a fertile ground in the city; *in these respect, then, the specificity of Verona can be looked at as a useful case for theory-building on extreme right and populism.* Secondly, both events were carried out in the early months of 2019, in a moment of open political opportunities (Tarrow 1996) for the extreme right at the local level, where it has found a fertile ground and an institutional support at least since 2007 with the election of Flavio Tosi as the city major, and at the national level, during the fifteen months of the first Conte government, sustained by a coalition of the 5 Stars Movement and the Northern League. Thirdly, compared to other events carried out in the same time span in Verona, the selected events brought forth a vibrant public dispute reported on national media¹ and a strong response from the part of the local

¹ Berizzi, P., "Provocazione sovranista a Verona: un concerto nazirock per Jan Palach", La Repubblica, 29/12/2018

https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2019/03/12/news/patrocinio_palazzo_chigi_presidenza_consiglio_ministro_famiglia_world_congress_of_families_di_verona_revoca-221384632/?ref=search

Berizzi, P., "Verona, concerto estrema destra per Jan Palach: teatro non concede più spazi", La Repubblica, 15/01/2019

https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/01/15/news/concerto_ultradestra_verona_jan_palach_no_teatro-216642392/

Stella, G. A., "Gli studenti cechi indignati: 'No a quel concerto per Jan Palach'", Il Corriere della Sera, 06/01/2019

https://www.corriere.it/opinioni/19_gennaio_06/gli-studenti-cechi-indignati-no-quel-concerto-jan-palach-db131466-11ea-11e9-9792-87746038bd2f.shtml

Custodero, A., "Congresso Famiglia, Di Maio: 'A Verona destra di sfigati.' Giallo sul patrocinio del governo." La Repubblica, 12/03/2019

https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2019/03/12/news/patrocinio_palazzo_chigi_presidenza_consiglio_ministro_famiglia_world_congress_of_families_di_verona_revoca-221384632/?ref=search

Arachi, A., "Congresso delle famiglie, ospiti oltranzisti di tutto il mondo: chi sarà al meeting di Verona." Il Corriere della Sera, 14/03/2019

https://www.corriere.it/politica/19_marzo_14/famiglia-congresso-verona-matteo-salvini-annuncia-io-andro-845d07b8-4646-11e9-a4ff-e29a115180ab.shtml

movement area, for the case of the concert in memory of Jan Palash, and from the trans-feminist movement *Non Una Di Meno* and other LGBTQ+ organizations, for the World Congress of Families. The type of responses coming from the left-wing movement have spanned from denouncement on social media, which contributed to the national diffusion of the news, to massive public protest, as in the case of the rally organized by *Non Una di Meno* movement to publicly protest against the World Congress of Families. These actions have been complemented by a visual repartee, that quoted the posters analyzed here to denounce and mock the events in question and to advertise the counter-demonstration. Finally, while the purpose of this work is to provide a few instances of the potential of visual analysis within the field of study of populism, it remains limited in scope and by no means aspire at providing a comprehensive study of the matters treated in this research note.

3. Methodology

From a methodological perspective, I follow the visual semiotics approach as proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), who respectively drew on the work of Michel Halliday (1978) and on Critical Linguistics. Visual semiotics conceives of visuals as a set of signs whose meaning ought to be uncovered. Signs are analyzed in relation to the processes of sign-making and to the role of sign-makers in such process. In this regard, the process of representation is conceived as based on a specific interest of the sign-maker, who selects a criterial aspect of the object represented, which is sorted depending on the motivations that stand behind the representation itself.

Visual semiotics offers a set of valuable tools to carry out the analysis of the posters within the scope of this work. The main advantage of this approach relates to its conception of the visuals analyzed as a comprehensive text including both visual and linguistic sections, which are regarded to as 'meaningful wholes' (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006: 1). In particular, Kress and Van Leeuwen stress the importance of meanings that can be drawn from the composition of the visuals under scrutiny. Consistently, the authors maintain that a sort of syntax of the visuals can be detected or, in other words, that a set of regularities or patterns – typical of Western produced materials – can be singled out and ascribed with a specific meaning. However, this comprehensive analysis of the visual does not imply that the same analytical tools are used for both linguistic and visual

sections; on the contrary, linguistics is treated as one branch of semiotics which is therefore equipped with a set of distinct tools for the analysis of linguistic parts, proving especially useful when it comes to the analysis of multi-modal posters. Finally, as several other approaches to visual analysis emphasize (Müller and Özcan 2007; Stocchetti and Kukkonen 2011; Doerr and Milman 2014), visual semiotics as well highlights the importance of the context in which visuals are produced, spread and the type of response they generate (2006: 8).

Following this approach, the analysis develops according to three steps described below. Prior to the visual analysis itself, a contextual frame of the two events is outlined through the analysis of a set of relevant documents and newspaper articles². Subsequently, the first stage of the visual analysis is carried out: I examine the main visual and linguistic elements in isolation from the composition scheme, in particular logos and linguistic sections are analyzed separately in this phase. The second stage of the visual analysis is concerned with the ways in which different linguistic and visual elements relate to one another within an integrated text, in this regard the compositional patterns and their purport are taken into consideration. To conclude, I briefly discuss the movement response to these events, in terms of the visual repartee that the two posters triggered.

4. The neo-fascist concert in memory of Jan Palash

Nomos – Terra e Identità (Nomos – Land and Identity), a cultural association set in Verona, organized a concert in memory of Jan Palash³ in January 2019, in occasion of the 50th anniversary from his death. *Nomos* holds close political ties with some extreme right groups and with some local extreme right administrators, who directly contributed to its creation as a cultural association to collect money for the people of Verona affected by the flood of 1st September 2018. In fact, the event was organized with the patronage of both the Province and the Municipality of Verona, and received public support from the part of Forza Nuova and Casapound, two Italian extreme right political organizations⁴.

² The documents selected and analysed for the contextual frame are: a set of national and local newspaper articles reporting on the events; press releases published by the events organizers on facebook and on their webpages; posts and press releases related to the event published on the facebook page of the local movement area (Veronesi Aperti al Mondo), on Non Una di Meno movement's facebook page, on Casapound Verona and on Forza Nuova and Fortezza Europa facebook page.

³ A Czechoslovak student who set himself to fire in the aftermath of the Prague Spring in 1969.

⁴ Forza Nuova expressed its support via their national and provincial leaders, Luca Castellini and Pietro Amedeo:

The concert hosted several bands sharing a neo-fascist background. Among them, *La Compagnia dell'Anello* (the Fellowship of the Ring) is one of the first self-proclaimed 'alternarive right' Italian rock bands which was constituted during the first Hobbit Camp in 1977⁵. *The Hobbit*, another band involved, is led by Emanuele Tesauro, who is the current leader of Fortezza Europa (Fortress Europe), a political group which recently split from Forza Nuova.

*The planning of a concert in memory of Jan Palash initially gained visibility thanks to local left-wing movement area who successfully mobilized to denounce and contrast the concert, which was relocated twice and was eventually held in a peripheral area of Verona's province. The event was reported on the national press and beyond: the Students' Council of the Faculty of Art at Charles University in Prague – which used to be Jan Palash's department – as well as some European Members of Parliament outspoke against the appropriation of the memory of Jan Palash put in place by the extreme right.*⁶

(Figures 1 and 2 about here)

The cultural association name '*Nomos. Terra e Identità*', makes reference to traditions – *Nomos*: customs and habits from the ancient Greek – linked to the territory and to identity. The logo (Fig. 1) takes the shape of a coat of arms; the symbol of the *Scala*, from the local middle age lords of the city, is depicted in central position. An open book is placed on the stairs symbol, on which the words land and identity are written. The choice of the yellow and blue colors and the symbol of the *Scala* both make reference to the city football team and to traditional symbols that have come to designate the local radical right.

The graphic font of the title highlights the three main words '*Terra e Libertà*' (land and freedom) and 'Verona', somewhat suggesting that the local city should be territorially freed from a not better specified occupier. A clear reference is made to strong local identity values and to a rhetoric of liberation which, in turn, evokes the presence of an

"Il concerto per Jan Palach non si farà neanche al Movieland Park", Verona Sera, 18/01/2019

<http://www.veronasera.it/attualita/concerto-jan-palach-movieland-park-no-18-gennaio-2019.html>

Casa Pound Verona, on its facebook page Il Mastino, published a post on 18/01/2019 in memory of Jan Palash, attacking the "bagarre of these days" according to them provoked by the anti-fascist left.

⁵ Three hobbit camps were organized by the young section of the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* between 1977-1980 (see di Nunzio, D., Toscano, E., 2014: 251-262).

⁶ Stella, G. A., "Gli studenti cechi indignati: 'No a quel concerto per Jan Palach'", Il Corriere della Sera, 06/01/2019

https://www.corriere.it/opinioni/19_gennaio_06/gli-studenti-cechi-indignati-no-quel-concerto-jan-palach-db131466-11ea-11e9-9792-87746038bd2f.shtml

"Concerto nazirock per Jan Palach, anche i cechi chiedono spiegazioni", Verona Sera, 31/12/2018

<http://www.veronasera.it/politica/concerto-nazi-rock-jan-palach-verona-repubblica-ceca-31-dicembre-2018.html>

external enemy. Furthermore, the title of the event is an example of left-wing symbols' appropriation. Land and freedom quotes the famous motto '*Tierra y Libertad!*' of the *guerrilleros zapatistas*, which has been largely resumed by various left-wing anarchist experiences and, among others, directly reported in the title of 1995 Ken Loach movie, set during the Spanish civil war.

In the bottom right part of the poster, the good cause of the event is reported: "Eventual profits will be donated to the families of Verona affected by the flood on 1st September 2018." In this respect, two elements should be highlighted: the first refers to the category of family, which marks the social unit appointed as a worthy target of help. The term family is far from randomly selected; in fact, it stands at the core of the extreme right's political agendas: the term is framed as a political keyword whose meaning refers to conservative, catholic values as opposed to progressive civil rights, advanced by LGBTQ+ and feminist movements. The use of the term is even the least neutral in Verona, as it clearly resonates with local political specificity: the at-the-time Minister of family Lorenzo Fontana – a long-term member of pro-life associations – comes from Verona where he was vice-major, the first pro-life motion against 194 Italian law on voluntary termination of pregnancy has been approved in Verona in October 2018, and finally, the World Congress of Families was held in Verona at the end of March 2019, bringing together several extreme right, right-wing politicians and pro-life associations from all over the world. The second element reported refers to one of the political objectives attached to this cultural event which aims at supporting local families affected by the flood through a 'welfare-oriented' donation. Welfare chauvinism has been defined as one of the key features of Radical Right Populism (Muis and Immerzeel, 2017). Indeed, the donation to those 'affected by the flood' refers, on the one hand, to specific social practices targeting exclusively local people, used to reinforce the boundaries of native communities. On the other hand, it aims to mobilize specific emotions, such as the resentment of the deprived and a negative perception of the state institutions and bureaucracy as unwilling or incapable to provide assistance to native people.

The poster overall communicative effect does not evoke a rock concert. Rather, the choice of a brown-gray tinge, the main image and the whole composition recall more of a formal event. The message is conveyed in a mild and neutral way, this is especially visible when comparing this poster to other nazi-rock concerts' visual communication⁷.

⁷ See for instance the poster of the concert 'Defend Europe' held in Verona on April 20, 2019 organized by the Veneto Fronte Skinheads
"Cerea (Verona), concerto di gruppi nazi-rock in un padiglione del comune. Ed è polemica." *La Repubblica*, 21/04/2019

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) distinguish between narrative and conceptual patterns of visuals. In the former type of visual, participants are represented while in action and are therefore referred to as actors. In the latter type of visual, which corresponds to the case of this poster, the subject depicted is not performing any action and is described according to a “generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence” (2006, 59). Thus viewers do not identify the figure as an actor, but rather as a carrier of significant possessive attributes, like a hero or a saint. In the poster, this impression is enhanced by the neutral background, by the fact that the picture of Jan Palash is posed and occupies a relevant portion on the left side of the poster, and by the feathered edges of the picture which contribute to give the impression of being in presence of a major figure.

The poster analyzed has prompted a visual repartee with the local movement area, which republished the same poster with the addition of a yellow banner in central position stating ‘Nazi-rock concert’.⁸ This response strategy had the purpose of denouncing by mocking the event and of countering the communicative camouflage that was being put in place, by clearly bringing out what the event was about.

To sum, three main elements emerge from this analysis, the first refers to the appropriation of left-wing cultural symbols which are re-signified and deployed to express extreme right stances. The second relates to the way in which visual communication is designed so as to convey a message that is made to look harmless and moderate. Finally, the third refers to the use of some populist elements in the communication strategy of this organization, such as the mention to welfare chauvinistic practices and the use of the word ‘family’ to frame an easily identifiable group that can be swiftly extended to mean the good ‘people’.

5. The XIII World Congress of Families

The World Congress of Families⁹ (WCF) is organized annually by the International Organization for the Family (IOF), a US based cultural organization lobbying to uphold a

https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/04/21/news/verona_veneto_frente_skinheads_concerto-224593624/

⁸ The poster modified by the local movement area is published on ‘Veronesi aperti al mondo’ facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Assemblea17dicembre/photos/a.397940793872118/776962725969921/?type=3&theater>

⁹ Declared objective of the Congress is “to unite and let cooperate leaders, organizations and families to affirm, celebrate and defend the natural family as the only stable and fundamental unit of society.” <https://wcfverona.org/it/about-the-congress/>

heteronormative model of family. At the end of March 2019, its 13th version was held in Verona in collaboration with other international and Italian pro-life and pro-family organizations¹⁰, most of which share a common support for conservative catholic positions and right to extreme right political stances, often publicly endorsed. The cultural and political activities of these groups range from the support to gender binarism and the so-called 'natural' family, to the opposition to LGBTQ+ and women's rights.

This blend of right and extreme right political stances with catholic fundamentalism has found a fertile ground in Verona, where conservative religious powers and right-wing politicians have fostered a long-term alliance (Franzina ed. 2009). In fact, the Congress has counted on the public endorsement of the local bishop as well as the patronage from Verona Municipality (which offered also financial support), Verona Province, Veneto and Friuli Venezia-Giulia Regions, and the former Ministry for Family and Disabilities. Several right-wing and extreme right politicians participated, among them the leader of the Northern League and former Italian Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini, the leader of Brothers of Italy Giorgia Meloni, the Hungarian Minister for Family, Youth and International Affairs Katalin Novak, and the at-the-time President of the European Parliament Antonio Tajani. The Congress has been the source of considerable controversy: opposition to it has arisen especially from the area of left-wing social movements, especially the trans-feminist global movement *Non Una Di Meno* and many other LGBTQ+ organizations who gathered in Verona to protest against the Congress conservative and illiberal positions. For what concerns institutional politics, the Democratic Party and the 5 Stars Movement took a stand against the Congress.

(Figures 3 and 4 about here)

The logo of the XIII World Congress of Families (Fig. 3) depicts eight stylized arches which recall those of the Arena, the historical symbol of the city. Two arches are filled with two stylized persons: a light blue figure in bottom left position, symbolizing a man, and dark pink colored figure in top right position, symbolizing a woman. The two figures are carved with a half heart which becomes complete only when the two are juxtaposed¹¹, suggesting that the only possible love is the heterosexual one, while all other arches are empty and colored in gray, suggesting that there is no alternative to the type of love depicted. This message is further remarked by the choice of blue and pink colors, in line with other pro-life association symbols, which reinforce the idea that only gender binarism, heterosexual love, and families formed by heterosexual couples are legitimate. This design recalls yet another symbol of the so called 'city of love', the Juliet balcony, as

¹⁰ Provita Onlus Association, National Organization for Marriage, Generazione famiglia, Comitato difendiamo i nostri figli, CitizenGO.

¹¹ As in the video version and in other versions of the logo itself.

suggested by the general position of the stylized figures, and the position of the head of the blue Romeo which seems to be staring up to pink Juliet.

In the bottom part of the poster (Fig.4), a white and separate framework contains the institutions of patronage and the organizing associations. On the left side, surrounded by a double frame (one open and rectangular and one more faded and curved) the title of the congress can be read: "Il vento del cambiamento" (the wind of change), which resonates with the 5 Stars Movement-Northern League populist government, the self-proclaimed *governo del cambiamento* (government of change). The choice of the title indicates the double intention of organizers to place themselves in line with the current government and to directly address it as an institution to lobby on. As mentioned above, the Northern League and its ministers provided support and participated to the Congress.

The sub-title "L'Europa e il Movimento globale Pro-family" (Europe and the Pro-family global movement) makes a double reference: the first relates to the European Union as another political institution addressed: indeed, several panels of the Congress were held on EU family policy. The second reference relates to strategic self-representation: the name this set of lobbying and pro-life organizations appoint themselves with is 'the global pro-family movement'. Interestingly enough, the communication strategy of the Congress aimed at presenting itself as emerging out of a global movement, somehow suggesting that it is brought together by ordinary people gathering from below and spontaneously meeting from different parts of the world, while in fact the World Congress of Families is one of the main activities of a US-based lobby association, the International Organization for Family.

As a whole, the poster (Fig. 4) conveys a positive sense of daydream atmosphere, which is communicated through the choice of pale pastel colors (light blue and lilac), the brightness and over-exposure of the picture and the main subject itself, a girl who is wearing an old-fashioned pilot helmet and paper wings, playing to fly. The poster develops horizontally and is divided into two halves: on the left side there are different frames containing the title of the Congress, the place and the date; on the right side there is the girl playing the pilot. In this way, the poster suggests a causal and temporal relationship between the two sides, one that follows the reading direction: thanks to the Congress (left), children will be happy and free to play (right).

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) distinguish between conceptual patterns and narrative patterns of visuals. As mentioned above, within conceptual patterns participants are represented as carriers of a timeless essence. In narrative patterns, the case of the Congress poster is an example of it, subjects are depicted in action and the hallmark of narrative visuals is the presence of a vector. Vectors are formed by "an oblique line, often a quite

strong, diagonal line. (...) The vectors may be formed by bodies or limbs or tools in action” (2006, 59). In the poster, the girl is the only actor depicted and the vector corresponds to her arm, which points towards the sky. Her position entails a set of meanings which resonate with dream, future, progress, etc. Finally, the girl is wearing a lilac T-shirt with a version of the Congress logo that is drawn by a child. This way, the Congress logo and the values it entails are two-time intertwined with children, first by making the logo look like something designed by children themselves, and second, as a symbol that children engage with and happily embody, as envisaged by the act of wearing it.

The reactions that countered the World Congress of Families took several different forms; for the focus of this analysis it is interesting to mention one of the many visual responses to the poster analyzed here. It was elaborated by the local movement area which republished a fake version of the World Congress of Families poster that advertised the Family March held on 31st March with a reversed word order, switching from *La marcia della famiglia* (The to family march) to *La famiglia marcia* (The rotten family), playing with the double meaning of the word *marcia* in Italian, and once again associating the act of denouncing with the one of mocking the event.¹²

To sum, the first point that can be drawn from this analysis relates with the fact that graphic, visual and linguistic choices altogether aim at a catch-all communicative ambience that attempts to convey extreme right and fundamentalist catholic messages through a very progressive-like style, as it is visible from the visual and linguistic choices hinting at ideas of future and change and the absence of religious and right-wing symbols. The second point refers to the use of some populist elements in the communication strategy of the poster. Primarily, the choice of the word cambiamento (change) as part of the Congress title goes in this direction, as it clearly resonates with the 5 Stars Movement-Northern League populist government and shows a complacent attitude towards it. Furthermore, the use of the term pro-family and the category of family as the wide and good category of people, as opposed to other ways of living requires deeper consideration. Questions of gender, LGBTQ+ and women rights, and thus also of values attached to concept of family, remain quite marginal within the study of populism (Mudde 2007; Meret and Siim 2013). The term family is used in both cases analyzed: in Jan Palash concert poster, for instance, family is appointed as the deserving target of welfare chauvinism. In the case of the World Congress of Families, the main written documents¹³ refer to the family as the core cell of society and its relevance is associated with the internal

¹² See: <https://www.facebook.com/Assemblea17dicembre/photos/a.397940793872118/824062341259959/?type=3&theater>

¹³ In the introductory document and in the final declaration of the WFC. See <https://wcfverona.org/it/>

solution of the demographic crisis, implicitly addressing the fear of becoming a minority in one's own country. Ultimately, the term family has come to indicate a category with which people can easily identify and one that is usually associated with positive values. Accordingly, the category of family is strategically deployed to convey a specific political project and a set of conservative values. Particularly in the case of the World Congress of Families, it is made clear how the concept of family can be used to construct 'the people' and how the catholic morality can be transposed from a religious ground to a political one, in a way that well suits the manichean division of the world into right and wrong, good and evil, reproducing the typical demarcation lines of populist rhetoric.

6. Concluding notes

This work shows the relevance of visual analysis in contributing to understand not only the messages conveyed, but especially the ways in which themes and values are expressed by politicized organizations that are differently associated to extreme right and conservative catholic stances. Both posters analyzed share a set commonalities: the first concerns the attempt to spread extreme right and fundamentalist catholic values through mild and moderate visual styles, positive and purposeful vocabulary, producing a type of communicative camouflage that allows these groups and their messages to be agreed upon by a wider public, while simultaneously making the deconstruction of their rhetoric harder for political opponents. A second point of commonality relates with the presence of some populist elements in the communication strategy of the organizations analyzed, such as the reference to welfare chauvinism, the deployment of the term 'family' as a homogenizing category associated with the moral and deserving people, and to the use of specific terms that resonate with the national public discourse of populist parties and leaders.

Finally, the aim of this work – however limited in scope – is not to pinpoint a numerous enough set of populist elements in the communication strategy of such organizations so as to be able to define them as fully populist actors, but rather to uncover the use of some populist elements in the communication strategy of the actors examined. Furthermore, this contribution emphasizes the usefulness of an analysis of visual communication to uncover specific communication strategies, such as communicative camouflage that politicized organizations operating at the edge of the political sphere put in place to bring extremely polarized political stances to a mainstream diffusion, not by moderating the content of their messages, but rather by watering down their communication style and leaving behind highly recognizable and divisive symbols.

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Website of the World Congress of Families

(<https://wcfverona.org/it/>)

Facebook page of the World Congress of Families

(<https://www.facebook.com/WCF13Verona/>)

Facebook page of *Nomos – Terra e Identità* association

(<https://www.facebook.com/Nomos-Terra-e-Identit%C3%A0-2207567869485990/>)

Facebook page of *Non Una di Meno* movement

(<https://www.facebook.com/nonunadimeno/>)

Facebook page of *Veronesi aperti al mondo*

(<https://www.facebook.com/Assemblea17dicembre/>)

Figure 1: Logo of Nomos - Terra e Identità



Source: Nomos Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/Nomos-Terra-e-Identità%20-%202207567869485990/>)

Figure 2 - Nomos' concert poster

19/01/1969 - 19/01/2019

TERRA E LIBERTÀ

**A CINQUANT'ANNI
DAL SUO SACRIFICIO**

Concerto per
JAN PALACH

Parteciperanno alla serata
GABRIELE MARCONI
TOPI NERI
HOBBIT
COMPAGNIA DELL'ANELLO

Con il patrocinio di

provincia  verona  Comune di Verona
Presidenza del Consiglio Comunale

SABATO 19 GENNAIO ore 21.00

VERONA

INFO E TICKET: nomos.verona@gmail.com **POSTI LIMITATI**

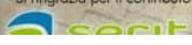
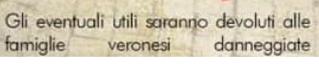
   Gli eventuali utili saranno devoluti alle famiglie veronesi danneggiate

Figure 3: World Congress of Families Logo



Source: WCF webpage (<https://wcfverona.org/it/>)

Figure 4: XIII World Congress of Families poster



AUTHOR'S INFORMATION:

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