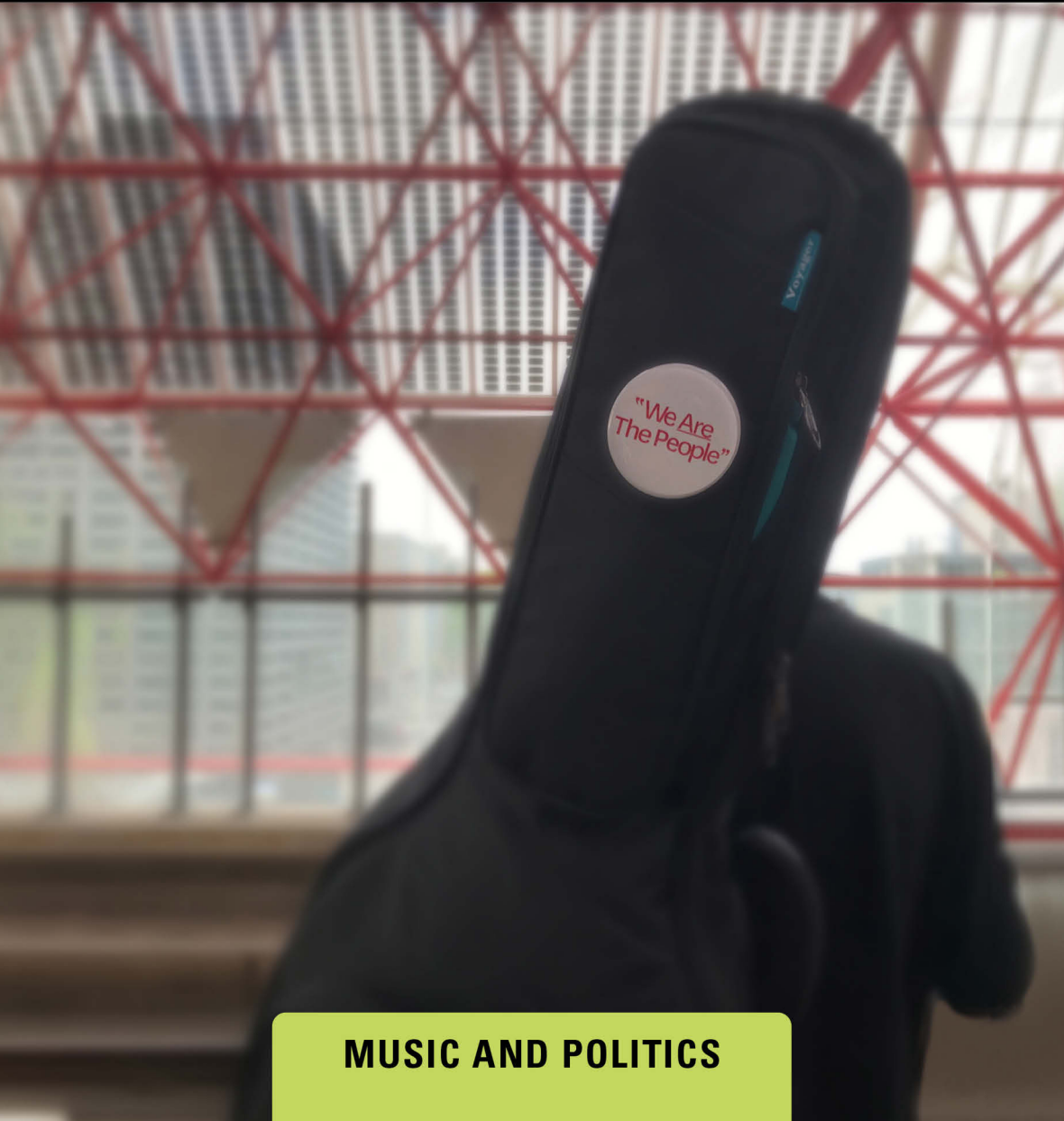




Edited by Mario Dunkel
and Melanie Schiller



Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe



MUSIC AND POLITICS

“The great strength of this fascinating collection is that it does indeed show how popular music is linked to the rise of populism in Europe. With its subtle and sophisticated case studies and its careful framing, this book reveals the political importance of music and the cultural roots of populism.”

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“This wonderful collection shows that populism is more than just parties, movements and leaders – it extends into popular culture as well. Theoretically-imaginative and empirically-rigorous, it considers the intersection of populism and popular music in Europe, and opens up new avenues for thinking about how populism operates in the 21st century.”

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POPULAR MUSIC AND THE RISE OF POPULISM IN EUROPE

This book focuses on the role of popular music in the rise of populism in Europe, centring on the music-related processes of sociocultural normalisation and the increasing prevalence of populist discourses in contemporary society. In its innovative combination of approaches drawing from (ethno)musicology, sociology, and political science, as well as media and cultural studies, this book develops a culture-oriented approach to populism. Based on shared research questions, an original theoretical framework and a combination of innovative methodologies that pay attention to the specific socio-historical contexts, taking into account musical material as well as processes of reception, the five chapters in this volume offer detailed analyses of the nexus of popular music and populism in Hungary, Italy, Austria, Sweden and Germany. All of these countries have seen a marked increase in populist parties and discourses over the last years, as well as significant interactions between populism and popular music. This book will be essential reading for those investigating popular music as a crucial aspect in the study of populism as a cultural phenomenon in Europe.

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Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe

Mario Dunkel and Melanie Schiller

POPULAR MUSIC AND THE RISE OF POPULISM IN EUROPE

Edited by Mario Dunkel and Melanie Schiller



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POPULAR MUSIC AND THE RISE OF POPULISM IN EUROPE

An introduction¹

Mario Dunkel and Melanie Schiller

On July 30, 2016, tens of thousands of people donned lederhosen and dirndl to celebrate Andreas Gabalier's sold-out show in Munich's Olympic Stadium. The scale of the event testified to Gabalier's increased popularity in German-speaking countries. In fact, the Austrian musician, who has repeatedly expressed sympathies for the far-right populist Freedom Party of Austria, has become one of the most successful artists with German-speaking audiences in recent years. In addition to showcasing Gabalier's enormous popularity in German-speaking regions, however, the concert in Munich was also remarkable for another reason: it took place one week after nine people were killed and thirty-six injured by an 18-year-old Iranian-German inside the Olympia shopping mall near the stadium. The teenager's motives were unknown at the time, but false rumours of Islamist terrorism were one prominent explanation.²

Whilst Gabalier was careful not to make any clear statements about the incident, he nonetheless alluded to it between songs:

It is sad enough that you even have to think about whether to still go to concerts on days like these, whether you still go out of the house, whether you still go out in public somewhere, somehow [cheers, Gabalier pauses]. That's pretty bitter, because we're actually a very, very happy and sociable culture, we Austrians just like you Germans, and, and, what do I want to say now? Everything I'm thinking, I'd just rather not say, because, because I have to watch out for you guys. But I can say one thing: I am so happy that you are here today. And I am glad that you also take a young Styrian boy from Austria as he is, who now and then also says what he thinks, because it is still nicer, despite all these worries that the country currently brings with it, here with you in Germany, and also at

home in Austria. It's a big challenge that we have to face at the moment, and [pause]. Well, that's all I'm saying.³

Gabalier used this subtle reference to an ostensible security crisis to introduce his 2015 protest song "A Meinung haben" ("Having an Opinion"), in which his persona heroically confronts political correctness as dictated by an unnamed elite and presents himself as a lone warrior for free speech. The song thereby invokes the populist trope of the silent majority, and questions whether Austria is truly democratic. More specifically, "A Meinung haben" celebrates Gabalier's famous refusal to sing the revised official lyrics of the Austrian national anthem, voted into effect by the Austrian parliament in 2012, in which not only are the nation's "great sons" revered, but its "great daughters" too. As such, "A Meinung haben" has become something of a signature song for Gabalier, who projects a self-styled rebellious persona and flaunts an opinion that runs contrary to the supposedly dominant regime of elite politics and political correctness.

By introducing "A Meinung haben" with a speech that gestured, albeit obliquely, to a recent act of alleged Islamist terrorism in Munich, Gabalier not only reinforces his persona as politically outspoken in the face of powerful elites, but also alludes to the populist notion of the silent majority – that is, "the people" – who share an opinion which cannot be expressed publicly. Accordingly, his hesitancy to say what he is really thinking is, he claims, to protect his audience ("because I have to watch out for you guys"). Note that it would not threaten Gabalier himself, the unwavering rebel, but – such is the implicit assumption – the audience might be penalised in public discourse, supposedly dominated by political correctness. Furthermore, Gabalier, who describes himself here as a simple and down-to-earth "young Styrian boy" from the countryside, connects this silent majority with the "very, very happy and sociable" culture of Austria and Germany – as opposed to the implied Other that poses a serious threat to these ostensibly natural national lifestyles.

Besides illustrating how populist politics are actively negotiated in contemporary popular music culture in German-speaking countries, this example also raises a number of questions: what does the concept of populism entail in a popular culture context? How do music and musical performance negotiate populism? To what extent is Gabalier's popular success emblematic of a larger normalisation, or mainstreaming, of populist discourses in German-speaking countries, or Europe more broadly? And how do audiences interpret performances and articulations of populism? In its attempt to answer these questions, this book argues that in some ways, Andreas Gabalier does indeed exemplify broader developments within popular music cultures in Europe. Populism and popular music culture are intricately intertwined in contemporary Europe, and it is necessary to explore the ways in which they interact.

What, then, is populism? All of the reference works that have been published on the topic in recent years agree that it is notoriously difficult to define.⁴ In addition to being a common political *Kampfbegriff*⁵ in many countries, populism

has been approached from a wide range of research traditions and perspectives. Whilst historically oriented studies tend to associate the development of the term with the US Populist Party, and therefore with a democratic social movement (Goodwyn 1976; Ionescu and Gellner 1969; Postel 2009), other definitions have described populism as an emancipatory resource (Laclau 2005), a political strategy (Weyland 2017), an economic policy (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991), a communication style (Block and Negrine 2017), or an ideology (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Benjamin Moffitt has grouped these perspectives into three main categories: ideational, strategic, and discursive-performative. Ideational perspectives consider populism to be an ideology that lacks substance and is therefore “thin-centred” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 6). Strategic approaches, meanwhile, view populism as a specific “way to pursue and sustain power” (Moffitt 2020, 17; Weyland 2001), whilst discursive-performative approaches regard populism as a kind of language or communication (Moffitt 2020, 22; Venizelos and Stavrakakis 2020).

Due to the term’s polyvalence, attempts have been made to distinguish between different varieties of populism. Indeed, research that focuses on specific regions often prioritises certain concepts of populism over others. Strategic approaches are prevalent in research on South America, for instance, whilst ideational perspectives are prominent in studies of European populisms. To systematise populism, given its adaptability, scholars have differentiated between Latin American, African, Central and Eastern European, Western European, US, East Asian, Indian, and other regional varieties.⁶ Moreover, researchers have defined subcategories of populism such as inclusionary, exclusionary, right-wing, left-wing, syncretic, and others (Downes and Xu 2020; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013).

Despite these variations, a significant majority of researchers agree that populism’s primary function is to operate a conceptual division of society into two antagonistic groups: the people and the elite. Populism therefore denotes ways of discursively and performatively casting the people as a group engaged in a struggle on a vertical (bottom-up) axis of conflict with a corrupt elite. It then invests this antagonism with affective significance. As Lawrence Rosenthal, Chantal Mouffe, and others have pointed out, the failure or success of populism depends on the extent to which it is able to appeal to people’s emotional and affective faculties (Mouffe 2018; Rosenthal 2020).

Over the last decade populist politics have gained real prominence in European contexts. The rise of populism has been described as a major threat to European social order, as it is deemed to undermine the core democratic and egalitarian values on which the European Union was founded. This argument has been particularly prevalent among Western European researchers with liberal democratic commitments, such as the German populism researcher Jan-Werner Müller (Müller 2016). Assessments of the alleged danger posed by populism to democracy often revolve around the question of whether or not populism’s dualisms and dichotomies are dangerous *per se*, or whether they are a necessary aspect of political

transformations. Whilst Müller argues that populism always invites Manichean thinking and the vilification of a particular group of people, Mouffe sees the confrontations inherent in populism as a necessary means of democratic political change (Mouffe, 2018). Following Mouffe's embrace of populism, we see populism in Europe as a complex phenomenon that precludes reductive assessments and judgments. The last ten years have seen the rise of a wide array of populisms in Europe, ranging from left-wing (such as Syriza and Podemos) to syncretic (such as the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Slovakian Ordinary People and Independent Personalities party), and far-right variants. It is therefore necessary to theoretically distinguish populism from related discourses that represent genuine, major challenges for European societies, such as far-right extremism and authoritarianism.

As Lawrence Rosenthal has argued, the 2010s saw "populism's toxic embrace of nationalism" in European and North American societies (Rosenthal 2020). This is true of most European national parliaments, where populist-nationalist and far-right parties have gained more than a foothold. Such populist-nationalist parties as the League and Brothers of Italy (FDI) in Italy, Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) in Austria, Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, Danish People's Party (DPP) in Denmark, Finns Party (PS) in Finland, and Sweden Democrats (SD) in Sweden have already participated in and formed governments, in coalition with both established parties and other populists. The German Alternative for Germany (AfD), Estonian Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE), Latvian National Alliance (NA), Dutch Forum for Democracy (FVD), and Spanish party Vox have gained large swaths of the popular vote in national elections, and in some of the Visegrád countries, such as Hungary and Slovakia, populist-nationalist politics and discourses have become hegemonic.⁷ Meanwhile, non-nationalist, left-wing, and syncretic varieties of populism have been on the wane (Moffitt 2020, 67).

The reasons behind this rise in populist far-right politics are manifold, and their salience in public discourse is itself subject to contestation. They range from economic crises such as the Great Recession of the late 2000s and the further expansion of a neoliberal financial regime, to an increase in economic and social insecurity for the large majority of people, the continuing erosion of the welfare state, changes in patterns of global migration (such as 2015's "summer of migration" and, in 2022, the influx of refugees to European countries in the context of the Russian war against Ukraine), larger technological transformations and developments in media culture (Wodak, KhosraviNik, and Mral 2013, xvii; Reckwitz 2012), progressive value change (Inglehart and Norris 2019), and the diminishing influence of an "old establishment" in various social, political, and economic sectors (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019). Populism researchers have also pointed to the significance of crises in populist discourse (Moffitt 2016; Brubaker 2017), and the past decade and a half have provided an array of events that have been framed as such. This framing has been facilitated by a political and media culture in which crisis, as "a category of social and political practice," is "mobilized to do specific political work" (Brubaker 2017, 373). Notably, the crisis frame seems particularly

relevant for populist nationalism, which proffers the nation state as the safe haven of the people.

The frame of populism itself, however, has also become a subject of debate. In particular, it has been criticised for functioning to obscure more than it reveals. According to the German sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer, the term populism has served to banalise the rise of authoritarian nationalism in Europe (Heitmeyer 2018). Similarly, Mondon and Winter (2020) have argued that populism's popularity amongst academics has contributed to downplaying ongoing practices of xenophobia and racism, and the structures that enable them, in contemporary Western democracies. We agree with these assessments. Bearing these calls for caution in mind, however, we argue that the frame of populism is nonetheless crucial in any attempt to come to terms with contemporary social change. As this book demonstrates, populism, as a discursive and performative practice, is a widespread – albeit ambiguous – phenomenon that has shown itself to be remarkably successful at permeating contemporary popular culture, and that continues to be central to political and cultural change. In popular music it is often difficult to pin one political ideology to a particular genre, song, artist, or reception practice, even if they are highly relevant to political discourse by reproducing the populist dichotomy of “us” versus “them.” It is therefore important to engage with the term populism critically and in ways that are context-sensitive, as well as to closely examine how populism is articulated in popular music cultures. This will allow us to gain a clearer picture of how populism may be empirically enmeshed with discriminatory practices such as racism and sexism, as well as political discourses such as nationalism.

Whilst the political traction of populist nationalism is often examined via a focus on party politics, we argue that this approach does not sufficiently explain the rise of populism and populist nationalism in Europe. Indeed, a far more fruitful perspective from which to understand the rise of populism in Europe, and its embrace of nationalism, is a discursive-performative one. As Benjamin Moffitt argues, “[w]e need to move from seeing populism as a particular ‘thing’ or entity towards viewing it as a *political style* that is performed, embodied and enacted across a variety of political and cultural contexts” (Moffitt 2016, 3, emphasis in original). Though discursive-performative approaches vary depending on their understanding of discourse, they all agree that populism should be treated as a complex phenomenon that reaches beyond the realm of party politics. As such, populism is a cultural phenomenon. It is ingrained in everyday culture and performed in myriad ways that are often difficult to grasp.

Against this backdrop, the chapters presented here ask: What is the role of popular music cultures in the rise of populism in Europe?

Cultures of populism: Towards a culture-oriented approach

Studies on the recent rise of populism and its various articulations have analysed several reasons behind the growing support for populist parties and movements,

both nationally and internationally. Yet, these have remained largely limited to political and economic perspectives, neglecting insights from other fields such as cultural studies (Marchart 2010; Moran and Littler 2020). This volume, therefore, argues that the cultural dimension of populism must be addressed so as to gain a more complete understanding of how populism has been able to attract the widespread support that it has in Europe (and elsewhere). So far, arguments about cultural aspects of populism have tended to fall into two camps. Either they are limited to a cultural backlash thesis, which holds that the recent rise of populism can best be explained as a reaction against progressive cultural change (Norris and Inglehart 2019), or, as in the case of Juha Herkman's recent *A Cultural Approach to Populism*, hold to a view of populism as merely a "political phenomenon" (Herkman 2022, 8) tied to the empirical field of political parties or movements. Our focus, however, relies less on essentialising cultural claims that consolidate (rather than challenge) populist dichotomies, as we are more interested in how populist discourses are articulated in the realm of (popular) culture and music in particular. As such, we aim to broaden the frames through which populism is understood by discussing it as a cultural phenomenon beyond the narrow field of party politics, politicians, and political movements.

Populism's changing discursive power in society needs to be understood as part of a broader cultural struggle. As Laclau reminds us, categories such as the people and common sense are not preexisting social givens, but are in fact constructed through discourse. Following Laclau and Mouffe, discourse is not limited to words and ideas, but rather denotes all "systems of meaningful practices that form identities of subjects and objects through the construction of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers" (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2002, 3–4). This performative construction of the people versus the elite – mostly in nationalist and exclusionary terms (Müller 2016) in contemporary Europe – is what characterises populist projects. Populist discourses can therefore be understood as hegemonic struggles for power in their attempts to fix meanings and identities (Moffitt 2020, 21), to win the consent of other groups, and to achieve a kind of ascendancy over them in both thought and practice (Hall 2003). On the one hand, populism presents itself as counter-hegemonic by claiming to challenge the dominant culture, and the political and social status quo, playing the role of the oppositional underdog, whilst on the other hand, it simultaneously claims to be the true and rightful representative of the ("silent") majority. To achieve hegemony,⁸ it is necessary to create a basic level of consensus in which a social group can present its own interests as the general interests of society as a whole (Gramsci 1998).

This hegemonic struggle plays out in what Gramsci calls the "war of positions": an ideological struggle over definitions of the people and common sense, in which existing elements are dismantled and reconstituted into a new logic (Hall 1979). This war of positions is not only political, but also cultural, in as much as culture is a terrain of ideological struggle over meanings and the discursive construction

of (new) societal norms. As such, (popular) culture plays an important role in this conflict as it is a site

where [the] struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured.

(Hall 1998, 453)

In fact, as Stuart Hall points out, popular culture is the primary site for constituting the people (Hall 1998, 452).⁹

Of course, these discursive struggles over cultural hegemony are not (always) articulated as explicitly political messages, but most often work indirectly and invisibly, at the level of representation, signs and myths, affect and emotions. Since (popular) culture is not only concerned with concepts and ideas, but just as much with feelings, attachments, and emotions (Hall 2003), it is particularly fertile terrain for creating a sense of collective identity, (national) community, and belonging. As Fiske reminds us, it is important to remember that audiences play a constitutive role in the attribution and creation of (alternative) meanings as political acts (Fiske 2002). As such, popular culture is never a one-sided medium of communication, for instance for the dissemination of populist messages, but always consists of both consent and resistance that must be analysed and understood in their specific contexts.

It is particularly surprising that populism scholarship has neglected popular culture, given that populist actors¹⁰ often hone in on socio-cultural issues such as cultural change resulting from immigration (Mudde 2010), claiming to represent the (national) culture of the common people whilst drawing on popular cultural means of expression. Because culture is so central to any hegemonic project, as Hall writes, populism (in his case, Thatcherism) works on the basis of existing social practices and lived ideologies (Hall 1979). As we have seen, “populism takes these cultural elements which are already constructed into place, dismantles them, reconstitutes them into a new logic and articulates [them] in a new way, polarizing [them] to the Right” (Hall 1979, 16). Besides the obvious notions of an authentic people and a corrupt elite, particularly salient concepts in European contexts that are frequently rearticulated in populist terms include the nation and national (memory) culture, the heartland or *Heimat* and a sense of belonging, rurality as opposed to urbanism, gendered identities, and taste communities, amongst others.

Since hegemony-building always involves social and cultural processes that extend beyond the political realm (Panizza and Stavrakakis 2020), populists frequently employ popular cultural forms of expression. For a better understanding of these, Pierre Ostiguy’s socio-cultural conceptualisation of populism contains some very valuable insights. Populism has, of course, long used simplified messages and affective appeals directed at the so-called people; Ostiguy’s contribution

is a discussion of populism's social connotations. With the notion of "flaunting the low," Ostiguy points to how populist actors not only construct the people, but also appeal to the public by performing seemingly improper approaches to politics, and disregarding conventionally correct modes of expression. This may involve manners, demeanour, ways of speaking and dressing, vernacular codes, and culturally popular tastes displayed in public. By behaving in this way, populist actors aim to present themselves as authentic, cultural nationalists close to those they claim to represent. As Ostiguy concludes, "populism is defined as the antagonistic, mobilizational flaunting in politics of the culturally popular and native, and of personalism as a mode of decision-making" (Ostiguy 2017, 84).

More recently, Ostiguy, Moffitt, and Panizza have recommended a "performative and discursive approach to populism," arguing that "populist actors constitute popular political identities through performative practices that range from political speeches to transgressive 'low culture' performances which resonate locally" (Ostiguy et al. 2021, 2). This post-Laclauian approach is certainly valuable for recognising the relational link between populism and culture (by connecting content to style). However, it still misses the fundamental role of (popular) culture in the construction and representation of the populist people and its dichotomous, antagonistic Other, as well as in the dissemination and normalisation of populist discourses in wider society in and through (popular) culture. By remaining focused on the way in which populist actors use strategic performances and styles to gain political support, Ostiguy et al. remain limited to a narrowly-defined political realm, overlooking broader and more fundamental shifts, such as the ongoing redistribution of the sensible order (Rancière 2004)¹¹ along populist lines in contemporary European societies. Whilst they rightly highlight the fact that "populism redefines what is *sayable*, and hence also doable, in politics" (Ostiguy et al. 2021, 8, emphasis in original), their appraisal of culture sees it only as a resource for transgressive behaviour, rather than an equally important realm in which populist discourses are negotiated. Meanwhile, in *A Cultural Approach to Populism*, Herkman is right to observe that populism combines the cultural processes of signification and affective identification with political identities by giving politicised meanings to things and creating social belonging and exclusion (Herkman 2022, 35). However, his discussion does not go beyond populism's challenge to *political* hegemony, and overlooks the importance of (everyday) cultural practices.

Considering the centrality of (popular) culture for any hegemonic project, it is therefore obvious that the recent rise of populism in Europe must be understood as a wider discursive shift in society that surpasses the realm of party politics. Andreas Reckwitz, for instance, has indicated the importance of the cultural dimension in radical right-wing populist movements. As he puts it, "Right-wing populism is [. . .] not only party politics; it pursues a policy of ideas that aims at achieving cultural hegemony."¹² Likewise, Miller-Idriss has also pointed out that the far right is not simply a political movement, but a site of (sub-)cultural engagement (Miller-Idriss 2017).