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The people vs. the power bloc? Popular music and populism

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On 12 November 2017, the Philippine celebrity musician Pilita Corrales was singing the popular song 'Ikaw' ('You') at a gala event in Manila, attended by some of the world's most powerful politicians at the time, US President Donald Trump and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Suddenly, she noticed a male voice singing along with her, its intonation off, its volume increasing. Aware that the event was being recorded, Corrales at first tried to disregard the intruding voice. Eventually however, she could no longer ignore it and, shielding her eyes from the lights with one hand, she tried to spot the uninvited singer in the audience. 'Where are you, sir'? she asked. Realising that the singer was on one of the balconies, it dawned on her that he was none other than Duterte himself. After giving Duterte room to sing a section by himself, she then joined the president in the song's finale (BBC News 2017; Guardian News 2017; Rappler 2017).

In what ways can Duterte's performance be considered a kind of musical politics? And which theoretical frameworks might prove useful when trying to understand the meanings of such a performance?

This special issue proposes the concept of populism to interpret Duterte's performance, as well as other and related musical phenomena. As Duterte revealed after his singing, his intervention was an act of musical diplomacy. According to him, Trump had challenged him to sing along with Corrales; he had followed the order of 'the commander-in-chief of the United States' (Rappler, 2017). His performance was therefore part of a power play between two rulers fascinated with the allure of authority. In addition to honouring Donald Trump's request, Duterte's musical performance demonstrated his absolute command over the event, exceptional social position, disregard for étiquette, fearless spontaneity and (performed) familiarity with Philippine popular music culture. 'Ikaw' is a love song by the Philippine composer and politician George Masangkay Canseco (1934–2004), written for the eponymous movie released in 1993. The movie starred the celebrity singer Sharon Cuneta, who subsequently popularised the song in concerts. Duterte has claimed that 'Ikaw' is one of his favourite songs, and has performed it on live television and at different events. Although on a literal level, 'Ikaw' addresses a lover, the

desired object might also be read as a metaphor for the nation.[1] Performances of this song have therefore underscored both Duterte's reputation as a 'womaniser' and his image as a strongman leader intimately connected with his country's populace, a 'man of the people'. Indeed, this performance of proximity to 'the people' serves to corroborate Duterte's insistence that he stands outside the corrupt 'elite', his declared target upon taking office.

Although the term populism remains contested, most researchers agree that populism is based on a binary conception of society: a 'people' on the one hand, an 'elite' on the other (Moffitt 2020). Building on Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason* (2005), Chantal Mouffe defines populism as 'a discursive strategy of constructing a political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilisation of the "underdog" against "those in power"' (Mouffe 2019, p. 11). In the populist conception, these two groups are antagonistic to one another, the 'powerful elite' – usually envisioned as being the smaller group – seeking to maintain its hegemony over 'the people'. By associating himself with a popular song, Duterte performed the part of a charismatic leader who is simultaneously 'of the people' and opposed to 'the elite' (despite the fact that he was holding the political reins in the Philippines). In addition, Duterte's intrusive act of singing along with a well-known professional singer, albeit off-key, can be interpreted as 'inappropriate' or 'bad' manners, a possibly populist provocation levelled against the establishment.

This incident also highlights an important conceptual entanglement between populism and the popular. Popular music culture offers a wide range of affordances on which populists can draw in articulating a 'people' or an 'elite'. This power derives from popular culture's – and in particular popular music's – performative character, affective potential, and significant role in the discursive construction of cultural identities. At the same time, music can be a prime site for challenging hegemony and articulating counter-hegemonic discourses. In what follows, we briefly address the complex interconnections between populism and the popular, attending to both their conceptual similarities and fundamental differences.

Music and the popular

The set of habits, beliefs and objects that express and embody a social system's most commonly shared meanings is often referred to as popular culture (Kidd 2017). In his seminal *Keywords*, Raymond Williams (1983, p. 237) suggests that the term has four meanings, which tend to allot the signifier 'people' a key role: 'well-liked by many people', 'inferior kinds of work' (as opposed to 'high culture'), 'work deliberately setting out to win favour with the people' and 'culture actually made by the people for themselves'. This notion suggests that popular culture entails the construction of a (historically contingent) relationship between the popular, the people, and as Stuart Hall has it, a continuing tension with the power bloc (Hall 1998, p. 425). Some scholars celebrate popular culture as 'the culture of the people' (Fiske 2010, p. 140) and 'the culture of the subordinate who resent their subordination' (Fiske 2002, p. 7), while others have taken issue with the uncritical celebration of the popular (Frith 1991; McGuigan 1992). Yet, as Hall reminds us, popular culture is

[1] In Philippine political culture, it is not uncommon for politicians to appropriate love songs in a patriotic manner (Balance 2010; Gabrillo 2018).

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the very realm where the meanings of such categories are negotiated: it is a key site in which notions of 'the people' are constituted in the first place and 'the struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged' (Hall 1998, p. 453).

In cultural studies scholarship, the process of constructing a people (as well as subcultural identities and their implied challenge to hegemony) is often conceptualised as performed indirectly or obliquely along the lines of signifying practices in the symbolic realm, through rituals (Hall and Jefferson 2003) and style (Hebdige 1979). This scholarship emphasises that popular culture and music's political potential is 'most effective in the progressive and the micropolitical' (Fiske 2010, p. 126) rather than at radical and macropolitical levels (Fiske 2010; Marchart 2012). Similarly, popular music scholars have pointed out that participation in music often seems to fall outside of definitions of political participation (Street *et al.* 2008). Yet we also know that music, as a discursive practice, is 'always already grounded in the social, as an avenue of cultural contestation or social and political engagement' (Peddie 2006, p. xvi). As such, it can play an important role in creating, maintaining or strengthening social movements and thus transforming social conditions through struggles for policy changes on a macro level (Porta 2015). A key political function of music in this context – besides its ability to articulate political discourses – is its affective appeal (Danaher 2010; Street 2003; Thompson and Biddle 2013), and 'capacity to stimulate bodily sensation and influence emotion, mood and motivation' (Garratt 2019, p. 18). Indeed, music is known to mobilise emotions and bodies in protest settings, among others. It can have a 'magnetic effect' (Denisoff 1972) and generate solidarity (Eyerman and Jamison 1998), unity and 'communities of feeling' (Berezin 2002) through collective musicking practices (Rosenthal 2001; Small 1998).

Given music's ability to constitute and perform popular identities, and to challenge or reaffirm hegemony, politicians, political movements and parties have employed music for its affective capacity (Street 2012). Political actors frequently draw on popular music as a means of aligning themselves with popular identifications, expressing particular solidarities or presenting themselves as 'ordinary people' (Jordan 2013; Patch 2016). To these ends, they might associate themselves with popular artists, publicly share personal playlists, organise music events or play music at election rallies. Indeed, scholars have pointed out that the boundaries between politics and popular culture are becoming increasingly blurry, with a growing number of popular musicians assuming the roles of political advocates or even actors in the political field (Street 2006, 2019), and professional politicians increasingly performing as celebrities or pop stars (Street 2004, 2019). In Austria for instance, the celebrity singer-songwriter Andreas Gabalier, who calls himself 'Volks-Rock'n'Roller', has become a prominent political actor (Dunkel and Kopanski forthcoming; Dunkel *et al.* 2021). Conversely in Sweden, the 'charismatic leader' of the populist radical-right Sweden Democrats, Jimmie Åkesson, delights in performing with his nationalist pop-rock band, Bedårande Barn (Schiller 2023, forthcoming).

Following Stuart Hall's conceptualisation of popular culture as organised around the binary popular forces vs. the power-bloc, these examples suggest a conceptual correspondence between the popular and populism. As we argue, however, not all popular culture is populist. Although theories of popular culture necessarily refer to notions of a people and expressions of the popular, its *ex negativo* definition in opposition to the power bloc (in Hall's neo-Gramscian terminology) is generally

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conceptualised as *relational* rather than *antagonistic*. It is precisely this difference between the people's relational opposition to power, on the one hand, and an anti-institutional, antagonistic and dichotomous construction of the social around an internal frontier, on the other, that Ernesto Laclau identifies as the difference between 'popular' and 'populist' oppositions respectively. By and large, the popular culture of capitalist societies has been understood as working 'primarily in the realm of the popular rather than populist opposition' (Fiske 2010, p. 127). Accordingly, its politics have been seen as 'progressive rather than radical' (Fiske 2010, p. 127).

Read against the backdrop of this distinction between popular and populist, Duterte engages in the *popular* music practice of singing popular songs, which allows him to reaffirm his *populist* staging of himself as a 'man of the people', in antagonism to the elite. Conversely, Gabalier is a popular singer who engages in populist rhetoric when claiming to be heroically confronting the 'headwind' blowing from the supposed left-wing liberal (media) elite. And Jimmie Åkesson seeks to build an image as a harmless popular musician while promoting a far-right populist ideology. Together, these examples combine performances of the popular with populism, but also stand as reminders of the necessity to distinguish the terms carefully.

Populism and music

Some researchers emphasise populism's ideological nature, although the ideology it entails is often 'thin-centered,' as Cas Mudde has argued (2007, p. 23). Others highlight its strategic (Weyland 2017), socio-cultural (Ostiguy 2017) or performative character (Moffitt 2016), regardless of the political orientation on the left–right spectrum of any given populist movement. The so-called discursive–performative approaches (Moffitt 2020; Ostiguy *et al.* 2021) are especially helpful in making sense of the connections among the popular, populism and popular music. The political scientist Benjamin Moffitt, for instance, stresses that populism can be 'understood as a *political style* that is performed, embodied and enacted across a variety of political and cultural contexts' (Moffitt 2016, p. 3, emphasis in original). In this light, 'the [populist] leader is seen as *the performer*, "the people" as *the audience*, and crisis and media as *the stage* on which populism plays out' (Moffitt 2016, p. 5, emphasis in original). This conceptualisation of populism pays close attention to how populist actors, like celebrities, constantly need to navigate performances of ordinariness and extraordinariness in the contemporary media landscape. Further, it underscores the ways in which populist actors use media channels – and arguably popular culture and music – to construct, portray and render present 'the people' by continually evoking a sense of crisis and consistently pitting 'the people' against an 'other'. Pierre Ostiguy describes the socio-cultural dimension of these populist performances as 'the flaunting of the low' (2017, p. 78). By this, he refers to the emphasis on transgression and specific ways of being and acting that are often marked by uncouth and crude 'manners, demeanours, ways of speaking and dressing, vocabulary, and tastes displayed in public', including slang or folksy expressions (Ostiguy 2017, p. 78). The populist socio-cultural 'low', Ostiguy argues, relates to 'the mobilizational flaunting of the culturally popular and native "people from here"' (2017, pp. 84, 93). Although this antagonistic style or aesthetic of populist appeals is connected closely with

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cultural and social hierarchies and tastes, Michael Kazin shows how the populist notion of 'the people' is 'not narrowly bounded by class' (2017, p. 1). Popular culture, then, constitutes a discursive resource for social identifications and antagonisms that fuel populism, and its affective affordances can provide populism with the means of politicising audiences and spaces according to populism's own logic (Canovan 1999; Moran and Littler 2020; Naerland 2020).

Populism's affectively charged processes of antagonistic collective identification are often performed in and via popular music. Existing scholarship on the nexus between popular music and populism demonstrates the breadth of populist parties and movements' musical activity, which ranges from the symbolic endorsement of specific genres, styles, tastes, artists and aesthetics, through the composition of campaign songs to political actors performing as musicians themselves. In recent years, scholars have discussed cases including populism in presidential campaign songs and Barack Obama's mixtapes (Jordan 2013; Patch 2016, 2019); musical references in the discourses of the Podemos party in Spain (Caruso 2020); popular music playlists at demonstrations of the German far-right Alternative für Deutschland (Dunkel 2021); the affinity between Hungary's extreme-right Jobbik party and the Nemzeti sub-genre of rock music; and the embracing of Disco Polo by Poland's Law and Justice Party (Łuczaj 2020; Szele 2016). These examples, musically and politically different, reveal that populism has increasingly blurred the boundaries between the political extremes and the mainstream. As has been argued elsewhere, Trump-supporting fashwave music, for instance, combines musical and cultural aesthetics derived from popular genres such as synthwave, vaporwave and retro culture, with extreme-right content in what might be described as 'populist retromania' (Schiller 2022; 2023). Anti-populist efforts have also garnered some attention, including the Belgian 0110 concerts organised in defiance of the radical right Vlaams Belang (De Cleen 2009); Norwegian hip hop in opposition to the far-right Progress Party (Naerland 2016); and Turkish protest music produced and performed in the context of the Gezi Park demonstrations (Way 2016). In addition, some populist figures have performed popular music themselves. These include Jimmy Åkesson, whom we have mentioned above, but also Paweł Kukiz in Poland, Silvio Berlusconi and Beppe Grillo in Italy, as well as Jörg Haider and H.C. Strache in Austria, to name but a few. What is more, some well-known musicians (such as Morrissey and Kid Rock) have been branded populists for comments they have made in and outside of their songs.

Finally, it is notable that, with very few exceptions, studies in the field of popular music and populism are carried out in the disciplines of political science, media and communication studies, or area studies. Seldom is the topic addressed from the perspective of musicology or popular music studies. As we argue elsewhere, these disciplinary dynamics have led to a considerable focus on the use of music by politicians and the relative neglect of populism in everyday musical culture beyond party politics (Dunkel and Schiller, forthcoming). Even when researchers enquire about particular political actors or institutions, their conclusions rarely account for popular music's complexity.

This special issue, then, aims to develop more nuanced perspectives on the vast but understudied field of popular music and populism, addressing the multiple intersections of the two from various disciplinary standpoints, including musicology, sociology, political science and communication studies. The articles assembled here discuss musical aesthetics, genre, the politics of listening, musical addressivity and

music's function in social movements, as well as the transnational character of musical politics. In doing so, they address the following questions: in what ways does popular music interact with and negotiate populist discourses? How do musical sounds, lyrics, performances and visuals articulate populist politics? How can analysing popular music help develop a better understanding of populism as a socio-cultural phenomenon?

Overview of contributions

Research into the nexus of populism and popular music culture reveals that they share many stylistic features. Oded Erez highlights these similarities in his article on the use of popular music during Miri Regev's term as Israel's Minister of Culture and Sports in Netanyahu's right-wing populist government (2015–2020). Both populism and popular music contribute to what he terms a 'regime of style', a set of aesthetic principles shared across both fields. Given that populism is defined by its antagonism to the 'establishment', populist regimes in power face the challenge of continuously reinforcing their own oppositional stance while simultaneously stabilising their authority. This struggle is often performed through 'dramas of identity' (McCarthy 2017), style and aesthetic judgements (Peck 2019), which are also core features of popular culture. Erez shows how Miri Regev partakes in the cultural and political contestation of taste hierarchies, as well as in a populist, identitarian 'flaunting of the low', drawing on widely popularised performance practices and aesthetic principles from contemporary reality TV and *Idol*-format TV shows. Israeli music shows such as *Kokhav Nolad* ('A Star is Born'), *X Factor Israel* and *The Voice* involve performances of specific ethnic and classed identities, which equip populist and nationalist politicians with stylistic resources to position themselves as representatives of a particular (ethnic, national) people. Erez shows how during her tenure Regev organised several musical events to explicitly showcase her endorsement of pop music styles associated with audiences that traditionally support her party, the Likud, i.e. the Jewish *Mizrahi* middle class. Miri Regev therefore relies on the wider cultural shifts and popular aesthetics of *Idols*-format shows, which have played an important role in repositioning *muzika mizrahit* as the dominant marker of Israeliness in music. Erez draws on Jacques Rancière's (2004) conceptualisation of the relationship between aesthetics and politics as involving particular distributions of the sensible, or *régimes*. On this basis, Erez argues that the contemporary 'regime of style' amounts to a common aesthetic programme shared between popular culture and populist politics.

What are the implications of understanding populism in terms of performance and style, when considering music genres? A key issue in popular music studies has been how genres should be conceptualised (Brackett 2016; Holt 2009; Lena 2017). As Jennifer Lena argues, genres can best be understood as 'trajectories of genre forms' consisting of various social, organisational and aesthetic attributes (2017, p. 25). In this perspective, and given their diversity, are some music genres more likely to afford populist uses than others, or is the very hypothesis of a populist-leaning music genre a non-starter? In their article, Savvopoulos and Stavrakakis address this issue through the case of Greek rap music, an itself diverse, fascinating yet understudied musical field (Efthymiou and Stavrakakis 2018; Elafros 2013). Importantly, if Erez focuses on populist styles associated with the Israeli right,

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Savvopoulos and Stavrakakis's object of study is more politically ambivalent. The rap music they look at includes left-leaning and antifascist articulations, occasionally drawing on populism as a mobilising force. Their article, which is grounded in a discursive–performative understanding of populism, demonstrates that populist narratives play a prominent role in contemporary Greek rap music. Advocating for a 'nuanced conceptualization of populism', they argue that the frame of populism can provide a perspective on Greek rap music that transcends Eurocentric interpretations.

As Savvopoulos and Stavrakakis admit, an analysis of music and populism centred on lyrics is too limited to address the polyvalent politics of musicking, including what Nina Sun Eidsheim calls 'the micropolitics of listening' (2019, pp. 24–8). According to Emilia Barna and Ágnes Patakfalvi-Czirják's article, the method of musicological group analysis is one way to bridge this gap. Ralf von Appen *et al.* (2015) developed the method in the mid-2010s to analyse reception processes in groups. It is analogous to ethnologists' earlier efforts to translate 'ethno-psychoanalytical' methods into an analysis of musical reception processes, pioneered by Jochen Bonz (Bonz 2012). If ethno-psychoanalysis is primarily concerned with understanding how cultural and psychological processes are interconnected in music reception, musicological group analysis allows for greater consideration of sonic, musical and formal qualities and the ways in which they are enmeshed in cultural listening practices. Barna and Patakfalvi-Czirják employ this method to analyse three songs commissioned by Hungary's populist-nationalist Fidesz government, in power since 2010 and whose politics exemplify populist and nationalist hegemony-building. Based on their critical readings of three music examples, Barna and Patakfalvi-Czirják caution against simplistic sociocultural understandings of populism as 'the flaunting of the low', which, in their judgement, fail to grasp the complex class dynamics that play out in many contemporary cases, including the policies and politics of the Orbàn regime.

Although populism is not inherently aligned with a particular political spectrum, in contemporary European contexts it is often associated with radical right and nationalist discourses (Wodak *et al*. 2013). Whereas populism and nationalism share 'the people' as a central signifier, both adhere to different logics and characterise belonging in distinct ways (Moffitt 2020, p. 31). De Cleen and Stavrakakis, for instance, argue that populism operates according to a down/up antagonism of 'the people' vs. 'the elite', whereas nationalism functions in terms of an in/out opposition between the nation and its 'other' (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). In the context of nationalism, music can play an important role in discursively constructing an idealised national body, as Rheindorf and Wodak show with regard to the context of Austria and the performances of pop singer Andreas Gabalier mentioned above (Rheindorf and Wodak 2019). The combination of music and populism, however, is often more ambivalent and less direct than the case of Gabalier might suggest. As André Doehring and Kai Ginkel emphasise in their contribution to this issue, grasping the political functions of music that is superficially apolitical requires paying close attention to the specific socio-material relationships between musical spaces and 'audiencing' practices (Born 2021, p. 186). This insight emerges from an analysis of localised meaning-making processes in the context of seemingly apolitical popular music played at political events held by the Austrian far-right populist Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). By introducing the concept of an 'assembled politicity', Doehring and Ginkel describe how music's political potential is activated

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through its social inscription and particular situational arrangements of reception (beer tents in the case of the Austrian FPÖ), including sounds, bodies, materialities and spatial environments. This emphasis on the combination of situated performances, bodily practices and musical aesthetics raises important questions of methodology. Doehring and Ginkel suggest a multi-step approach that enables researchers to grasp the performative aspects and populist affordances of concrete situations of reception through ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth analyses of the musical material and collective music analysis (which Barna and Patakfalvi-Czirjak also undertake in their contribution). By drawing on this methodology, Doehring and Ginkel shed light on music as sound and situated performance, debating the pleasure and political meanings of musical experiences in populist spaces.

If the articles on populism and popular music in contemporary Hungary and Austria address the ways in which populist-nationalist parties such as Fidesz and the FPÖ co-opt and employ popular culture, populism theory may also help us to understand the bottom-up musical politics of social movements (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). Some historical forms of populism have been understood as part of larger social and cultural movements. Consider, for instance, the 'sentimental populism' that historian Michael Denning identified in the cultural movement on the US American left during the 1930s and 1940s, which he labelled the 'cultural front' (2011, pp. 117–27). According to Denning, populist articulations continued to inform the US American left beyond the 1940s. More recently, populist political parties have capitalised on the mythologisation of resistance in the history of popular culture. Initially centred on the comedian and musician Beppe Grillo, the Italian Five Star Movement drew on myths related to popular music culture – not least by setting up a 'Woodstock Five Star Festival' in order to launch the party at the national level in 2010. While the Five Star Movement's rhetoric attempted to profit from widely available cultural memories of Woodstock as a festival of musical resistance, its strategy can also be understood as an attempt to build on historical precursors for the successful use of music in social movements (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). As the contribution by Gonzalo Carrasco, Dan Bendrups and Raúl Sanchez Urribarrí suggests, one example of such a precursor may be the Chilean *nueva canción* movement of the 1960s and 1970s.[2] Applying the term populism to this movement is not unproblematic (Riveros Ferrada 2018); for one thing, some highly visible researchers continue to use the concept to devalue Salvador Allende's communalist and socialist politics as an ostensibly misguided 'macroeconomic populism', which was supposedly deeply flawed from the beginning (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991; Edwards 2019). In their article, Carrasco, Bendrups and Sanchez Urribarrí seek to reassess populism regarding the *nueva canción* movement, providing a fresh perspective on the political positioning of the movement's key actors and the Chilean Communist Party.

Finally, Lyndon Way's contribution acknowledges that, although populism may be locally situated, it is also a transnational phenomenon in a contemporary global political context. Returning to popular music's potential to challenge the hegemonic power bloc, Way's article on anti-populist populism and music underscores the value of transnational comparisons when it comes to understanding the relationship between music and populism, as well as the challenges of opposing populism.

[2] On parallels between Latin American populisms and the Five Star Movement, see Padoan (2021).

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In his article, Way attends to songs that can be described as both populist and anti-populist in style and content, comparing and contrasting cases derived from two fundamentally different cultural contexts, namely the United States during Donald Trump's tenure as president (2017–2021) and Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's authoritarian populist regime (since 2014). By analysing and comparing Eminem's 'The Storm' (2017) and Ezhel's 'Yarınımız Yok' ('We have no tomorrow', 2018) Way demonstrates how oppositional popular music can articulate distinct forms of populism and discursively construct 'the people' in distinct ways. Using multimodal critical discourse analysis to compare two music videos, both criticising authoritarian-populist politicians, Way emphasises what he calls populism's different 'accents' in popular music. In his close reading of the songs' lyrics, visuals and musical sounds, Way shows how the music videos cast Eminem and Ezhel as authentic rappers and legitimate representatives of the people, respectively. Yet by articulating alternative versions of 'the people' and 'the elite' in opposition to populism, these artists ultimately employ populist rhetoric and stylistic registers that resemble those used by the very authoritarian-populist politicians they set out to challenge. Way's article points to the potential limitations of musical anti-populism's double-edged discursive strategy.

Collectively, the articles in this special issue advance urgently needed research on a topic that, to a significant degree, remains obscure. We still know too little about how music interacts with political change in most historical periods and geographical areas of the world, and the articles assembled here only address a small fraction of this global process. The historian Gary Gerstle (2022) has recently argued that we may be witnessing the beginning of a new political order in the United States and beyond. Regardless of whether one agrees with his claim, investigating popular culture – and popular music in particular – is indispensable for understanding the discursive, performative and affective levels of both the macro- and micropolitical developments that motivate significant normative and political transformations. As John Street, Sara Inthorn and Martin Scott put it: 'The pleasures of popular culture are closely allied with the ways in which citizenship is lived' (2013, p. 4). This special issue argues that the concept of populism is key to approaching and understanding political and cultural change. While focusing on how polarisation, antagonism, but also solidarity form in particular groups, the polyvalence and adaptability of populism incentivise us to avoid simplistic judgements, encouraging instead nuanced contextualisation to account for populism's ideological, discursive and performative entanglements. Varieties of populism involve a wide spectrum of political positions, some emancipatory, others reactionary; some authoritarian, others egalitarian. Irrespective of this plurality, populism's inherent critique of power structures challenges 'us', as citizens with an interest in popular music and politics, to engage in the self-reflexive 'standpoint epistemology' (Táíwò 2022, pp. 71–84) necessary to prevent the reinforcement of analytical biases.

That we received more than 70 abstract submissions testifies to the significant academic interest in the questions discussed in this special issue. Although we could only include a small number of articles, we are confident that some of the questions addressed therein will translate into, and productively contrast with, other cultural and disciplinary contexts, while generating further research. Only through dialogue across diverse fields can we hope to achieve the nuance of understanding that populism requires. We hope that this special issue, with its

range of international and interdisciplinary contributions, is a worthy step in this direction.

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