

Researching Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe

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In this article we want to present our research project Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe, which we have just started working on in March 2019 (Dunkel et al. 2018). In the first half of the paper, we will present the project, its aims, set-up, and methodology. In the second half, we will discuss two music examples from different contexts to show how popular music and populism interact in similar ways across contemporary European music cultures.

Populist parties and movements have grown exponentially over the last decades and years especially, not only *but also* in Europe (Noury and Roland). This project holds that the recent rise of populist movements in Europe cannot be regarded as merely a political, economic, or social phenomenon, but also a cultural one. Other than those cultural approaches which mainly scrutinize changes in voters' attitudes, ours examines the transformations in popular music cultures that have occurred in connection with societal shifts. In this international comparative project, we focus on five European countries: Hungary, Italy, Austria, Germany, and Sweden with researchers in Budapest, Florence, Graz, Oldenburg, and Groningen/Stockholm.¹

Interactions between popular music and populism are manifold. Just to give two very brief examples: In 2010, for instance, the Italian comedian-turned-politician Beppe Grillo and his Five Star Movement organized the “Woodstock Five Star” festival to rally support for his populist party. In German-speaking parts of Europe we witness highly successful mainstream acts such as Frei.Wild or Andreas Gabalier which declare themselves to be apolitical but transmedially create “the ideal subject of the extreme right” (Rheindorf and Wodak 307). In Sweden, Jimmie Åkesson, the leader of the populist radical-right Sweden Democrats, plays in a band that performs at party events like the annual Summer Festival organized by the party. We intend to look at the way in which mainstream popular music negotiates populist ideas. We address the following questions: How can we describe the interaction between populism and popular music? Which populist tropes do we recognize in popular music? Is popular music an effective medium in the dissemination of populist ideologies? And by what means does it become effective?

For understanding the connection between popular music and populism in Europe, it is essential to first define what we mean when we refer to populism. There are many definitions of populism and the term itself is very broad, which can make it a challenge to work with. When *we* talk about populism we refer to a definition by Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser who describe populism as an “ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 498).

In this project, we consider popular music to play an important role in spreading populist ideologies in wider society and making them acceptable. In that sense, we follow the tradition of cultural studies, regarding popular music as a site of contestation and negotiation between dominant ideologies and oppositional cultural and ideological values in society (Hall 73). Antonio Gramsci has described this process as a slow, hidden conflict where forces seek to gain influence and power – as a “war of positions” (238) – a process that importantly does not only take place in the political sphere, but also in the realm of culture. In this sense, we consider popular music to be one site of these „battle grounds“. As such, music is a culturally situated *text* and *practice* that is shaped by its *pro-*

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ducers (musicians, song-writers, etc.) and its *active reception* (what people make of it), but it *also* shapes the cultural processes (and society) of which it is a part: So popular music not only *reflects* ongoing debates in society, it is also constitutive of them. This is why we need to understand music as part of politics (Street) in this ongoing “war of positions,” and music therefore offers important insights for a better understanding of populism in contemporary Europe and how formally radical and niche ideologies make it into the public sphere and become normalized in society.

To illustrate these theoretical points we want to first discuss and compare two contemporary music examples from Italy and Austria respectively. The first example is a music video of the Italian popular singer Giuseppe Povia, also known simply as Povia. The second example is an MTV unplugged live recording of a song by the Austrian singer and songwriter Andreas Gabalier. By investigating these two examples we seek to demonstrate how a perspective informed by populism studies can illuminate how these cultural artefacts interact with populism by articulating similar populist tropes and ideas within different contemporary European cultures.

Povia: “Chi comanda il mondo”

Over the last years, the Italian popular singer-songwriter (*cantautore*) Giuseppe Povia has written and performed a number of far-right populist songs and music videos – including the song we want to talk about: “Who Is in Charge of the World?” (*Chi comanda il mondo?*).

Povia’s career as a singer got a boost in 2006, when he won the prestigious San Remo song festival with the song “I Would Like to Have a Beak” (*Vorrei avere il becco*). The San Remo festival is a precursor to the Eurovision Song Contest and holds the status of a major popular music event that is broadcast and followed throughout Italy. In 2009, Povia almost repeated his success when he came in second with the song “Luca was Gay” (*Luca era gay*). Narrating the story of a young man who believes that he is gay, but eventually (and as the song indicates: fortunately) falls in love with a woman, the latter song helped to earn Povia the reputation of a conservative musician. In a way, the song established Povia’s musical dog whistle politics (Lopez): Its homophobia was recognized and criticized especially by Italy’s liberal cultural milieu (Vitali), but it remained an interpretation that many Italians did not share. Many thought that the song had primarily a positive message (Palamara).

Over the last five years, Povia’s music has become more radical in its articulation of far-right messages. This is obvious in his video “Who Is in Charge of the World”. We would like to return to Mudde and Kaltwasser’s definition of populism to approach this video. According to Mudde and Kaltwasser, populist ideologies pit the “pure” people against the “corrupt” elite (498). Povia’s song in many ways reaffirms and animates this dichotomy. On a textual level, the song asks, “who runs the world?” While the lyrics do not provide an answer to this question, the music video does depict a figure who is in charge of the world. He is dressed in a dark coat, in suit and tie, and has a disfigured, asymmetric and anemic face. The man may be reminiscent of popular depictions of death, but he is also strikingly close to anti-Semitic cartoons of the 1920s and 30s. In addition, the video adds to the lyrics that the European Union is a means to enslave “the people.” The European Union, so the suggestion, is only a shadow parliament run by corrupt politicians who are themselves string puppets under the control of this dark, evil master.

In addition to thus defining the “corrupt elite,” the music video imagines the “good people.” At one point in the song, Povia says that one day, “one of these children” will wake up to become the most powerful man in the world and to “carry love up to the sky.” Visually, the people are depicted as young, healthy, innocent, white Europeans – young men, women and children, who are likewise enslaved by higher powers.

This dichotomy between good and evil – between the innocent, pure people on the one hand, and the elite that is corrupted by an evil master on the other – provides a larger framework, which is animated by other populist tropes:

First, the fact that Povia whispers the first chorus, for instance, pointing his finger to his mouth hints to the idea that the people are oppressed by a so-called “dictatorship of opinion,” alluding to the populist discourse of a so-called “silent majority.” Second, the chains and – especially – the European flag turning into Jesus’s crown of thorns on Povia’s head reaffirm the claiming of victimhood. Victimhood is fundamental in the construction of the good people and the corrupt elite, it delegitimizes the “elite,” turning them into criminals. Third, the persona of Povia himself is equally fundamental to this video. As singer and writer of this song, he poses as a rebel, doing things that are forbidden, breaking taboos, speaking the unspeakable, as his voice seems to represent the voice of the people. Musically, the impression that Povia is the head of some resistance is most obvious in the song’s bridge about three minutes into the song. Povia’s singing verges on shouting, and his voice is overdubbed several times

by his own shouting while the rest of the band plays an eight-bar break. In the end, these techniques serve to cast Povia as a leader of a resistance to the illegitimate enslavement of the people by the “corrupt” elite.

Andreas Gabalier: “*A Meinung haben*” (Having an Opinion)

Our second case study is from Austria, by the musician Andreas Gabalier, who calls himself Volks-Rock’n’Roller, Austrian ‘Alpen-Elvis’, or the Elvis from the Alps. Gabalier is an extremely successful popular musician: He has sold millions of albums, has won numerous awards in Germany and Austria, and goes on sold-out stadium tours. Generally his lyrics are often about the homeland and represent a conservative world-view, referring to what he would call the “good old values”. Yet, he is also close to Austrian far-right politicians such as Heinz-Christian Strache who, alluding to “Je suis Charlie Hebdo”, supported Gabalier with the slogan “Je suis Gabalier” when the latter was criticized for implying that heterosexual men would be disadvantaged in today’s world (Weber 99).

Gabalier is for instance outspoken against the alleged “gender madness.” In 2014, for example, he publicly sang the Austrian national anthem in its old version – which only pays tribute to the nation’s “great sons” (Rheindorf and Wodak 311–312). The new and now official version includes the nation’s great sons *and daughters*. This caused a big scandal and national debate. Gabalier, however, saw no reason to sing the anthem in its new version. He sees the old version as a historic national treasure that should be respected, and claims that the new version alienates the Austrian people from its nation. He framed the criticism he received for this as reputational damage and as evidence that there is a lack of freedom of speech in Austria. In reaction to this self-staged scandal, he released a song called “Having an Opinion” (*A Meinung haben*).

Our analysis is based on a live performance of “A Meinung haben” at the MTV unplugged session in 2016, performed as a duet together with Xavier Naidoo. Naidoo is a German soul and R&B singer, and a controversial figure often associated with utterances that can be read as extreme right (Bos). We want to analyze how the performance articulates populism: Lyrically, we hear a heroic narrative and a story of rebellion: Gabalier is standing up for his convictions against all odds. The concrete convictions (and opinion of the title), however, remain explicitly unnamed and are mainly implied through context. This appeal to a shared tacit knowledge and understanding of the “coded message” functions, similar to the example of Povia, as dog whistle politics, but also as an empty signifier (Laclau). Gabalier further calls into question the function of representative democracy: “How can it be that a few people think to know what a country wants?”, and he claims that the people are silenced by a dictatorship of opinion: “Is this the meaning of democracy / That one person says something and the others are silent?”² All of this is sung in a light form of Styrian dialect, linking Gabalier’s narrative to national discourse and identity.

Musically, Gabalier is famous for combining *Volksmusik* (folk music) with pop and rock elements, however in this case we hear a ballad that combines rock with classical elements: the rock instrumentation, in this version presented as “unplugged”, emphasizes authenticity, truthfulness, and sincerity – combined with the seriousness and pathos of a string orchestra and solo cello. While Gabalier’s raspy voice and the rock elements with its associated emphasis on vigor and rebelliousness here underline the unruly character of the song’s message, the symphonic character draws on the cultural capital of “high art” (institutions) and gives legitimacy to the song’s claims. In terms of performance aesthetic and style, we see an equally interesting combination of elements: Gabalier performs in *Lederhosen* (traditional leather pants, emphasizing nativeness, rurality and tradition, as well as connection to the homeland), yet combined with a rock’n’roll haircut (the classic undercut), straddle-legged and dressed in a white shirt with a black jacket as classic markers of masculine rebellion. This defiant (yet rooted) performance of masculinity and national identity is also expressed in elements such as the highly visible bandana on his wrist and microphone stand, another classic marker of rock authenticity and rebellion, in this case fittingly in the national colors of Austria (red and white), articulating his rebellion in the name of the native *Heimat* (homeland). Sonically, an intimacy is created, by singing very close to the microphone and thereby bridging the gap between performer and audience, emphasizing closeness, a shared experience, and a sense of urgency (a technique famously perfected by Elvis himself).

In sum, we can understand “A Meinung haben” as a heroic song by Gabalier about his own self-proclaimed act of resistance, of standing up for traditional national values – in the name of (re-) uniting the Austrian people that are not rightfully represented by the elite. Gabalier’s version of the nation is clearly marked as masculine, and he claims to speak “for the people” and their true interests, as opposed to “the elite”, which in this case is liberal politics in general, but also the democratically elected national parliament in particular.

² Our translations

Conclusion

In the two music examples, we recognize a struggle between the essentially good people and a corrupt elite. Within this conflict, the white male singer is cast as a charismatic rebel representing “the people” who both suffer from and resist the elite. This antagonism between the elite and the oppressed people is corroborated by the claiming of victimhood and the appropriation of aesthetics and symbols of protest. In both examples, this performance of protest against oppression intersects with a celebration of heroic manhood as self-made, brave, and persevering. Both music examples also invoke the concepts of a fake democracy (parliaments dissociated from the people) and a dictatorship of opinion, suppressing the “silent majority.”

Our discussion of these two examples was less a demonstration of final project results than a preliminary illustration of the potential of our approach. Exploring the nexus of populism and popular music can provide unique – but significant – insights into the mechanisms underlying larger social and cultural shifts. If popular music is a site of cultural negotiation and struggle, then the investigation of cultural and musical dynamics is a first step to better understanding larger cultural transformations. Importantly, our project will focus not only on musical, audio-visual, and performance analyses but also include the study of ways in which people make sense of populist articulations in popular music cultures. For this, we rely on the kind of fieldwork we are currently doing, including participant observations at party events, festivals, concerts and demonstrations, as well as conducting interviews with concertgoers and heterogeneous groups of people. We do think, however, that the musical materials discussed here clearly indicate manifold ways in which popular music cultures are negotiating populisms across European cultures.

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