Article

Cultural populism in new populist times

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Abstract
This article unpacks the concept of 'cultural populism' in multiple ways, and explores its value for the critical analysis of new formations and expressions of populism in the current conjuncture. Taking Jim McGuigan's influential book, *Cultural Populism*, as our point of departure, we begin by exploring its earlier use in cultural studies as a critical term for apolitical/celebratory modes of analysis, and then argue it may be usefully extended today to refer to popular and political efforts to construct a 'people' in overtly cultural terms. Second, we make the case for renewing an expressly 'critical populist' stance, one that is attentive to ordinary tastes and pleasures, while also locating and analysing them in relation to the production of needs and desires within a capitalist political economy, and that is attuned to the political possibilities for change. Third, we argue that the resources of cultural studies should be mobilised to redress some of the deficiencies of dominant accounts of populism from political science, and suggest that the twin concepts of cultural and critical populism offer an advance over the elitist and culturally reductive mode of analysis associated with Inglehart and Norris' conception of 'cultural backlash'. We conclude by offering an overview of the other contributions to the special issue, as they seek to push the concept of cultural populism in new directions, while also critically engaging with residual, dominant and emergent popular and populist currents in these new populist times.

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Introduction

As a postdisciplinary, theoretically sophisticated and empirically rooted field of study that subjects the norms and practices of 'culture' to critical, political analysis, cultural studies has long been habituated by and indeed constituted through periods of self-reflection. One such period of self-reflection was occasioned by the publication of *Cultural Populism* by Jim McGuigan in 1992. Insisting that we foreground the relationship between culture and economy, and that we avoid 'idealist' and apolitical forms of analysis which reproduce the celebratory norms of consumer culture – 'cultural populism' in McGuigan's terms – the book created a considerable stir in cultural studies through its often controversial approach and by reinvigorating debates over how we understand the relationship between culture, politics, power and capitalism.

As we enter a new period of populisms – not just cultural and consumerist, but also political – this special issue reflects on the development of cultural studies since the intervention of *Cultural Populism* by interrogating the meanings, values and practices of populism and commercialism in relation to contemporary culture. In an age of Brexit, Trump, social media and consumer citizenship, what progress have we made towards the kind of 'critical populism' that McGuigan argued for – and what other approaches and tools are needed? This special issue both analyses 'cultural populism' in the sense intended by Jim McGuigan and aims to use its insights to push the concept in new directions, while tracing its relationship to the contemporary moment. It builds on an event held at City, University of London in December 2017, at which on the 25th anniversary of the publication of *Cultural Populism* (1992), a number of key figures from the field of cultural studies came together to celebrate both the book and Jim McGuigan's wider and multifaceted contribution to cultural studies. Extending beyond the analysis and critique of cultural populism, this has included his ground-breaking work on cultural policy, particularly the books *Culture and the Public Sphere* (1996) and *Rethinking Cultural Policy* (2004); later work which took a critical scalpel to neoliberal culture, such as *Cool Capitalism* (McGuigan, 2009a), *Cultural Analysis* (McGuigan, 2009b) and *Neoliberal Culture* (2016); and an ongoing commitment to renewing the work of Raymond Williams for contemporary cultural studies and sociology (McGuigan, 2014, 2015, 2019; McGuigan and Moran, 2014).[1]

As was roundly noted at the City event, the contributions and legacies of *Cultural Populism* are manifold. Perhaps most especially, *Cultural Populism* contributed towards reinvigorating the powerful, politicised strand of cultural studies which had been only too palpable in the CCCS at Birmingham, for example, in its extra-mural projects to expand the commons and its commitment to left analysis: Stuart Hall (1981: 239), for instance, notoriously wrote that popular culture matters because it is one of the places where socialism may be constituted.[2] The critique of capitalist cultures that *Cultural Populism* helped refocus upon and re-evaluate has since flourished in new directions through analyses of the working of neoliberal cultures and how they play out in relation to the complexities of intersections of gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, physical ability and age (Moran, 2015), as well as the new challenges posed by technology and environmentalism.

This special issue therefore simultaneously looks back at and revisits the original text of *Cultural Populism* and its role in the wider critical genealogies of cultural studies, while mobilising its legacies to help rethink the complexities of cultural populism today. Like the original, the aim is neither to eschew the study of popular culture, nor cultivate a dismissive attitude to the content of contemporary popular cultural forms, but rather to promote a critical perspective that interrogates the relationship between popular culture and contemporary powerful economic and political formations. To this end, we also seek to promote a *critical populism* which, in an era of Trump, Brexit, social media platforms and continued hyper-consumerism, can – to paraphrase McGuigan – account for both ordinary people's everyday culture and its material construction by powerful forces which appear to be beyond their control, and attune this critical populism to the political possibilities for change.

In this introductory article, we explore the twin concepts of cultural populism and critical populism, both as they were articulated by McGuigan and as they might be revitalised for contemporary populist times. In so doing, we consider the emergence of new, deeply troubling forms of populism in the 21st century, emphasising and calling for greater attention to the cultural and political context for Brexit and Trump, and the popular cultural narratives, texts and social technologies that supported and animated these developments. This focus gives rise to a series of questions that the individual contributions respond to in various ways. To what extent have the warnings of the book *Cultural Populism* been heeded, or to what extent has cultural studies continued to develop an idealist trajectory, against the cultural materialist approach argued for in the book? What have cultural studies scholars got to say about the new forms of populism associated with Trump and Brexit? What resources of cultural studies can be mobilised to unravel the forms of pleasure and dissonance encapsulated in the cultural narratives and tropes that brought Trump to power and Brexit to life, differently complex phenomena though they are? How can cultural studies understand the power and pathos of new forms of social media, the cultural communities, echo chambers and silos of power and exclusion they create? Finally, we look forward to and preview the contributing articles as they pick up and continue the conversation initiated by *Cultural Populism*, traversing the space between reflecting on the key themes of McGuigan's book and addressing the questions it raises in and for new populist times.

'Cultural populism' and 'critical populism': history and renewal

In many ways, the very concept of 'cultural populism' seems to belong to a different era: to not quite fit the current conjuncture. The subject of a significant row in the 1990s, the core of the debate was captured by Jim McGuigan (1992), when he argued that Cultural Studies had taken a wrong turn, towards an 'acritical cultural populism' that celebrated rather than challenged the norms of the dominant consumer culture. There was, argued McGuigan, a peculiar and worrying affinity between the aims and ambitions of consumer capitalism and the kinds of celebratory analysis that were routinely marshalled to make sense of this. In its place, he argued for a *critical* cultural populism – which he

shortened to a 'critical populism' – that would take seriously popular preferences and tastes, while nonetheless situating them within a critique of political economy and an analysis of the production rather than simply reception and consumption of needs, desires and identities. This searing critical analysis was written at a very specific moment: the peak post-Fordist, pre-recessionary moment of the 1990s and the zenith of 'Third Way' liberalism, when to large sections of the Western commentariat it seemed possible to proclaim 'the end of history' (Fukuyama, 1992).

The critique advanced by McGuigan has sometimes been mistakenly read as a critique of the study of popular culture itself, as though choosing to study popular cultural texts was itself a celebratory populist move. But despite his purposive emphasis on the production rather than consumption of popular culture, there was no accompanying dismissal of the study of popular culture. 'I do not consider. . .the study of popular cultural texts to be, by definition, populist', wrote McGuigan (1992: 3). And insofar as 'an appreciative, non-judgemental attitude to ordinary tastes and pleasures' is at stake, he affirmed, 'I am perfectly happy to declare myself a "cultural populist"' (McGuigan, 1992: 4). His problem, then, was neither with the cultural texts chosen nor the attitude towards them but with the displacement of a critical perspective that foregrounds the relations between political economy and popular culture by a wholly interpretative one that ultimately legitimises the social and cultural order it purports to critique. *Cultural Populism* was also intended to offer a solution to the impasse it diagnosed. Hence, at the outset it is announced that the book

> is dedicated to exploring the prospects for critical renewal in the field and to the possibility of a *critical populism*, which can account for *both* ordinary people's everyday culture *and* its material construction by powerful forces beyond the immediate comprehension and control of ordinary people. (McGuigan, 1992: 5)

Interrogating an 'uncritical populist drift in the study of popular culture', while remaining sympathetic to the choice of subject matter that had given the field of cultural studies its *raison d'etre, Cultural Populism* helped many cultural studies scholars of its generation understand not only the tensions and contradictions of the popular cultural dimension of capitalist societies, but also re-evaluate the strengths and limitations of the field of cultural studies itself, as a living critical organism that can be pulled in many different directions.

In re-asserting the importance of critical rather than celebratory approaches to popular culture, McGuigan's analysis helped identify a depoliticised offshoot from earlier highly sophisticated and politicised work in cultural studies that had sought to theorise the *agency* of consumers, audiences and citizens in relation to their social and political contexts. The paradigmatic case here for McGuigan was the domestication of the radical work of De Certeau (1984) in the later analyses of John Fiske (1989a, 1989b). 'Fiske's conception of popular culture, with its ostensibly critical pedigree', wrote McGuigan (1992),

> represents a drastic narrowing of vision: the gap between 'popular' and 'mass' culture is finally closed with no residual tension; the relation between interpretative cultural studies and the political economy of culture is obliterated from the surface of the argument. (p. 73)

In challenging such depoliticising moves, *Cultural Populism* formed part of a critical current that would continue, in the next several years, to emphatically reassert the restrictions and impoverishment engendered by critical and intellectual alignment with the latest phase of capitalist culture. For instance, by 2008, in her essay 'Young Women and Consumer Culture: An Intervention', Angela McRobbie launched a powerful critique (considered also in relation to her own work) of the tendencies in feminist media and cultural studies that celebrated 'female empowerment', while ignoring how such consumption might also be imbricated with social exploitation and environmental degradation; and called for 'the resuscitation and re-conceptualisation of feminist anti-capitalism' (McRobbie, 2008: 548). Given the ubiquity of 'neoliberal culture' in titles of articles and conference papers in cultural studies today, and the resurgence of interest in ideology, it may now be hard to recall this late 1980s and 1990s apolitical moment – which was also inflated and seized upon by those hostile to cultural studies for reasons of disciplinary protectionism and anti-interdisciplinarity – but which nonetheless did exist (Littler, 2016).

McGuigan's development of the concept of 'critical populism' was not only intended to challenge the celebratory populism of the time, but also to reaffirm that original cultural studies impulse against cultural elitism. Cultural studies' aversion to cultural elitism – or cultural pessimism – is well established, and the arguments against it well-rehearsed in a field that has been founded on the political decision to take ordinary desires, tastes and preferences seriously. This foundational cultural studies commitment seems particularly relevant at a moment in time when 'behold the stupid people!' has become a dominant trope in mainstream commentary attempting to make sense of the vote for Trump or Brexit. Thus, the old dilemma re-appears in new form in contemporary populist times: how can we study the popular without ourselves endorsing and reproducing an acritical populism that, in its reluctance to pass judgement on the popular, can give forms of exploitation, racism and xenophobia a pass? How can we do this without, in the process, automatically occupying and legitimising a space of cultural elitism, that in its refusal to see ordinary pleasures and values as anything other than an ideological justification of the dominant social order ultimately delegitimises the real experiences and choices of people caught within it? McGuigan's resolution – to adopt a critical populism that neither eschews the study of popular culture, nor cultivates a dismissive attitude to the content of contemporary popular cultural forms, values and activities – usefully promotes a critical perspective that interrogates the relationship between popular culture and contemporary powerful economic and political formations, and the possibilities that arise therein for democratic participation and renewal. In this sense, it reactivates politically attuned earlier analyses, most famously those offered by Raymond Williams (1961) in *The Long Revolution* and Stuart Hall (1981) in 'Notes on Deconstructing the Popular' (Harsin and Hayward, 2013) – and it is in this sense that such an approach remains deeply valuable today.

A key implication of cultivating a critical populist perspective for understanding contemporary popular culture is that we should today remain especially wary of forms of cultural practice and analysis that dovetail with, rather than challenge, our current, later phase of capitalism, whether we call this 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff, 2019), neoliberal culture (Gilbert, 2016; McGuigan, 2016), libertarian authoritarianism or

neoliberal nationalism (Brown, 2018, 2019).[3] We suggest that within contemporary novel capitalist formations, this involves, for example, pursuing analysis of the way in which social media texts produce data that create new sites of enormous profit within capitalism, while remaining resolutely attentive to the content of these texts, including its power to shape our subjectivities, and to distract from and legitimise the values (and operations of) the industry and the economic system of which it forms part (for some good examples see Couldry and Mejias, 2019; Fuchs, 2015; Hearn, 2008, Seymour, 2019; Winch and Little, 2020). At the same time, it remains important to recognise the potential of social media to connect, contest and organise, including in new forms of social movements and political activism, from The Arab Spring and Occupy to Black Lives Matter (see Fenton, 2016; Fuchs, 2014; Pickard and Berman, 2020).

The question of what it means to 'be critical' vis-à-vis the content of popular cultural texts has also been taken up in adjacent fields such as sociology and the wider terrain of the social sciences. In 'Who's Afraid of Critical Social Science?' for instance, Sayer (2009) makes the case that the 'critical' social sciences have become so afraid of normative reasoning for fear of endorsing or exhibiting cultural imperialism, subjective reasoning or a repressive universalism that they have eschewed it altogether, leading to an impoverished form of critique that is opposed to oppression, exploitation and inequality without being able to say why. In contrast, Sayer (2011: 775) argues that a truly critical social science must fundamentally incorporate 'the critique of suffering or ill-being' at its heart, for '[i]n practice', as he explains, 'the targets of the critiques developed by substantive critical social sciences are not merely false ideas and their supports and consequences, or lack of freedom, but injustices and avoidable suffering'. As Sayer concludes, without an articulation of and commitment to a set of values premised on the promotion of human flourishing and opposition to suffering, engagement in 'critique' ends up in a dead-end position of 'being critical', 'being reflexive', 'unsettling dominant norms' and so on, without ever being able to say *why this matters.*

To be critical in these terms thus involves not just unmasking falsehoods or deconstructing narratives, but being able to evaluate these narratives in terms of how they contribute to, or undermine, social flourishing. The implication for cultural studies is that in an era of Facebook, fake news and fact-checking, cultural studies scholars need to commit to the articulation of values based on equality and justice that can inform the much-needed analysis of these phenomena, and visualisation of the forms of cultural practice and communication that might replace them. Using these values as guides to engagement with and evaluation of popular cultural forms is one way to ensure that a critical populism prevails over celebratory endorsement. Applying this critical perspective to popular cultural forms without merely dismissing them is where the strength of cultural studies has always been and where the strength of any 'critical populism' lies today.

McGuigan's contribution in *Cultural Populism*, then, helped reposition the debate and refocus the relationship of cultural studies to power and politics. Yet, while offering a valuable (if not uncontested) contribution at the time, the spirit and emphasis of McGuigan's intervention nonetheless remains somewhat distant from contemporary concerns about Trump and Brexit, as we noted at the outset. For one thing, the character of contemporary populisms presents as overtly political rather than cultural, both in the

sense that they have disrupted conventional political parties and voting behaviour, and appear to be primarily focused – at least on the face of it – on questions of national sovereignty, the sanctity of borders and the legitimacy of so-called establishment elites. Yet, at the same time, to *purely* frame these populisms as 'political' concedes too much to the political scientific framing of the issue, as we would argue that there are clear cultural manifestations of and sources for all these issues that the term 'cultural populism' might usefully capture. Just think, for example, of the popular racism that has been nurtured by those million- and billionaires greedy for more corporate control through the political appointment of Trump and the UK exit from the European Union (cf. Littler, 2019; Mondon and Winter, 2020; Valluvan, 2019).[4] But even here, we should recognise that whereas 'cultural populism' primarily signified a loss of a critical perspective on the part of cultural studies *practitioners*, within the new constellation of right-wing populist forces it now seems that what requires our attention is the popular attempt to construct and appeal to a racialised vision of an 'ordinary people' against a cabal of corrupt elites. In other words, a form of populism that relies on *cultural* tropes and mechanisms to achieve its ends, reinforced by large-scale data analytics which themselves construct a version of 'the people'.[5] If the concept of 'cultural populism' is to be renewed for and reapplied to contemporary populist times, it will be useful to reconsider it afresh: as a cultural analogue to the political populism that abounds. In order to clarify the value of this revisioning of the concept of 'cultural populism', let us turn now to consider the forms of populism that are currently prevalent, and the kinds of scholarship that have predominated in their analysis, so that we may more clearly articulate what a cultural studies response that utilises the twin concepts of cultural and critical populism has to offer.

Contemporary populist politics and the role of culture

It is widely held that the vote for Brexit in the United Kingdom, the election of Donald Trump in the United States, and the upsurge in nationalist, xenophobic political parties across Europe are best understood in terms of a resurgence of political populism across the liberal democracies of the world. As such, there has been an explosion of scholarly interest in populist politics, typically defined in terms of a struggle between 'elites' and 'the people', the centrality of demagogic leaders, the mobilisation of narratives of racial and national purity, and efforts to revitalise 'traditional' economic and political practices in the pursuit of national prosperity. Much of this work has been concentrated in the fields of political science and sociology, with new books, special issues and conference papers being produced on the subject at an astonishing pace.

While contemporary studies of populism routinely acknowledge the contested nature and history of the term (Canovan, 1981; Moffitt, 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017), one persuasive and useful account remains that provided by Kazin (1998), who argued that populism is 'a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter' (p. 1).[6] This approach to understanding populism has been usefully elaborated upon by Judis (2016), who has distinguished 'triadic' from 'dyadic' forms of populism; rather than simply opposing a

'people' to an 'elite', triadic populism adds a third, scapegoated party comprised migrant or welfare-dependent populations whom the 'elite' are understood as favouring. This distinction maps onto differences between supposed 'Left' and 'Right' forms of populism (Fasenfest, 2019; Tormey, 2019; Caiani and Graziano, 2019), with the former preoccupied by plutocratic elites who are understood to have engineered extreme forms of social inequality in their favour, and the latter by 'liberal' and 'expert' elites who are positioned as undermining the prosperity of the national people through pro-migrant and other anti-nationalist policies. While debate persists on the question of whether a Left populism occludes class politics, lacks sociological specificity, or is the only thing that will save us (Dean, 2017; Mouffe, 2018), there is nonetheless consensus that it is right-wing forms of populism that are currently in the ascendency. Within these broad conceptual boundaries, scholarship has flourished, and has enhanced contemporary understandings of populism as a potent if not dominant political force today. But it is also the case that within these debates the relationship between culture and populism has not been as extensively discussed as might be expected.

However, there has been one widely circulated account which emphasises culture in order to explain populism: the 'cultural backlash' thesis of Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2019). In their book, widely touted as the key text on cultural explanations for populism, they argue that the rise of populism can be best explained in terms of a 'cultural backlash'. This is defined as a 'reaction against progressive cultural change' rather than in terms of any response to widespread economic insecurity and precarity, which indeed, they rule out. The argument, in other words, posits the contemporary problem of populism as definitively not an issue of economics – this interpretation is dismissed – but rather a problem, primarily, of *culture*. As Norris (2019) recently summarised their argument, contemporary populisms have arisen in response to a shift in cultural values, as a bellicose attempt to consolidate older cultural values ignored if not threatened by contemporary 'elites', Hollywood and newspapers. It also has a clear generational component, as the illiberal (and ultimately populist) views of the older generation are left unchallenged and augmented as their sons and daughters move to metropolitan areas, to be educated and rendered multicultural, 'post-materialist' (Norris, 2019) and socially liberal, never to return.

The Inglehart and Norris approach to populism touches on many important cultural issues but is profoundly problematic and reductive. Culture is clearly important; values are crucial in the constitution of contemporary populisms; metropolitan cosmopolitanism is an extremely important part of the story. Yet, here they are bound up in a fetishised formulation of the cultural which cannot understand that there is, in fact, *a relationship between the economy and culture*. Their account completely absolves those privileged, highly educated groups construed as 'liberal elites' from any blame and evacuates the decimation caused by neoliberal capitalism from any role or blame in the rise of right-wing populism. But contrary to their argument, the economy has had a lot to do with why those offspring move away: why there were few jobs or few interesting jobs or progressive municipal cultures for them to *want* to participate in (Milburn, 2019). And rather than the newspapers *not* representing 'the people', we can point out, there are in fact only *too many* newspapers, both broadsheet and tabloid, which have worked harder and harder over the past two decades to incite xenophobia and racism in the name of a 'true' nation

of people, and to articulate this to widespread economic contraction, loss and precarity, in order to boost the economic fortunes of the 1 percent (including the very owners of these newspapers) (Fenton et al., 2020).

The concept of 'cultural backlash' deployed by Inglehart and Norris is thus demonstrably extremely reductive, precisely because it does not deal with the conjunctural or contextual. It cannot be a question of *only* 'cultural values': as the entire tradition of cultural studies has shown, there is no such thing as 'only' cultural values. By contrast, we argue that a critical approach to cultural populism – understood in terms of the effort to deploy cultural resources to construct a national 'people' – offers a more useful way of thinking through what is happening in the current moment, and what is at stake. This perspective asks what the relationship between politics, the economy and this entity being presented as 'the popular' is. As Ernesto Laclau (2005) pointed out some 15 years ago now, populism is itself a discursive strategy, dividing society into two camps, calling for the mobilisation of 'the underdog' against 'those in power'. Therefore, and as Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter (2020) point out in their recent book *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Right Became Mainstream*, we need to ask who is claiming to be 'the voice of the people' (and we would add, what cultural shifts have enabled them to do so); how powerful and wealthy forces are trying to mobilise particular tendencies, and why.[7] Who is not included in 'the people'? Often, those who abstained: only 37.4 percent of the United Kingdom voted for Brexit and 26.7 percent for Trump in 2016. The misuse of populism and the hype of the threat it represents, Mondon and Winter (2020) point out, 'has allowed the systemic failures of liberalism to go unremarked within public discourse, impeding the emergence of real alternatives' (p. 198). We can see how, therefore, Inglehart and Norris' notion of a singular 'populist vote' based around 'cultural values' is used to shore up the position of liberal elites and foreclose any debate about problems within neoliberalism which may have fermented any revolt and dissatisfaction. Indeed, this makes such analysis part of the problem: as Chantal Mouffe (2005) writes, it is the very lack of an effective debate about *alternatives* to liberalism 'that 'led in many countries to political parties claiming to be the "voice of the people"' (p. 52, see also Mouffe, 2018).

Moreover, the attitude towards the 'popular' that Inglehart and Norris exhibit is redolent of the cultural elitism that a critical populist perspective rightly evades. Inglehart and Norris in effect offer a critique of 'the foolish masses' dressed up as a concern over 'changing values'. They promote a view of society as divided into deserving competent elites, fit to run an economy and a polity, and a mindless, injudicious mass, who need to be governed (as evidenced for them in the disastrous unchaperoned vote for Brexit in the referendum).The latent narrative is therefore that the most superior social order is a liberal democratic capitalist one (i.e. the stereotypical 'boomer' assumption[8]). In contrast, a critical populist perspective rejects any notions of a foolish incompetent mass, believing instead that the preferences and tastes of the popular should be *understood*, rather than simply *de facto* dismissed or celebrated. Whereas, the 'cultural backlash' thesis implies a violent, unthinking mob response to something progressive, exploring these issues as an expression of cultural populism, as we understand it, involves analysing the set of practices that calls into being 'a people' through a range of cultural tropes and mechanisms, and on behalf of particular economic and political interests – the kind of careful

analysis we have argued is represented by a 'critical populist' perspective. It is also the ability to understand the difference between 'the people' as they are called into being, and the experiential accounts of people negotiating, reproducing or challenging these interpellations, that cultural studies has always been so good at.

This critical populist perspective allows for a much more careful and nuanced reading of and explanation for the turn to populism, and specifically the votes for Brexit and Trump, than does the cultural elitism of the 'cultural backlash' thesis. A critical populist perspective allows us to see two key things about these apparently 'irrational' votes: First, where 'the establishment' are understood to have stood over and benefitted from the decades-long disempowering of ordinary people, and the eroding of the public institutions required for a functioning democracy, the rejection of that establishment in a popular vote is entirely rational/understandable. Second, the eroding of the public institutions required for a functioning democracy has involved the breaking up, hollowing out or serious undermining of: an inclusive and objective media; an education system fostering critical thinking; a polity that is representative of a wide range of groups, not just the well-resourced; and a more equal distribution of wealth and a non-stigmatic (universalist) welfare state. All of these social trends, part of the neoliberal attack on the post-war social contract, have been accelerated by the years of austerity following the financial crash and preceding the vote for Brexit (Walby, 2018). Given these interrelated contexts, it is entirely unsurprising that this rejection of 'the establishment' would take irrational (and worse, racist, xenophobic, etc.) form, since – as Tom Steele's article in this issue argues – the resources and materials for critical thinking, solidaristic political intent and participatory democracy have themselves been radically diminished.

A 'critical populism' approach can also connect older radical currents of work in and around cultural studies to more recent ones. In this context, one obviously key theory to draw on to understand contemporary cultural populism is Stuart Hall's (1980) theorisation of 'authoritarian populism' as a means of describing the political-ideological formation of Thatcherism. Drawing from the Greek political theorist Nicos Poulantzas' (1978) concept of 'authoritarian statism', which identified how a state could become increasingly coercive, while retaining its outer democratic forms of rule, Hall coined the term 'authoritarian populism' to emphasise the mode and level of consensus achieved in these transformations. Specifically, Hall developed this concept to show how social democracy was being restructured in the interests of big capital, and overlaid this with a focus on how Thatcherism was working 'on the terrain of popular ideologies' to do so: how it was interpellating particular gendered, classed and racialised subject positions and stirring up moral panics and righteousness to win both active and passive forms of popular consent (Hall, 1988: 123–149). These strategies, he later emphasised, 'served to win for the authoritarian closure the gloss of populist consent' (Hall, 1985: 116).

It is notable, though perhaps not entirely unsurprising given what we have said, that Inglehart and Norris also use the term 'authoritarian populism' without referencing Stuart Hall's work or any of its numerous insights. While we are in a distinctly different moment to that of the Thatcherite conjuncture, nonetheless many of the tendencies that Hall identified remain recognisable today, as, for example, reactionary neoliberal projects being presented as 'modernising', such as cuts to library staff and provision being presented as 'creative' and 'necessary for the future' (Forkert, 2017). Meanwhile the

technical tools Hall offered continue to be useful, for example, in terms of how racist moral panics are being used to attempt to extend new forms of authoritarianism. Indeed, a number of key academics have drawn on these insights to make sense of contemporary populism, while simultaneously emphasising the importance of understanding its specificity (Grossberg, 2018; Rustin, 2019). As John Clarke (2020) has put it,

> what Stuart Hall named as 'authoritarian populism' always speaks the local language, drawing on distinctive histories and imaginaries of the People and their enemies. But it also reflects the ways in which authoritarianism and populism become articulated with other political and cultural formations, including local forms of nationalism, racism, misogyny and homophobia. There is a delicate balance to be struck between emphasising cross-national similarities and attending to difference and variation. (p. 127)

Cultural studies, then, has a wealth of resources to draw upon in unpacking and critiquing these contemporary political populisms: indeed, in many ways, it is better placed than other disciplinary areas to dissect the relationship between the economy, politics, society and culture. A number of the contributions to this special issue clearly advance this ambition as they explore, among other concerns, the populist platforms and performative politics associated with Trump and Brexit (Murdock), the emergence of a very gendered (and even 'anti-gender') form of populism across Eastern Europe (Szelewa) and right-wing populisms' assault on immigration and climate science (Miller), in a manner which is primarily attentive to the cultural and ideological expressions and manifestations of these political projects. If political populism refers us directly to the faux-democratic, sometimes authoritarian, and overwhelmingly racist, nationalistic and gendered power-grabs of Trump, Farage and a range of political parties across Europe and Latin America, then critical cultural populism, as we intend it, can direct our attention once more to the cultural constructions and performances of racialised nations and 'peoples' on which such political campaigns depend.

Overview of contributions to the special issue

Let us now summarise the argument of this introduction. First, we have argued that we should make a distinction between different uses of the term 'cultural populism', which was used by Jim McGuigan in the 1990s to refer to uncritically 'populist' attitudes of scholars that segued with consumer capitalist norms, but which can also be used to understand the efforts by politicians, public figures, academics and the media to construct a 'people' in overtly cultural terms. Second, we have explored the value of renewing an expressly 'critical populist' stance that insists upon the exploration of the powerful economic and political interests with which popular forms are bound up when analysing their content, and on a commitment to a set of normative values to guide analysis. Drawing on McGuigan's work alongside earlier and later work in cultural studies, we have shown how a renewal of 'critical populism' is and remains key both for the 'anti-disciplinary discipline' of cultural studies and the meaningful analysis of culture. Third, we have argued that considering cultural dimensions of the current populist conjuncture – 'cultural populism' in the second sense – is crucial to achieving a deeper level of

analysis which cannot be achieved by political science alone. Contemporary cultural populisms are both part of specific cultural conjunctures and are characterised by the intensive use of cultural techniques – in both new and old guises, from the beermat to the tabloid to the darkweb. We need to pay attention to the cultural in its widest sense to understand how contemporary populisms work and to challenge them.

The contributions to this special issue take up these themes in a number of ways. All fulfil Graham Murdock's assertion that while different forms of populism 'share certain defining features in common, analysis of particular cases need[s] to pay close attention to the specific histories and conditions that have shaped them'. In his own article, Murdock connects contemporary authoritarian populisms to those of the pre-war fascism analysed by the Frankfurt School during Hitler's rise to power, and the communicative channels such as radio they used to mobilise 'a people'. Arguing that 'right wing populist platforms are organised around three central themes; exclusory definitions of the "true" people; pledges to restore lost glories, and implacable opposition to all institutions seen to be questioning or thwarting the popular will', he dissects the populist racisms of Trump and Boris Johnson, and their use of media platforms including talk radio, wrestling, right-wing TV and newspapers alongside the unprecedentedly personalised address of social media. In doing so, he shows how the vested interests of billionaires have been channelled through culture and media to normalise what were once marginal right-wing prejudices – polarising public discourse and attitudes in the process.

When considering political economy in relation to culture, it is of course crucial not to neglect intersectionality. The interconnections of gender, 'race', class, sexuality, physicality and age are as critical to formations of populism as they are to understanding them. In her article, Deborah Philips explores that quintessential 'popular cultural' text, the woman's romance novel, and traces its relegation to the category of 'trash'. She outlines how cultural studies has dealt with the form and challenges Jim McGuigan's account of its analysis at CCCS. The article analyses such trends for what they can tell us about the limits and shifts in social discourse about masculinity, femininity and gender relations. In an era of men's-rights activism, an emergent movement with connections to the alt-right, the election of Trump in the United States and the continued backlash against feminism, what forms of female oppression and empowerment are imagined and negotiated in these novels, she asks, and what can this tell us about the limits of women's resistance to (or incorporation of) dominant gender norms today?

Tom Steele similarly looks back and forth through cultural studies, arguing that a significant source for British Cultural Studies was its key connection to popular adult education through the Worker's Educational Association (WEA) and university extramural (outreach) departments, and noting Raymond William's deep commitment to community education. He positions McGuigan's work in relation to this extensive and frequently overlooked tradition, stating that

> McGuigan's combative tone, groundedness in everyday life and class and gendered responses, scepticism towards over-theoretical approaches, refusal of the easy populism of some theorists, assertion of the materiality of culture and the importance of cultural policy, while subtly reflecting on the nature of symbolic interaction, reflect a continued impulse to position Cultural Studies as a political project.

How might such populist community education work be revived today, in conjunction with cultural studies, in the context of muted left-wing politics and reduced electoral successes? Steele considers podcasts and left political educational festivals like *The World Transformed* in his conclusion.

Garry Whannel also takes a usefully long view of cultural studies, focusing on the constitutive significance of the schism between culture and economy and making the case that cultural studies has always developed around successive attempts to re-connect them. It simultaneously situates *Cultural Populism* in this context and robustly defends the post *Policing The Crisis* CCCS from some of the criticisms McGuigan levelled at it, arguing that it was rather part of a broader cultural moment when 'cultural Marxism and post-modern theory leaked, often in diluted, distorted or half-baked form, into wider public discourse'. In considering the travels of a range of theoretical resources that were fundamental to cultural studies and their treatment of 'the economy', Whannel pulls out a wide range of useful resources for the present moment. Reflecting the orientation of the special issue, he argues that 'to know where you are going, it helps to know where you have been'.

Nick Stevenson argues that Jim McGuigan's book on cultural populism should be read as a warning as to what happens to cultural analysis in a world dominated by capitalism. His piece pays tribute to McGuigan's work and reflects on why, in a specific context, it was formative to his thinking and acting. One such reason, he writes, is that it offered a socialist perspective on culture, 'while suggesting that there were critical possibilities beyond a binary between consumerist populism and a retreat into cultural pessimism'. Stevenson makes the case that today such an 'anti-capitalist cultural studies' needs to be channelled towards eco-socialist ends, and drawing on the intellectual heritage of Raymond Williams and Herbert Marcuse, considers a range of texts, to argue 'the need to develop a more environmentally sensitive and "cultural" economics'.

Toby Miller takes up the theme of eco-socialism in even more direct and combative form. Working in the grain of *Cultural Populism*, he critiques the uncritical populism of those cultural studies and cultural studies-adjacent scholars who produce uncritical research to boost the corporate creative industries and waste far too much time searching for grants. He links this analysis to the political populism of the present, in relation to which he argues that 'populism isn't the problem': what *is* the problem is our treatment of climate change and immigration. In an excoriating critique, he weaves these critical threads together to lambast the priorities of contemporary academia for time-wasting, political complicity and for failing to provide the critical resources that would allow disoriented citizens and non-citizens alike to organise, mobilise and achieve change.

We then invited feminist critics Dorota Szelewa and Laura Martínez-Jiménez to broaden the geographical and gendered dimensions of the issue. In the first critical commentary, Dorota Szelewa takes aim at the roots of right-wing populism in Eastern Europe, arguing that these should be traced back to the upending and then reinforcing of ideas around a conservative gender and economic order in the transition to, first, market democracy, and second, the European Union. Exploring a complex matrix of forces in a post-Soviet environment, Szelewa finishes by looking at the contestation and repurposing of right-wing populist ideals and slogans by a resurgent feminist movement across the region. In the second critical commentary, Laura Martínez-Jiménez explores the

popularisation of feminism in a Spanish context, examining a range of 'pro-women' populist forces that rhetorically promote female empowerment, all the while undermining the very forms of social, political and economic equality that would support a genuinely feminist and emancipatory social order. Adopting a critical populist stance, Martínez-Jiménez nonetheless refuses the outright dismissal of these populist politics, looking instead towards the potential for the resolution of their immanent contradictions in an inclusive, intersectional and anti-capitalist feminist project.

Accompanying these pieces, Jilly Kay reviews Jim McGuigan's most recent book, *Raymond Williams: Cultural Analyst* (2019), which seeks to restore Raymond Williams as an important socialist intellectual and leading scholar of British cultural studies and sociology. Noting that 'everybody loves Raymond' nowadays, Kay identifies the key insights of the book, questions the critical faultlines it sets up, and connects McGuigan's characteristic concerns and mode of engagement to contemporary debates within the broad field of cultural studies and beyond. And in a final contribution, Marie Moran interviews Jim McGuigan, who reconsiders some of the key themes of cultural populism and its reception at the time, as well as the implications of promoting a renewed critical populism in the current cultural and political conjuncture. Returning to the work of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and Ralph Miliband, while also reflecting on earlier efforts to radicalise TV drama and the pursuit of a form of analysis that is attentive to encoding as well as decoding, production as well as consumption, he once more elaborates a vision of a critical populism that has the capacity to critique 'bad, reactionary and oppressive work' while at the same time remaining sympathetic to 'the cultures of ordinary people'. Finally, taking account of new political populisms, McGuigan extends his earlier analysis by arguing that 'critical thinking and judgement, a focus on the production of these populist cultural forms, and a refusal to sentimentalise these attractions is politically of enormous importance'. This special issue, we hope, goes some way towards realising this vital critical and analytical ambition in new populist times.

Funding

Notes

1. Jim McGuigan's article 'The Cultural Public Sphere' was also published in this journal in 2005, 8(4): 427-443.
2. A range of examples of these extra-mural projects – from disabled rights activism, to club nights – are discussed in K. Connell and M. Hilton (eds) (2016) *Cultural Studies 50 years On: History, Practices and Politics* Oxford University Press.
3. In contrast, capitalism was typically understood in terms of 'globalisation' or 'consumer capitalism' when *Cultural Populism* was written in the 1990s.
4. In the UK, examples include the owners of right-wing newspapers, including the offshore billionaires the Barclay Brothers (*The Daily Telegraph*) and the offshore billionaire Lord Rothermere (*The Daily Mail*).
5. In the current political conjuncture, this 'people' is imagined to be largely undifferentiated by class but united by 'race' or nation – and while this may not be part of the scholarly variants of

cultural populism that concerned McGuigan, it is the case nonetheless that any construction of the preferences of the people – the popular – as somehow valuable in their/its own right, independently of any values that might animate these preferences, is vulnerable to this kind of malappropriation.

6. This approach also corresponds with the approach developed by Mudde, who has defined populism as

   a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated 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: 6, italics in original)

7. The construction of 'elites' is similarly loaded and politically variable, as Marie Moran explores in her forthcoming book *Inequality in the 21st Century* (Polity).

8. One of the categories Inglehart and Norris use in their generational analysis is the 'boomer generation' (born in the two decades following the Second World War), a category into which they fall themselves. Interestingly, 'boomer' has become a derogatory term in online cultures to refer to 'establishment' figures who blame younger generations for social and economic decay, while themselves appropriating a disproportionate amount of cultural and economic capital.

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