

Cultural Studies Colloquium (14):

Populism/s



WED, 10-12, Ü24

Pinback button from the 2008 Obama campaign, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture [\[LINK\]](#).

'Populism' is omnipresent: at issue in television talk shows and political discussions, in play across a range of popular as well as academic contexts, and practiced on social media in a range of emphatically short (TikTok) and immersive long forms (podcasting and streaming). But does all this activity in and around the concept necessarily equal a better understanding of the phenomenon? We suspect that the opposite might be the case. Thus, in this summer semester, we are taking the opportunity to more carefully assess populism as a term that captures a complex articulation of strategies and dispositions that not only relates to developments in the UK and the US, but also in Germany, Eastern Europe, and societies across the globe.

What is our preliminary understanding of populism? While an opposition between the elite and the populace is commonly seen as key to populism, the notion of 'the people' along with 'speaking' and/or 'acting for' the people is arguably even more central. 'The people' would thus seem to be coming into their own in populism. In actuality, 'the people' in this designation wriggle uneasily between their role as political object, on the one hand, and political agent, on the other. Most strikingly, in contradiction to the hopes of democratic progressivism and its populist tendencies, 'the people' has most recently gained prominence overwhelmingly in terms of an openly regressive politics that questions the major discourses of our time as well as the foundations of democratic cultures.

What is our approach to assessing populism? In the seminar, we will be considering populism not only as a contemporary phenomenon, but also in its historical dimensions. Thus, while the frequency of populism's use as a term peaked in the wake of the Brexit vote in 2016 and Trump's first election in the same year, the rhetorical and visual strategies of these campaigns harken back to populist movements of the previous centuries. We will be considering these strategies through a tri-focal lens of British, Slavic, and US-American cultural studies. At the same time, we will bring these different perspectives into dialogue with each other as we consider populist mechanisms, imaginaries, and affectivities.

Organisation

The seminar is part of the **JMU Cultural Studies Colloquia (CSC)** series. The Cultural Studies Colloquia are research seminars primarily designed for advanced and graduate students. For an overview of CSC seminars and Study Days to date as well as the associated JMU Cultural Studies publication series (Würzburg University Press), please see our website: [LINK](#).

To create a committed and cohesive thinking community, we ask prospective participants to compose a brief (productive or even provocative) **statement of purpose** (of 1 to 1,5 pages) in which they **(1)** introduce themselves and **(2)** outline their interest/s in this semester's topic. In particular, we encourage prospective participants to explain their interest in the seminar (and to sketch the questions they are bringing to the seminar) by *referencing a concrete cultural and/or political phenomenon* (such as an image, a video clip, a quotation, etc.). – Please mail your statement of purpose to culturalstudies@uni-wuerzburg.de by **27 March**. We will respond to statements of purpose by **01 April**. There is no open enrollment for this course.

Preparation

As an introduction to the topic (and also as a possible inspiration for individual statements of purpose), we particularly recommend looking into the following texts (please read at least two of them before the first meeting).

- JOHN ABROMEIT, “A Critical Review of Recent Literature on Populism,” *Politics and Governance*, 5.4 (2017): 177-186 <<https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i4.1146>>.
- JUHA HERKMAN, *A Cultural Approach to Populism* (New York: Routledge, 2022) → All chapters in the book are pertinent in relation to the seminar, but it might be a good idea to initially read the introduction (1-10) and the Conclusion (“Populism after the pandemic and Trump?” – 101-109). [accessible online through WUB].
- ERNESTO LACLAU, “Populism: What’s in a Name?,” *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. F. Panizza (London: Verso, 2005) 32-49. [will be made available on WueCampus and widely available online.]
- BENJAMIN MOFFITT, *Populism* (Cambridge: polity, 2020), Key Concepts in Political Theory → See esp. the introduction “Why Populism Matters” and the chapter “What is Populism” [will be made available on WueCampus.]
- CAS MUDDÉ and CRISTÓBAL ROVIRA KALTWASSER, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) → See especially the chapters “What Is Populism?” (1-20) & “Populism around the World” (21-41). [accessible online through WUB].

Student Contributions & Assessment

Participants are required to write a minimum of three RESPONSE ESSAYS dealing with texts from the seminar's reading list as well as a CONCLUDING REFLECTION or PROJECT REPORT at the end of the seminar. Ideally, RESPONSE ESSAYS prepare for the next session (i.e. we ask you to 'write forward'). However, reflective essays are also possible. We ask that essays be submitted by Sunday evening before our shared seminar session so that seminar participants have time to read them as part of their focused preparation for the session. The length of the response essays and other contributions can be freely allocated by participants over the course of the semester as long as the combined length of all texts (including the statement of interest) will finally constitute a PORTFOLIO of approximately 20 pages.

Planned Sessions (a preview)

- 22/04 **Clarifying the approach: Politics, culture, and cultural studies**
- 29/04 **Testing the approach: To what extent and in what ways is populism a cultural phenomenon?**
- 06/05 **Historicizing and reframing the concept: Progressive forms of populism?**
- 13/05 **Interrogating the concept: 'The people', popular agency, and populist rhetoric**
- 20/05 **Populist affectivity: Trauma & futurity / individuality & collectivity**
- 27/05 **Populist mechanisms I: Integration and coercion – Populism and/against pluralism**
- 03/06 **Populist mechanisms II: Inclusion and exclusion – Populism, nationalism, biopolitics**
- 10/06 **Populist imaginaries I: Class, labour, economy**
- 17/06 **Populist imaginaries II: Gender, sexuality, and the family**
- 24/06 **Political strategies for the present: Fighting populism / Reinventing populism (Practices & debates)**

- 01/07 [No meeting: preparation for study day]

- 08/07 **Study day** (10 a.m. – 4 p.m.)