

Call for Papers

Populism and Cultural Studies

Annual Conference of the Society for the Study of British Cultures

Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg

Date: 19-21 November 2026; Venue: Schelling-Forum Würzburg

'Populism' is omnipresent. In the Anglophone world, the frequency of the term's use peaked around the Brexit vote and Trump's first election (Herkman 2022; Paul et al. 2019), and the *Cambridge Dictionary* selected it as 'Word of the Year' for 2017. Almost a decade later, 'populism' still serves as a signature term for the climate of the present. In political debates and private conversations, on TV screens and in social media, in institutional debates and on the pages of popular and academic treatises, the term is played to capture a complex and volatile articulation of strategies and dispositions that apparently dominates moods and developments not only in the UK and the US, but also in Germany, Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, and indeed all across the globe (Moffit 2020; Schiller 2018; Schwenck 2023). Once relegated to the margins, what we call 'populism' has moved to the centre not only of society and politics but also of culture and the arts. If populism professes to translate cultural dispositions into a political programmatic, then cultural studies is ideally poised for its critical examination. What is usually deemed to be at the heart of populist discourses is a binary opposition between the elite and 'the people', often couched as a rhetoric of 'us' versus 'them' (McGuigan 1992; Kranert 2020). Populist discourses thus seem to press the necessity that 'the people' must come into their own, but it is unclear whether they are meant to do so as political agent or political object.

BritCult 2026 addresses the need for systematic attention to the cultural roots, the cultural practices, and the cultural assumptions of populism, and possibly also the cultural acts and agendas necessary to wrestle with populist cultures past and present. Claiming to mobilize an integrated culture of 'the people' not only against impoverishment and elitism but also against cultural heterogeneity and dispersion, populism determinedly *politicizes culture* and *culturalizes politics*. Our conference aims to examine such processes in view of two central and interrelated objectives:

- (1) A thorough analysis of populism's cultural constitution, practices and performance;
- (2) An interrogation of populism's cultural claims, especially *querying* the fundamental pretence of being cultural movements.

Because of the omnipresence of populism, our conference moves beyond the usual geocultural orientation of BritCult. While emphasizing British Cultural Studies as a grounding framework, the conference seeks to address the trans/national character of contemporary populism/s by bringing together the fields of British and American as well as Slavic Studies. A special focus on the British Isles and world regions touched by British colonialism will be retained, but we likewise encourage contributions from transnational and transdisciplinary perspectives. We especially welcome proposals relating to US-American and Slavic-speaking cultures and spaces.

POSSIBLE FIELDS OF DISCUSSION INCLUDE, BUT ARE NOT LIMITED TO:

- The affordances and limitations of populism as a concept in cultural studies and cultural theory

- The populism *of* cultural studies
- Connections (and gaps) between academic practices and political activism
- Populism and consumerism
- Transnational studies of populism
- Populism and (digital) media culture
- Populism and aesthetics
- Populism and the cultural study of affect and emotion
- Cultures (old and new) of authority/authoritarianism and 'leadership'
- Populism and cultures of violence
- Class and/vs. ethnicity in populist discourses and practices
- Populism and gender (studies)
- Populism in academic culture and on campus
- Populism and nationalism
- Populism as threat vs. populism as a strategy of resistance or resilience

If you are interested in contributing a 20-minute paper, please send your abstract (c. 300 words) and a short bio-note (c. 150 words) by 15 April 2026 to anglistik-britcult2026@uni-wuerzburg.de.

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS:

- Prof. Dr. Juha Herkman (University of Helsinki)
- Prof. Dr. Melanie M. Schiller (Radboud University)

ORGANISING TEAM AT JMU WÜRZBURG:

- Zeno Ackermann, English Literature and British Cultural Studies
- Gesine Drews-Sylla, Slavic Studies
- Kirsten Sandrock, English Literature and British Cultural Studies
- MaryAnn Snyder-Körber, American Cultural Studies

WORKS CITED:

- Herkman, Juha. *A Cultural Approach to Populism*. London: Routledge, 2022.
- Kranert, Michael, ed. *Discursive Approaches to Populism across Disciplines: The Return of Populists and the People*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
- McGuigan, Jim. *Cultural Populism*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Moffit, Benjamin. *Populism*. Key Concepts in Political Theory. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020.
- Paul, Heike, Ursula Prutsch and Jürgen Gebhardt, eds. *The Comeback of Populism: Transatlantic Perspectives*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2019.
- Schiller, Melanie. *Soundtracking Germany: Popular Music and National Identity*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.
- Schwenck, Anna. *Flexible Authoritarianism: Cultivating Ambition and Loyalty in Russia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023.