

Abstracts BritCult 2026: Populism and Cultural Studies

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Keynotes

Juha Herkman (University of Helsinki): The Unholy Union Between Populism and Cultural Studies – Questions of Normativity

The etymological roots of both “populism” and “popular” trace back to the Latin term *populus*, meaning “the people.” Consequently, cultural studies, which focuses on the everyday experiences of ordinary life, are often intrinsically linked to a populist understanding of the significance of the people. In certain strands of cultural studies, the role of popular culture has even emerged as a political driving force, with a common interpretation of everyday popular practices as emancipatory actions. Within the critical tradition, a normative vision of equal and liberal development is ingrained in British cultural studies.

One notable approach to populism has been developed by discourse theorist Ernesto Laclau, who, in collaboration with Chantal Mouffe, formulated what is known as articulation theory. This theory seeks to explain the emergence of anti-hegemonic social movements. According to Laclau, in populism, a group of individuals comes together to articulate various social demands, thereby forging a political identity that serves as a counterforce to hegemonic power, while simultaneously constructing a perception of “the people” as the underdog against their adversaries. In this process, it is the various popular markers of everyday life that shape the demands and articulations, rather than underlying social structures.

For Laclau, populism represents a progressive approach, wherein leftist movements have historically challenged the conservative societal status quo and championed emancipatory social interests. However, as Mouffe has also pointed out, in the twenty-first century, regressive right-wing populism has managed to formulate its own articulations of popular identity. In the current political landscape, the close relationship between Laclau’s populism theory and British cultural studies brings to light critical questions of normativity in both fields.

Melanie M. Schiller (Radboud University): Between Irony and Ideology – Music and the Popification of Far-Right Politics

Contemporary populist far-right movements increasingly embrace a Gramscian conviction that politics is downstream from culture. While Antonio Gramsci developed his notion to explain the production and contestation of cultural hegemony, contemporary far-right actors have appropriated them as a strategy for metapolitical intervention. This paper examines how the far right advances this project through what I term the popification of politics: the translation of political ideology into the forms, affects, and aesthetics of popular culture. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s notion of the aestheticization of politics, I explore how far-right actors increasingly operate through music and digital aesthetics. At the same time, contemporary digital culture is characterized by what Simon Reynolds calls *retromania*: a

nostalgic fixation on recycled pasts and imagined futures. Combined with post-ironic sensibilities and the fluid subject positions associated with the emerging metamodernist structure of feeling, these conditions create fertile ground for new forms of populist cultural politics.

The paper investigates the popification of far-right politics through the interconnected aesthetic formations of retrowave, vaporwave, and fashwave music. I show how far-right cultural producers appropriate genres rooted in nostalgia and ironic ambiguity, infusing them with nativist imaginaries and reconstructive visions of the nation in what I call populist retromania. Focusing on the relationship between the US alt-right and the Swedish context, I trace how aesthetic and ideological repertoires travel across digital networks and acquire locally specific meanings.

By exploiting blurred boundaries between irony and sincerity, entertainment and ideology, these cultural forms function as powerful affective technologies. I argue that cultural studies is uniquely positioned to analyse how contemporary populism culturalizes politics and politicizes culture, contributing to far-right efforts to construct “the people,” mobilize affect, and pursue cultural hegemony in the digital age.

Panel 1: Approaching Current Forms of Populism

Sebastian Berg (Ruhr University Bochum): The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly? Comparing the Populisms of Three ‘Populists’

In 2015, Cas Mudde, one of the most prominent thinkers on populism in political science, described populism as a phenomenon that can take a good, bad, and ugly form. This is based on an understanding of populism as a “thin ideology”, which Mudde shares with many other scholars (e.g. Taggart 2017): in order to survive and to become effective, populism needs a “host ideology”. The ideological content of such a host is arbitrary – populism can be attached to sets of ideas as different as ethnic nationalism, democratic socialism, or political ecologism. In my paper on populism in political culture, I am going to investigate and compare the populisms of three British politicians with widely different backgrounds. Two of them have been around for a long time: the former Labour, later Respect, later Workers Party of Britain MP, George Galloway, and the former UKIP leader and current leader of Reform UK and MP for Clacton-on-Sea, Nigel Farage. The third is rather a newcomer and self-declared populist, Green Party leader Zack Polanski. It is my intention to show that the academic analysis of the populism phenomenon and the use of the populism label in political debate comes with the danger of obscuring political differences. I would like to propose a shift of focus from populism in the political to the political in populism. This takes into consideration and revisits a line of argument developed by Stuart Hall some 40 years ago, when he discussed the rise of Thatcherism as an example of authoritarian populism (1984).

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Christina Flotmann-Scholz and Merle Tönnies (University of Paderborn): Populist Structures under Scrutiny – Technocratic Populism and Meta-Linguistic Theatre

The proposed paper concentrates on the structural aspects of populism and uses two less obvious case studies to highlight this perspective. Firstly, we will analyse technopopulist documents which can be seen as defamiliarising key elements of populism to some extent. Afterwards, we will turn to selected examples from 21st-century British theatre which draw the audience's attention to populist structures through their use of language. The specific focus of the paper is on two key conceptual and rhetorical structures of populism: on the one hand, the use of 'the people' as a deliberately undefined group which according to Laclau can even be considered an empty signifier (cf. 105), and on the other, the fundamental opposition between in- and out-group which makes populism function. Usually, this consists of a 'corrupt elite' contrasted with 'the people' who should be empowered instead (cf. Mudde 543).

In technocratic populism, this binary opposition is constructed by shifting the moral evaluation and juxtaposing those who understand the technologies like AI and those who do not. A utopian notion of 'the people' in the AI-based future is often used here to veil a paternalistic or even neo-colonial futurism, where 'the people' are considered to be flawed and in need of guidance by the 'tech saviours'. This approach can thus be taken to reverse the orientation of standard populist approaches while keeping their basic structures intact. Ravenhill's *Yesterday an Incident Occurred* and Hussain's *Word-Play*, on the other hand, deliberately decontextualise popularist strategies of polarisation and exclusionary grouping. Ravenhill's work exerts growing pressure on the spectators to make them experience an inescapable positioning as the enemies of 'the people', while Hussain's reproduces political rhetoric and sloganistic communication by the authorities to foreground the dangers of naturalising imprecise categories. Studying these very differently positioned materials in combination can thus raise awareness about the ways in which populist strategies are constructed and may be destabilised by critical reflection.

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Raphael Zähringer (University of Tübingen): Constructing Existential Emergency – Populism and Crisis Narratology

This paper situates populism within the broader context of cultural studies by interrogating the narrative paradigm (Roitman) of crisis as a dominant narrative form in contemporary politics. Drawing on key concepts from crisis narratology and cultural studies, the paper argues that populism thrives not through ideology alone, but through its tapping into crisis narratology, i.e., the cultural construction of emergency as a diagnosis of the present.

In its first major part, the paper examines how populist movements deploy crisis narratives to reconfigure collective identity. These narratives hinge on larger discursive formations that mobilise affect and emotional registers (such as fear, nostalgia, or indignation) by framing the nation or community as under siege. The crisis is not merely economic or political; it is cultural, rooted in anxieties over authenticity, belonging, and historical continuity. In this way, populism, translates structural precarity into moral panic and political urgency, which points towards one of the key concepts of crisis narratology: the turning point, or point of decision. By doing so, populism also allocates conventional roles such as those responsible for the crisis (constructed ‘elites’, or immigrants), those who suffer from it (the ‘common man’ or families) valuing some (those who ‘act’) while devaluing others (‘experts’). It taps into real material precarity while distorting its causes, redirecting blame toward symbolic Others and constructing or reinforcing binary oppositions (e.g., us vs. them, purity vs. corruption). This cultural logic enables populism to claim moral authority, positioning itself as the only authentic voice of the people in times of perceived and constructed collapse.

In part two, the paper engages with concepts of media epistemology and the work of scholars such as Lauren Berlant (on cruel optimism), Sara Ahmed (on affective economies), and Chantal Mouffe (on antagonism and the political imaginary) to analyse how crisis narratives are produced and circulated through media, public discourse, and everyday cultural practices. From viral memes and performative speeches to ritualised public demonstrations, populist crisis narratives actively partake in society’s arena of power by capitalising on the worldmaking capabilities of specific media. Thus, the paper also seeks to demonstrate how crisis narratives are deeply embedded in the affective and symbolic fabric of late modernity and its contexts (neoliberal dislocation, digital mediation, and the erosion of trust in institutions).

Panel 2: Populist Temporalities

Naemi Victoria Dehde (University of Konstanz): (Re)Presenting the National – Restorative Nostalgia and Working-Class Community in *The Full Monty* (2023)

Loss of community is central to Disney’s *The Full Monty* (2023). Over the course of its 8 episodes, the series follows several storylines about the social and spatial alienation of working-class characters from their hometown, Sheffield. Their isolation from one another eventually results in a tragic death that urges those who remain to reunite and weather the challenges of austerity politics together. Notably, the temporary restoration of their community is sparked by a nostalgic reconstruction of white masculinity as the centrepiece of British social life.

Drawing on Svetlana Boym’s definition of restorative nostalgia, my paper will investigate *The Full Monty* series’ romanticisation of traditional social structures and its longing for a white,

patriarchal status quo. “The moment we try to repair longing with belonging, the apprehension of loss with a rediscovery of identity,” Boym cautions, “we often part ways and put an end to mutual understanding” (XV). This rediscovery of identity takes centre stage in populist visions about the British nation and will also be the main focus of my talk.

My paper is situated at the intersection of populism and popular media. I argue that *The Full Monty* series presents traditional social structures upheld by white, patriarchal authority as an object of nostalgic longing. Their temporary reconstruction in the present repairs longing with belonging. However, as I will critique, they also stylise social marginality into an aesthetic spectacle that regards diversity as a validation of an essentialised image of British community. In other words, the series’ restoration of working-class community is achieved at the expense of its diverse characters. It thus echoes sentiments associated with the rise of British right-wing politics by reasserting a sense of national coherence founded on the return of white, patriarchal authority.

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Heike Raphael-Hernandez (JMU Würzburg): When the world was still good – Nostalgic Memories, Popular Songs, and Populism in the Trump Era

When in 2016, the Republican Party won the U.S. national election with their candidate Donald Trump, quite a few voices, especially among the intellectual elite who had favored the Democratic Party’s candidate Hillary Clinton, expressed their astonishment about the victory of a candidate who seemed to have won the election because of voters who had hardly anything in common with the billionaire Donald Trump. Yet, what many people did not understand was that while Clinton had focused on a better future, Trump had promised a return to the past, painting imaginary pictures of the good old days, when blue color workers were not forgotten, when they earned a decent salary, when white people had not become the invisible people, when they were still honored with respect, when rough language was cool and rowdy behavior a sign of American manhood. The following presidential campaigns in 2020 and 2024 used the same mythical images of the good old days. Popular music became an important tool, emotionally connecting people with nostalgic dreams of the past. MAGA, the Trump-adoring base, has used several popular songs at all their rallies in support of Trump. A few examples of the songs are “YMCA” and “Macho Man,” both by the Village People, “Born in the U.S.A.” by Bruce Springsteen, “Rocking in the Free World” by Neil Young, or “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” by the Rolling Stones. Quite a few of these artists protested the use of their songs for political causes they did not support. Other musicians, especially in the country music industry, very much welcomed the use of their songs to evoke nostalgic longing for the good old days. In their collection *Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe*, the two editors, Mario Dunkel and Melanie Schiller, examine the growing nexus between popular music and populism across a variety of European populist movements. Their claims can also be applied to the U.S. MAGA movement. In my talk, I will investigate the use of popular music by Trump-supporting groups and by Trump himself for their goals of gaining ideological territory.

Panel 3: The Politics of Populism

Elena Dück (JMU Würzburg) with Daniela Caterina and Benjamin Opratko: Populism as a Strategy of the Far-Right – The Re-Ordering of Political Space in Europe

Building on transnational studies of populism and the findings of the Special Issue *European Populisms in a Changing World: Global Disorder and Re-Ordering of Political Space in Europe* (Caterina / Dück / Opratko: forthcoming), this contribution traces how far-right nationalist actors use populism as a strategy to reconfigure European political space. We argue that this strategy entails exploiting and reshaping conditions of disorder, and constructing new forms of political legitimacy, authority, and identity.

First, we outline our theoretical understanding of this process. Drawing on Gramsci's (1971) concept of the *integral state*, e.g. the dialectical unity of political society (state institutions) and civil society (mechanisms and channels of forging consent), we interpret the far-right not simply as a reactionary force but as a hegemonic project that seeks to reorganise the integral state through institutional, ideological and cultural interventions. Far-right actors use populism as a tool in this struggle to reconfigure the political, economic and symbolic space across Europe.

Second, to illustrate how populism is used, we discuss three dimensions of populist strategies and their effects in different spaces: populist performances in the physical space through protest events, practices in the digital space, and the reordering of the institutional space. While the analysis of protests movements highlights the emotional power of embodied experiences, the analysis of the digital space focuses on visual discourses and the use of cultural codes in far-right narratives. The analysis of the institutional space sheds light on how European far-right actors in power reshape political systems not via fundamental ruptures, but via incremental, yet cumulative shifts.

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Judith Neder (TU Dresden): “We’ll tell you exactly how bad it is” – Conspiratorial Populism in *The Liz Truss Show* (2025–)

On December 5, 2025, former Prime Minister Liz Truss launched a YouTube format titled “The Liz Truss Show – The Home of the Counter-Revolution.” As the subtitle and the title of the first episode, “London Is Falling,” already suggest, the show adopts a blatantly populist rhetoric of anti-elitism paired with conspiracist discourse, the stated aim being to “identify the tactics and the game plan of the enemy” and to “tell [...] exactly how bad it is” (Truss 2025).

This paper first outlines the confluence of populism and conspiracism in “conspiratorial populism” (Bergmann 2018) by arguing that conspiracy theories can provide the explanations for populism’s core concern of anti-elitism (Bergman and Butter 2020, 334; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). In a second step, I situate the *The Liz Truss Show* and particularly

the anti-elitism adopted by Truss at this intersection. One may argue that Liz Truss—as a graduate of the University of Oxford, former Royal Dutch Shell employee, former government secretary, and, last but not least, former prime minister—is in a paradoxical position when propagating anti-elitism and “the counter-revolution.” In the show, however, Truss reframes her positionality by navigating the roles of both an ‘expert witness’ and victim of a conspiracy, “sabotaged by the Bank of England, [and] the rest of the deep state” (Truss 2025). In a final step, this paper situates the conspiracist populism of *The Liz Truss Show* within the broader context of contemporary Tory explanations of personal and/or party failure by adopting conspiracy narratives, such as Nadine Dorries’ *The Plot* (2023) and *Downfall* (2024).

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Pēteris Plakans (Rīga Stradiņš University): “Populism and/in Parliamentary Speeches – Comparing Latvia and the UK”

Parliamentary speeches reveal the institutional culture and ethical norms of a country’s highest legislative body. By examining the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia alongside the House of Commons of the United Kingdom, the talk explores how political culture shapes the use and meaning of “populism” in parliamentary rhetoric. Using quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods, the talk analyses parliamentary speeches from the national transcript archives from 2020 to 2025 in the parliaments of an Eastern European country, where democratic political traditions have developed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and in a centuries-old constitutional monarchy.

In the Latvian case, “populism” functions primarily as a political slur – a culturally embedded tool for delegitimizing opponents rather than a self-descriptive ideological category. In a post-Soviet context, where political trust remains low, the term “populism” has lost analytical substance and become an emotionally charged tool of stigmatization. As a result, populism and ideology are not correlated concepts in Latvian parliamentary communication.

Although there is a long parliamentary tradition of criticising political opponents and undermining the government’s work, entirely populist parties – with their Western European-style approach to political communication – have emerged only during the period under review, beginning in 2022.

Approximately 90% of all cases of “populism” in the Saeima are negative, and the term appears across all political parties, including towards coalition partners. Unlike right wing populist parties in Western Europe, Latvian populist discourse does not centre on immigration or ethnicity narratives. Instead, its themes reflect the Soviet legacy, both in terms of ethnic composition and political culture, producing a different pattern of populist communication compared to Western Europe.

Panel 4: Populist Affect and Aesthetics

Leyla Rommel (University of Bremen): Soft Hierarchies – Aestheticized Power Structures and the Affective Life of Populism in Tradwife Content

Tradwife content poses questions relevant to the cultural analysis of populism as it mobilizes populist imaginaries of authenticity and social order through affective and aesthetic form. This paper examines tradwife videos as a site where gender ideals, affective aesthetics, and populist imaginaries converge in digital culture. Building on debates on cultural backlash and authoritarian populism (Norris/Inglehart 2019; Schäfer 2022), it approaches tradwife media not primarily as explicit political discourse but as a cultural form through which social order becomes emotionally and aesthetically compelling.

I argue that tradwife content organizes what may be described as *soft hierarchies*: forms of gendered subordination that are rendered harmonious and emotionally fulfilling rather than coercive. Across short-form videos on Instagram and TikTok, aesthetically appealing scenes of domesticity, intimacy, and care construct a deontics of “the good life”. Ordinary domestic life appears as natural and truthful, while contemporary social change is framed as alienating or detached from lived experience. These representations frequently position themselves against feminist ideals and against forms of modern life associated with abstraction, instability, speed, and social disorientation, thereby enacting a recurring populist logic of demarcation between an authentic in-group and its perceived cultural others (McGuigan 1992).

In line with work on affect and emotion (Ahmed 2010), these representations attach positive feelings to particular forms of gendered social relations, shaping what is experienced as meaningful and aspirational, often through their framing as matters of choice (Gill 2007). Drawing on discourse-analytic approaches to multimodal digital media (Kress/van Leeuwen 2020; Westberg 2021), the paper argues that tradwife content offers insight into the affective life of contemporary populism by showing how populist imaginaries in online practices are not necessarily argued for, but rendered effective through affective and aesthetic experience.

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Caroline Kögler (FU Berlin): Against Sexy Fascism

The contemporary resurgence of authoritarian and far-right politics – the new fascism (e.g. Herzog 2025, Dean 2025, Toscano 2023) – cannot be captured by institutional, political, or ideological analysis alone. Instead, having inserted itself into the social fabric as a complex catalyser of desire, its immersive affective forms take hold at the level of attachments, reorganising both attention and perception across different media, classes, and national borders. Building on Dagmar Herzog's concept of "sexy fascism" (2025), this paper examines how contemporary fascist and right-wing populist formations mobilise intimacy, pleasure, and fantasy in a "libidinal economy" (Dean 2025); it asks how it renders discrimination and violence affectively and aesthetically compelling. Also drawing on gender, queer, and trans theory, the paper explores “sexy fascism” as it circulates through curated masculinities and femininities, trading notions of sexy supremacy and erotic hierarchies. By analysing the convergence of affect, populism, and media culture, the paper asks how criticism might confront the seductive dimensions of fascist worldmaking without reproducing their aesthetic force.

Mir Ali Hosseini (University of Regensburg): Hope Lies in the Proles? Orwell’s Populist Elitism and Its Cultural Afterlives

Throughout his career, George Orwell consistently contrasted the false analyses of intellectuals with the supposedly more authentic judgement of the “ordinary people.” This opposition, I argue, is best understood not as anti-intellectualism in the straightforward sense of hostility to thought, but as part of a broader populist style. In the British context, Orwell believed that left-wing intellectuals not only failed to facilitate socialism but actively obstructed it, above all through their abstract language, their condescension towards the working class, and their susceptibility to totalitarian thinking. Yet Orwell’s appeal to the common people is never as unambiguous as its populist tone might suggest. While he repeatedly valorises ordinary judgement against the false sophistication of intellectuals, he also qualifies that judgement through a distinction between “intellect” and “intelligence.”

I argue that this tension gives Orwell’s anti-intellectualism both a populist and an elitist dimension. Orwell attacks the elite not only for its corruption, but also for its lack of intellectual and moral seriousness; at the same time, he does not celebrate the common people unequivocally but imagines a position from which they may be defended, interpreted, and

politically addressed. Read in this way, Orwell emerges not as a simple champion of the common man, but as a figure who combines anti-elitist rhetoric with the implicit authority of an alternative, intelligent vanguard. The paper suggests that this style of populist elitism has had a significant afterlife in anglophone political and media cultures.

Panel 5: Digital Populisms:

Philipp Raab and Elke Wagner (JMU Würzburg): Appropriation from Above – The Cycle of Populism & Digital Media Culture

Populist politics are closely tied to specific patterns of communication (Müller 2025). Small-scale media formats (Vogl/Blake/Siegert 2021), rapid modes of communication, and performances of authenticity are strategically employed to disseminate populist content in the public sphere, thus making it more broadly relatable. Donald Trump's posts on X or, to include a more local perspective, Bavarian Premier Markus Söder's TikToks illustrate this phenomenon. What once characterized the communication styles of private social media users is now being appropriated, imitated, and strategically deployed for political purposes.

The contribution will initially highlight the strategic modes of appropriation employed by professional politicians with the objective of contrasting this perspective on macrostructural political populism with empirical examples from post-migrant digital counter-publics on TikTok. In doing so, we will trace how communicative practices render users visible as authentic speakers within mass media discourse. Thereby, the aim is to empirically examine authentic self-representation against the backdrop of their contingent conditions of (re)production. This comparison will ultimately serve as a basis for understanding populism not merely as a form of political communication characterized by simplification, emotional manipulation, and division, but also as an integral part of a newly emerging digital public sphere beyond traditional editorial morphologies. Since they are blind to their own form, the central argument is that said small-scale forms have a reproductive effect, while the material aspects of this media shift remain largely unnoticed by users.

This holistic examination of populist communication contexts in the digital space aims to understand how the *Pentecost of Telematics* (Barth/Wagner/Raab/Wiegärtner 2023) once celebrated by sociologists – the unfiltered possibility of counter-speech – now appears as a contingent mode of communication that threatens the democratic public sphere. Thus, the paper concludes with the thesis that new forms of digital media affordances support precisely those features that define contemporary populist communication.

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Zaffar Manzoor (Riphah International University Islamabad, online): A Discourse Analysis of Digital Religious Populism as a Communication Strategy and its Impact on Digital Citizens in Pakistan

Religious populism has evolved into an emerging communication strategy that polarizes societies by amplifying extreme political ideologies through religious political narratives. This study investigates how digital religious populism is constructed and received by digital citizens in Pakistan. The Dataset consists of 544 X posts from three religious political leaders associated with two major religious political parties (JUIF, and JI) and 54,400 digital users' comments, during and after the 2024 election campaign. To examine the dataset, I apply Laclau's discourse theory of populism and van Dijk's ideological framing. The study showcases how populist religious discourse creates societal divisions through religious, cultural, and historical narratives in digital context and how digital citizens mirror such populist narratives, which emerge as a clear threat to democratic institutions. The study aims to contribute to debates on religious/right-wing populism in shaping political communication.