Propositions on right-wing populism: Available, excessive, optimistic

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ABSTRACT

Every discourse on right-wing populism is, more or less explicitly, a discourse on affect. From claims that right-wing populism emerges from a background of racialized resentment or the anger of the 'left behind', through to analyses of how populist politicians mobilized hatred and rage in a 'post-truth era', attempts to explain the emergence and electoral success of contemporary right-wing populism have centered affect. In the midst of the turbulence of post 2007 financial crisis politics, the discourse on right-wing populism has repeated the tensions and ambivalences that surround affective politics per se – with populism simultaneously serving as a warning of what an affect-based politics might become, whilst also seeming to offer a lesson for the liberal-left in how to mobilize and move people otherwise disaffected. In this paper we supplement this attention to affect, and step outside of this tensed relation, by articulating the *structure of feeling* of contemporary right-wing populism in the U.S.A and UK. We do so through the form of the proposition, finding in the proposition a style of inhabiting an impasse that (re/dis)orientates attention and opens up disagreement and further discussion. In the first proposition - *populism is available* – we explore questions of definition, settling on how the discursive emptiness of populism allows for its constant articulation. *Populism is excessive* – the second proposition – shifts to emphasizing the affective fullness of populism, following how this fullness plays out in registers such as fun. Our third proposition – *populism is optimistic* – argues that right-wing populism is dependent on a 'temporal loop' optimism where the future to come blurs with the past that was. We conclude with some reflections on the future of this affect structure in light of the January 2021 events in the US Capitol and the electoral defeat of Donald J Trump.

1. Introduction

During his 2016 campaign to become republican presidential nominee, at a meeting with the editorial writers of The New York Times Donald J Trump talked about applause lines at his rallies:

"You know … if it gets a little boring, if I see people starting to sort of, maybe thinking about leaving, I can sort of tell the audience, I just say, 'we will build the wall!' and they go nuts."[1]

For the editorial writers at *The New York Times*, the intentionality of Trump's public performance was evidence of a questionable relation with the audience who "go nuts." Invoking the longstanding specter of the politician who deceptively manipulates the unruly passions of the unwitting masses, they discuss how Trump invents policy and political positions: "His supporters say they don't care. What they may not know

is how deliberately he is currying their favor".

They "may not know," but perhaps they did know. What if someone "deliberately currying their favor" was felt as a form of care and exactly what was desired? Trump's applause line and the muted critique by the New York Times editorial writers indicates the complexities of the affective politics of right-wing populism. The conditional "*may* not know" (emphasis added) in the editorial hints to a crisis of response before a form of political performance where bellicose nationalism and racialized resentment gather around the 'wall' and mix with collective enthusiasm and the intensity of a violent fun against a background of potential boredom.

Five years on from this scene - and in the wake of still more dramatic scenes of incitement and affection - we address right-wing populism[2] in a way that stays with the ambiguities of affective politics. We do so in a transitional moment, an impasse (Berlant, 2011) or interregnum (Streeck, 2017) where it is no longer clear what we are living after, let

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alone what we might be waiting for. Is it possible that Trumpism was no more than a short-lived right-wing populism, destined to live on only as a 'bad omen' for would-be populisms, a betrayed promise for his followers, and a perennially enjoyable meme? Or does Trumpism have an ongoing role to play, a bed of coals keeping warm the forces of white-supremacy and right-wing militancy? And what if this is not 'the end of Trump' at all, but another incremental moment in the ongoing 'end' of neoliberalism, where the much heralded 'crisis' of neoliberalism after the 2007 financial crisis tips over into the advent of even darker illiberalisms?

Put differently, we don't know whether right-wing populism is our past, present, future, or all three simultaneously. From within this uncertainty, as lines between dominant, emergent and residual formations blur in today's conjuncture, we pause and explore the affective structure of right-wing populism in the UK and USA. We describe and speculate on how structures of feeling and atmospheres are part of the conditions of formation and emergence for right-wing populisms, but also how right-wing populism happens as a structure of feeling (Williams, 1977): an affective quality, or set of affective qualities, which "exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action" (Williams, 1977 132). In other words, how is right-wing populism affectively present to supporters and critics alike?

We are far from the first to consider the relation between populism and affect. Whatever kind of thing populism is taken to be, whether movement, ideology, style or genre, there is no discourse on populism that is not always-already a discourse on affect (whether couched in terms of emotion, feeling, passion or some other modality). By advocates and critics alike, collective affects are frequently invoked as causes of or conditions for the emergence of contemporary right-wing populisms (as we summarize in section two). They supposedly provide the answer to the thorny question of why right-wing populism now, becoming the means to understand the irruption of a dangerous phenomenon that, initially at least, appeared to confound analysis (see, for example, Mishra (2017) on anger or Wuthnow (2018) on rage). These stories of unruly passions normally center strong, dramatic, collective feelings which constitute the post-industrial 'left behind', principally anger and frustration but also a chaotic mix of broader insecurities about status in times of shrinking hope. Debates rage around which collective feelings to center, and whether focusing on one set of feelings problematically excludes other causes, in particular obscuring the dynamics of race and in particular fears and anxieties that cluster around immigration (see, for example, the pre-Trump debates around Hochschild, 2016). Does, for example, focusing on 'economic anxiety' in post-industrial peripheries obscure performances of whiteness and forms of racialized anxiety and resentment? Collective feelings are also the material which right-wing populists use to appeal and hook publics, with work describing and critiquing how right-wing politicians and campaigns evoke, solicit and produce anger, anxiety, and resentment. It's no surprise or accident that editorial writers of *The New York Times* choose to highlight Trump's affective performance.

There is something comforting about these accounts, even as they paint a dark picture of a maelstrom of smoldering resentments and intensifying angers that partly compose the turbulence of the post 2008 financial crisis present. The overspill, the excess, of populism is enrolled into a narrative which offers the consoling certainties of explanation. Collective affects play a mediating role in these accounts – solving the puzzle of how a set of political-economic transformations find expression in the emergence and success of populist parties and politicians. As with all explanatory work, they help stabilize the phenomena to be explained (Latour, 1988). They also enable some classic political tropes – principally manipulation – to be reasserted, as well as subject positions, including the critic who unmasks and reveals, the opponent who refuses manipulation and identifies others as manipulated, and the commentator who evokes and sympathetically understands. The zenith of this genre are accounts that make right-wing populism into a symptom of a broader becoming-affective or emotional of politics, where facts are replaced by affective facts (Massumi, 2015) in a disorientating, dissonant, post-truth era. In short, a kind of 'strong theory' of populism in Sedgwick's (2003) sense is enabled that enrolls affect for the purpose of centering post-industrial dynamics of race and class.

Elements of these stories will surface across our account. Our starting position, beginning from our opening scene, is that relations with affect are a little more complicated, with right-wing populism serving as something to be explained and a warning, but also as an exemplar and a scene of enjoyment. Right-wing populism has been narrated as uniquely affective or emotional, and as such as both alluring and repelling to opponents. One response by those advocating a 'left-wing populism' has been to find in articulations of the people and their passions a route to renewed political engagement (e.g. Frank, 2020; Smith, 2019).[3] For whether a tweet, or a photo-op, a meme or a joke by a late-night comedian, mediated populist performances *affect*. They gather attention as they are circulated through social media ecologies where economic and other types of value are created through attention and movement. Populist scenes have been *enjoyed* as occasions for strong feeling in a digitally mediated world in which lines between flatness and intensity, attention and distraction, engagement and disengagement, are increasingly blurred.

How to relate to this ambivalent field, already full of stories of and arguments about affect, and where outrage is about both enjoyment and rejection? And how to do so during a seeming never-ending production of claims and counter claims about what populism is and how to distinguish between populisms? We offer a set of propositions about right-wing populism, focusing on the United States and the United Kingdom over the past five years.[4] These two cases sit side by side both familiarly and with increasing perplexity. In 2016, with Nigel Farage touting a vote to leave the European Union as a "victory for real people" and Trump promising to transfer power from Washington "back to you, the American people," there was a growing consensus that a common current had been gathering force in both societies and had broken the dam with the success of these campaigns on either side of the Atlantic (Norris & Inglehart, 2019: 18; Farage, 2016; Trump, 2017). As Trump crowed on the eve of his victory, "It'll be Brexit plus plus plus!" – an American, supersized version of what UKIP had achieved (Mardell, 2016). Capitalizing on anti-immigrant sentiment and, in their different ways, promising to 'get it done' in opposition to bureaucratic power and entrenched political interests, both Trump and Johnson appeared to have leveraged their electoral successes via right-wing populism (Bogaards, 2017; Cox, 2017; Gusterson, 2017).

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[3] For reasons of space we do not address the question of 'left-wing' populism here, apart from noting that the right-wing populisms we focus on often articulate and mobilize elements typically associated with the left (as, for example, when Boris Johnson mobilizes a vocabulary of justice to justify the strategy and promise of 'levelling up', or Trump's appeal to those 'left-behind' by globalisation). Beyond the UK and US, this blurring is particularly found in Latin American populisms, often animated by anti-imperialist and anti-oligarchical impulses (de Genova, 2018). In Western Europe and North-America, the position of 'left wing populism' is more ambivalent, sometimes invested with hope as the only effective counter to populisms of the right (e.g. Mouffe, 2018) (for reflections on left-wing mobilisations of 'the people' see Bosworth, 2019).

[4] Multiple other populisms of the right currently exist beyond the UK and USA, leading some to emphasise their commonalities in vengeful nationalism and resentment towards racialized minorities and proclaim a global 'age of anger' (Mishra, 2017). Whilst there are commonalities of tone as well as multiple practical connections across our cases and populisms in Brazil, Hungary and elsewhere, for example the overlaps between the Orbán administration and elements in the UK Conservative Party and US Republicans, or Trump and Bolsonaro's shared reversal of even minimal climate change polices, we would caution against any single claim about the global affective present and right-wing populisms. We offer our propositions as a response to a particular formation, and invite readers to wonder about the commonalities and differences with other populisms.

And yet as Trump's presidency wore on and came to its unsavory conclusion, the conjoining of the US and UK cases has become less clearly illuminating. The blatant racism of Trump and his supporters, the president's cozy relationship to neo-Nazi organizations, and the violent conclusion to his attempt to overthrow the vote for President Joe Biden all go beyond the pale of Boris Johnson's administration, despite the shared investment in a 'culture war', continued anti-immigrant rhetoric and practice, and disastrous delays and incompetence in COVID-19 response. Further, the Black Lives Matter movement has thrown a spotlight on how white supremacy is violently upheld in the US, an analytic that immediately seems to offer more purchase on recent events – including Trump supporters' motivation and capacity to occupy the US capitol - than attention to questions of populism.

Nevertheless, our suggestion here is that there remains something to be gained politically and theoretically by taking populism as an analytic for understanding the affective politics of the right-wing in the UK and the US. This is in part because populism remains above all, as we argue in this article, 'available' as a way of constructing what Chantal Mouffe (2005) calls 'politics' – that is, the division of society into an antagonism between 'us' and 'them.' Populism is thus available to fascistic and white supremacist leaders but also to leaders like Johnson who mix renewed nationalism with neoliberal elements (and theoretically to left-wing movements as well, though such articulations are beyond the scope of our analysis here). Our question is, how have right-wing populist appeals gained an affective purchase in these two societies in the wake of the collapse of the expectations that ideologies of capitalist modernism and liberal democracy had fostered (Berardi, 2011; Berlant, 2011)? This is, in other words, a "political geography in the impasse" (Benjaminsen et al., 2018) that treats right-wing populism in the US and the UK as comprising ambivalently territorialized affective and political orientations (see also Lizotte, 2019). Such a conjunctural analysis is critical for understanding the dynamic and contingent emergence of 'the people' as a political subject mobilized against a range of vilified 'others' - a politics that, we will argue, goes beyond the scoring of grievance to circulate in scenes of excess, enjoyment, and optimism.

Partly our aim is diagnostic, in that we aim to understand how right-wing populism emerges in a particular conjuncture. However, addressing right-wing populism through the propositional mode may appear to be counterintuitive. After stressing the ambiguity of attachments and investments, we perform a mode which appears to be about certainty, about definite claims, and strong positions in which whoever proposes the propositions stands apart and surveys a moving present. This is a risk. And of course, there are other ways of staying with the ambiguity of affective life. Bosworth's (2020) excellent analysis of the embedded multiplicity of populism, for example, articulates the 'dissonant generic field' (Bosworth (2020) 10) of environmental populism through close attention to the enactment of populism as political genre in and across affective scenes. Our experiment with a propositional mode is a different kind of response to ambiguity, which like Bosworth attempts to remain open to what is happening in a scene, as it moves around a problem, attempting to articulate how affective and other forces relate. As claims, propositions are designed to be generative of a distinctive orientation to some aspect of the moving present. They are ways of acknowledging that we write from our imbrication in that present, whilst also amplifying for attention and discussion specific tendencies which give the present its character and feel. This means propositions are always provisional and contestable – subject to revision and reworking or indeed rejection as they are received and responded to. There can also be a playfulness to propositions. We are trying things out with them. We are moving around problems, attempting to clarify them, temporarily holding some things still in order to see what we might notice anew about contemporary conditions.

The paper is organized around three propositions. The first – *populism is available* - addresses the perennial problem of identifying what kind of thing populism is and what populisms have in common. Next, we move from the emptiness of populism to its affective fullness – *populism*

is excessive. Finally, building from our emphasis on a particular articulation of availability and excess, we propose that right-wing populism is a form of optimism: *populism is optimistic*. In conclusion we turn directly to the question of the futures of right-wing populism as an affect structure in the aftermath of the events of insurrection in the USA Capitol on January 6th, 2021.

Proposition 1.   *Populism is available*

Anthropologist Hugh Gusterson (2017: 209) opens his article on Brexit, Trump, and nationalist populism with the quip: 'Populism is a little like pornography in Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous characterization: it's hard to define, but one knows it when one sees it'. It is easy to sympathize with this retreat from category construction after one spends some time with the interdisciplinary academic literature on populism. Every treatment of populism begins with an effort to untangle the problem of definition. And yet, despite the accretion of case studies, comparative perspectives, historical genealogies and analytical arguments on the topic, no one solution, however sensible, seems to gain enough traction to put an end to the spinning wheels of (re)definition. If the problem is to establish a definition of populism adequate to the amorphous 'knowing' that 'one knows it when one sees it' invokes, one need only consider the enigma of sex (as per Zupancic, 2017) to recognize that we are dealing with a problem that evades solution for a reason.

Why is it so difficult to settle the question of what IS populism? Of course, populism is not unique for being a highly politicized political category, open to resignification and strategic deployment (see Held, 2006 on democracy). The exercise of defining populism often proceeds like a snake eating its tail: it begins from an *unarticulated definition* (what one 'knows when one sees it') that nets the cases to be considered and then uses these cases as the basis for establishing a definition or a typology that adequately captures them all (Canovan, 1981). Given the diversity of cases to be included, the result is logically a minimal definition, most prominently emphasizing the core concepts of the people, the elite, and the general will (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Typically analysis focuses on how populist movements and leaders mobilize a unitary 'people' in distinction from a corrupt and corrupting elite, and promise a break from the forms, practices, and tones of 'normal' politics (de Genova, 2018). More discriminately, some definitions work to trim the net so that certain cases fall away and the ideological content of populism comes into greater focus. For example, by establishing a definition of populism that excludes 'inclusive' or leaderless movements, or movements without 'demands,' some definitions winnow populism to a set of right-wing movements that can then be treated as a problem (for liberal democracy, pluralism or left politics more generally) (Müller, 2017; Crewe and Sanders, 2020). Other scholars of populism forgo case-based definition to identify populism not as a coherent movement or a core ideology (however 'thin'), but instead as a political discourse. Rather than referring to any stable set of policies or political orientations, populism thus names a rhetorical, aesthetic or performative style (e.g. Block & Negrine, 2017; Moffitt, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014). In this sense, populism is at once vacuous and widely available, a theatre in which political actors can participate (or not) without broaching the question of who (or what) is populist.

If populism poses a particular problem for 'knowing it' this is not least reflected in its dual tendency to signify nothing and everything in the political field. On the one hand, the academic struggles over definition that repeatedly attempt to shore up populism as an object of study betray the lack of affirmative articulation (the absence of self-declared populists) that voids populism of positive content. As Moran (2020: 253) puts it, "In the age of the populist hardly anyone owns up to being one." On the other hand, the very emptiness of populism makes it available to become over-full, as does the centrality of 'the people' to ideals of democracy (de Genova, 2018). This is apparent in the work of Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2005), in which populism is taken to be an

articulatory logic that links up a chain of demands to create the apparent unity of 'the people.' By naming the people, populism brings about an antagonistic front between the people and an 'other': "a *them* that is designated as not only *not* 'the people,' but as its film negative; an image of what society should not be, providing the movement with much of its affective impetus" (Salter, 2016: 117). 'The people' designates at once a lack and a surplus: the stitching together of what is more-than-itself in the social field (a chain of equivalence) to manifest a totalization that partially and temporarily fixes meaning while itself lacking any positive content. In this operation, populism becomes synonymous with both hegemony and politics more generally (Laclau, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2005). In other words, populism as empty signifier does *too much* work at the same time as it does too little.

An empty signifier, populism makes itself widely available, both as an ostensibly timely topic for study and punditry (consider *The Guardian's, 2018* quiz, "How populist are you?", which grants us all a place in the matrix of left/right populism) and as a political strategy with the potential to disrupt the status quo. Paradoxically, it is by virtue of this openness – this indiscriminate availability –that populism works to temporarily arrest the flow of difference in the social field. That is, what makes 'the people' capable of articulating a chain of equivalence that links and transforms a series of elements (for example, middle-class suburbanites, rural poor, Latinx conservatives, 4chan trolls, neo-Nazis and corporate executives) into an apparent totality – and thereby to initiate an antagonistic front against an 'other' (e.g. coastal elite, liberals, immigrants, Black Lives Matter, etc.) – is that *it appears and makes itself available within a discursive and affective field that is conditioned to receive it.* What these conditions are, in all their material and ideational complexity, is perhaps the most necessary question to ask regarding populism. In the following two propositions, we propose two such conditions of populism as it takes form in the impasse of the present.[5]

Proposition 2. *Populism is excessive*

"Populism' was always linked to a dangerous excess, which puts the clear-cut moulds of a rational community into question." (Laclau, 2005: x)

The idea that political institutions draw their strength from the passions precedes current fascinations with populism. In the late 17th century, Baruch Spinoza (2007: 3; 1994) suggested that, at times of doubt and uncertainty, human beings "fluctuate wretchedly between hope and fear," both of which are "born of the idea of a future or past thing whose outcome we to some extent doubt" (Spinoza, 1994: 190) – an impasse echoed in Berlant's notion of 'cruel optimism', wherein attachments to both past and future objects become compromised. For Spinoza, this vacillation and ambivalence in relation to *past and future things* (that is, in his definition, things by which we *have been* or *anticipate being* affected) conditions a religio-political field in which the key questions cannot be divorced from an understanding of the emotional state of the people.[6]

The problem of how to conceptualize mass politics under the fluctuating conditions of hope and fear provokes a particular set of responses in studies of populism. In *On Populist Reason* (2005), Laclau launches his reworking of the logic of populism by demonstrating how theories of 'the crowd' have historically worked to delegitimize popular politics. As Laclau makes clear, by setting 'rational forms of social organization' in counter-distinction to 'mass phenomena', 19th and 20th century political and social theorists expressed their wariness of the masses, whom they deemed too emotional and unpredictable for political enfranchisement (Laclau, 2005). Populism, when cast as an existential threat to liberal democracy (whether conceived as its flip side or an external force), takes up the mantel of the irrational political 'other' inherited over the long durée of Western thought, traversing the centuries from Plato's intemperate 'democratic type' on through Gustav le Bon's nineteenth century deluded masses, Elias Canetti's mid-twentieth century devouring crowd, and what Douglas Kellner calls the *American Nightmare* (2016: 54), in which "Trump was the *vox populi* of his follower's [sic] fears and rage."

Despite Laclau's critique, the study of populism has not easily moved on from this political-epistemological framing. The continued salience of the idea that, of all political formations, populism needs to be understood in terms of the emotions it marshals is reflected in the drive to 'explain' populism – its appeal, successes, and practices – in terms of how it mobilizes feelings of fear and rage. In political science, the inclusion of such feelings as an analytic factor has given rise to 'grievance mobilization models' in which authoritarian populism is understood to be fueled by political dissatisfaction, alienation, resentment against outgroups (specifically immigrants), and the failure of elites to respond to such grievances (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Ivarsflaten, 2008). However significant their findings, these models cannot parse whether the emotional factor stokes populism or results from it. It is even possible that anger and populism are on some level *the same thing*: the minimalist definition of populism (as "a thin-centered ideology" in which the "pure people" face off against the "corrupt elite" [Mudde, 2004: 543]) seems to already correspond to the structure of blame that is associated with the emergence of anger (Rico et al., 2017). Further, explaining populism in affective terms runs the risk of eliding what lies behind populist subjects' anger, fear, or resentment, thereby sidestepping a broader analysis of what has driven people into this affective valley. Regardless of these confounding issues, the sense that models of populism *should* include affective factors alongside socioeconomic and attitudinal markers is itself significant as an indicator of an ongoing conviction that the key to populism lies in its affective signature.

That populism exceeds the bureaucratic rationalities of liberal democratic institutions is also an element of the public discourse that eddies around it. In the context of mounting political tensions and a crisis of futurity in the West, the populist drive that propelled Britain out of the EU and landed Trump in the White House appears as a threat to the rational administration of government: a dangerous excess, fueled by fluctuations of passion and, harkening back to Spinoza, people's readiness 'to believe anything' under conditions of doubt and uncertainty. To be clear, that the populist governments of the 21st century have actively worked to roll-back democracy (by undermining or dismantling key democratic institutions, protections and constitutional frameworks) is evident not only in the US but in Hungary, Turkey, Brazil and elsewhere (Mounk & Kyle, 2018). Yet the *excess* of populism emerges not in the political-ideological agendas of populist leaders (which in many cases might be described more directly as authoritarian), but in the spectacle of passion, "fever dreams" of apocalyptic futures (Gökarıksel et al., 2019), and the heightened intensity that

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[5] The affective-material conditions for populisms clearly exceed those we focus on in this paper, although we should stress that our expansive notion of 'conditions' include the manner in which excess circulates and is expressed through racialized structures of feeling, and the structures and forms of optimism and associated relations with the future. These are as political-economic as they are social-cultural, and coexist with the other affective-material conditions (for example the experience and promise of work today, or forms of indebtedness) which compose contemporary capitalisms.

[6] For example, see Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* and his discussion of how 'dread' sways people towards credulity, such "that all the things [people] have ever worshipped under the influence of false religion are nothing but the fancies and fantasies of despondent and fearful minds; and that prophets have been most influential with the common people and most formidable to their kings when their kingdoms were in the greatest distress" (Spinoza, 2007, pp. 4–5).

makes populism quite distinct from a ten-point plan – that makes it the thing that one knows when one sees it.[7]

The excess of populism manifests, for example, in what is over-the-top about how the populist leader presents himself to the public eye. From the official proclamation that Trump "unequivocally, will be the healthiest individual ever elected to the presidency" ahead of his victory in the 2016 election (Cassidy, 2018), to Boris Johnson boasting that he was "fit as a butcher's dog" and "bursting with antibodies" after being forced to self-quarantine in November 2020 (Sky News, 2020), performances of over-pumped masculine virility exceed what is called for (e.g. a bill of health or quarantine routines).[8] Such excess is unmistakable in dramatically staged events, such as when on June 1, 2020 Trump chose to respond to the demonstrations erupting across the country in protest of the police murder of George Floyd with a photo op in front of the historic St John's Episcopal Church. The president's walk across the street from the White House was ushered by defense secretary Mark Esper's command to "dominate the battle space" of the DC protesters, and resulted in the use of rubber bullets, tear gas, and a Black Hawk helicopter flying low enough "to snap tree limbs and tear signs from the sides of buildings, a show-of-force maneuver often seen in combat zones to scare off insurgents" (Tan et al., 2020: no page; Flegenheimer, 2020). The sheer lack of necessity for any of this – for the photo op itself, let alone for the escalation of state violence against the peaceful demonstrators – was not incidental to the event but its most significant content.

On a different register, we might think of a campaign video for the conservatives in the 2019 general election as similarly excessive, but this time invoking the absurd and playful. Featuring Boris Johnson at a bakery in the midlands, he made a pie and put it in the oven. Smiling, with sleeves rolled up and a baker's apron on, Johnson asserted his promise of an "oven ready deal" to resolve the Brexit impasse. Like Trump's photo op though less immediately violent, the oven ready skit was entirely uncalled for, excessive. It clarified nothing. The performance implies that what needs to be explained is not how Johnson is going to deliver a Brexit deal, but what it means for something to be 'oven ready' - a phrase chosen specifically because everyone knows exactly what it means. The harmlessness of the baking exercise in the UK contrasts to the violent removal of peaceful protestors in the US, and certainly this divergence is significant politically and practically – yet our contention is that the shared element – excess - is also significant. The excessiveness beyond utility, beyond what is necessary, fosters a sense of more or less violent, more or less knowingly playful, difference from other politics and other politicians. In both cases, the affective register of politics departs from ordinary comforts and satisfactions to become decidedly more disruptive (Hook, 2017; see also; Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008; Jutel, 2018; Salter, 2016).

But the froth of populist excess does not arise only from the performances of populist leaders. Just as academic studies of populism have incorporated feelings of fear and anger into their analyses of populist support, the sense that populism is a site of excessive passion encompasses followers even more centrally than leaders. While populist leaders may be presumed to be the puppet masters of the passions of the people, the people themselves are frequently represented as the source of the energies harnessed. Whether this excess appears in the form of a proliferating chain of Q-Anon theories or the 'near spiritual devotion' said to be lavished upon Trump by his supporters, the sense that populists both enjoy their leader's excess and are themselves excessive colors the atmosphere of the populist surge in the US and UK.

While there are countless examples that could be used to illustrate the intensity of Trump supporters, one such video went viral on November 4, 2020, the day following the election (Insider Paper @TheInsiderPaper, 2020). The video shows a press conference in which election officials outside the Clark County Election Center in Nevada are reporting on the vote count when they are interrupted by a man wearing a "BBQ, Beer, Freedom" tank top (see Fig. 1). The man lunges onto camera yelling, "The Biden crime family steals this election! The media is covering it up! The Biden crime family steals this election! The media is covering it up! We won our freedom for the world. Give us our freedom Joe Biden! Joe Biden is covering up this election! He's stealing it!" Having yelled himself hoarse and not been interrupted or forced to leave, the man turns and walks away. The press conference resumes; one reporter can be heard asking, "Where were we?" The spectacle is one in which the excess of the man's fist-pumping, sweaty anger becomes absurd precisely because it is not met with any return of passion but instead left to fizzle out. The man runs out of slogans to shout and leaves. The mundane workings of the Clark County office prevail, it seems, over the threatening excess of populist fervor and vacuity.

In displaying the "BBQ, Beer, Freedom" man as an aberration at the press conference, from one perspective the video delegitimizes the populist actor along the classic lines of Western political thought: he appears to be irrational in the face of the rational proceedings of democratic bureaucracy. And yet, while amusing to anti-Trump viewers, it is unlikely that such a performance embarrasses the actor himself, who accomplished his intervention. What happened and what was said was exactly what was intended. While the cameras focus on the affective energy of the Trump supporter, questions about the evidence for the claims and even perhaps the movement's ideological underpinnings are deferred. That this may be precisely the aim of displays of populist anger is hinted at by the *Financial Times* publishing an article in its book review section in January 2020 titled "Populism and the smoldering rage of American poverty" that presented "new books [that] counter the view of populist voters as racist. They're just angry — and rightly so" (Luce, 2020). The righteous rage of "BBQ, Beer, Freedom" brokers no further discussion.

The excess of populism can be a bit of a lure. This is apparent in arguments in favor of a left populism. For example, suggesting that the cancellation of liberal-democratic futures comes as a consequence of its bloodlessness, Mouffe (2005: 6) writes, "The mistake of liberal rationalism is to ignore the affective dimension mobilized by collective identifications and to imagine that those supposedly archaic 'passions' are bound to disappear with the advance of individualism and the progress of rationality" (Mouffe, 2005: 6). From this perspective, the man in the tank top appears to have something the vote counting officials do not: an affective dimension of political identification. As a consequence, Mouffe (2018: 82) suggests, "In the struggle to establish a new hegemonic formation," – that is, if one is to effectively counter the interruption that wins even as it loses – "it is essential to adopt a 'populist' strategy."

When populist passion becomes in itself an object of desire, it draws our attention to the problem of enjoyment in politics more broadly – that is, the question of whether and how enjoyment is a political factor (Žižek, 2002). On the one hand, the excess of populism may signal an obscene enjoyment that the left wishes not to enjoy but rather to deflate (e.g. the "violent delights" [Nolan & Joy, 2016] of white supremacy, militarism, and conspiracy theory); on the other hand, this populist excess may arise from what Laclau and Mouffe see as the properly political passion of assembling 'the people', an enjoyment that the left *must* embrace if it is to establish a political (hegemonic) power able to counter the excesses of the right (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018; Stavrakakis, 2007). But perhaps even more problematic than the left's hovering between discomfort and desire in the face of populist enjoyment is the work that placing enjoyment on the side of the populist does to *allow the enjoyment of liberal democracy to remain unseen*. That is, what if it is not only the case that populism has its (submerged) rationalities, but also

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[7] By 'excess' we refer to a disruptive supplement over what is expected or anticipated within a given situation. We prefer this term rather than others more closely tied to a pre-existing norm, such as subversive or transgressive, to remain open about how 'excess' is performed, qualified, and circulates, sometimes in the service of norms, at other times as part of their overturning.

[8] On the "fragile masculinity" of such populist leaders as Trump and Erdoğan, see Gökarıksel et al., 2019.

Fig. 1. Screenshot from video posted on Twitter account @TheInsiderPaper.

that 'liberal rationalism' is supported by its own disavowed enjoyments – in, for example, the masculinism, ablism, and white-supremacy that dully prop up its 'neutral' institutions? Consider the flash of joy that energised exhausted liberal and left US-election watchers when CNN announced on 6 November that "national defense airspace has been put in place over Democratic nominee Joe Biden's home in Wilmington, Delaware" (Muntean, 2020). What disavowed attachment to US militarism did this betray? (One might consider David Hook's [2017: 609] well-taken argument that there is no 'good *jouissance*' for the left, but that does not mean that the left does not enjoy). It is possible that populism is not exceptional for its passion – but that its passion is exceptionally troubling, even unsightly, for those who distrust not only the end game of specific (right-wing populist) passions but also political enjoyment tout court.

The proposition that populism is excessive is like a pitfall trap. Baited with the epistemic assumptions of Western political thought, it delivers its unwitting target to a confrontation with their own enjoyment and its lack. And yet, if one avoids the cul-de-sacs of affect-based explanatory models or rational-strategic attempts to harness the passion of populism, one may still be able to feel one's way forward. One way to do this is by going back. For this is where we find the subject of politics: left behind with Spinoza, in the impasse of their ambivalent attachments to things past and future, vacillating between hope and fear. Setting aside the discourse on populism – that is, its problems of definition, the politics of its enunciation, the question of its affective wellsprings – we turn instead to its mood: how does populism feel?

Proposition 3. *Populism is Optimistic*

On October 6th, 2020, Boris Johnson delivered a virtual speech to the first conservative party conference since their general election victory in December 2019 (Johnson, 2020). Shifting from the topic of COVID-19, perhaps to divert attention from criticisms of his handling of the pandemic and reenergize support for his "people's government," he directly addressed the increasingly contested topic of the country's relation with the past. The immediate context was the Black Lives Matter protests. In an intensifying 'culture war' fueled by a right-wing backlash to those protests, what was at stake, for right-wing populists, was who storied the nation and whether and how people should attach to pasts. Johnson distinguished himself and the conservative party from a caricature of the protests. He stressed: "We are proud of this country's culture and history and traditions; they [referring to the 'labour opposition'] literally want to pull statues down, to re-write the history of our country, to edit our national CV to make it look more politically correct." Amid a manufactured outrage surrounding the BBC's supposed decision

to not sing the lyrics to 'Rule Britannia' at their Last Night of the Proms event and in a style that mixes irony and exaggeration, he stressed that, as conservatives: "We aren't embarrassed to sing old songs about how Britannia rules the waves." Some weeks earlier, Donald J Trump had made similar remarks about the relation to the national past during his seemingly stuttering re-election campaign at a hastily rearranged 'White House Conferences on American History' (Trump, 2020). In typically bellicose terms presumably designed to energize a base concerned with the ebbing privileges of whiteness and felt threats to white supremacy, he stressed that: "We must clear away the twisted web of lies in our schools and classrooms, and teach our children the magnificent truth about our country. We want our sons and daughters to know that they are the citizens of the most exceptional nation in the history of the world."

Whilst offered in their partially connected but different affective styles, Johnson and Trump's speeches exemplified how during a 'culture war' right-wing populism gives people permission to feel pride in threatened objects/scenes. People are given permission to attach to intensely reasserted national stories, and permission to not feel shame at a time of intense reckoning with pasts. The affective grounds for this reassertion are interconnected structures of feeling which, whilst distinct, hold various almost-lost pasts in suspension, making them both problematic *and* available to be reactivated through populist political projects and campaigns. In the UK, for example, Gilroy (2004) highlights the existence of what he terms postcolonial and postimperial melancholia, based on "Britain's inability to mourn its loss of empire and accommodate to Empire's consequences … "(111). We could speculate that a different form of racialized melancholia exists in the USA but focused on the inability to mourn the white supremacist liberal order built on slavery amid continued attachments to the American dream.[9] What is so striking about Gilroy's account is that he stresses the "odd combination" or "unstable mixture" of feelings which form a melancholic relation – "a signature combination of manic elation with misery, self-loathing and ambivalence" (Gilroy (2004) 114). The result is that public issues concerning race and ethnicity are enveloped by unstable

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[9] See Daniel Martinze Hosang and Joseph Lowndes (2019) on how Trump's "racial populism" (67) takes up longstanding right-wing discourses of the undeserving poor (e.g. "parasites") to differentiate "those groups deemed self-reliant, autonomous, and worthy of social protection from those who are dependent, debased, and worthy of abandonment and disavowal" (4). This right-wing discourse of deservingness obscures both the failure of the promises of the American Dream and the role that racism has played historically and continues to play in propping up the myth of equal opportunity in the US.

mixtures of surprise and denial, ambivalence and hostility.

There are other similar structures of feeling. Berlant (2011) identifies the continued but fraying attachment to the post-war Fordist settlement in the US, or rather the heteronormative good life fantasies which accompanied and animated it. In naming 'cruel optimism' as the maintenance of attachment to objects/scenes which have become 'problematic' because of their 'compromised' conditions of possibility, she explicitly distinguishes cruel optimism from the desire to temporalize a loss which, for her, characterizes melancholia (and Gilroy shows never quite happens in the UK in relation to imperialism or colonialism). Despite this difference, what these various diagnoses give us is a sense of the present as over-full with problematic objects/scenes of attachment which produce something like a stalled present, held between residual past attachments and a shrinking future – an amplified echo of Spinoza's ambivalent subject whose attachments to past and future objects have become unstable. As structures of feeling, both postcolonial/post-imperial melancholia and cruel optimism are ways in which past objects/scenes associated with national pre-eminence remain residual parts of the present. Even if relations to them are complicated, as Gilroy reminds us when he emphasizes the 'odd' combination of feelings surrounding race or Berlant when she writes of the tension between objects/scenes which sustain and harm, they are nevertheless available to serve as the representational and affective material of right-wing populism.

In relation to these affective conditions, right-wing populism translates an object/scene which is not-quite lost into an occasion for attachment. For us, this translation defines the specificity of right-wing populism – the restoration of an unruined past in a future to come.[10] As is well known, various actors internal and external to the nation and standing in opposition to the sovereign 'people' are invoked as the forces that have, to date, held back the nation from continuing and/or returning to the good that the past exemplifies and evokes. Trump is most explicit about this in his 2020 re-election campaign, articulating it in strikingly bellicose terms, amid a story of betrayal and threat in the present:

> Left-wing mobs have torn down statues of our founders, desecrated our memorials, and carried out a campaign of violence and anarchy. Far-left demonstrators have chanted the words "America was never great." The left has launched a vicious and violent assault on law enforcement — the universal symbol of the rule of law in America. These radicals have been aided and abetted by liberal politicians, establishment media, and even large corporations. (Trump, 2020)

If offered with less bellicosity and without the same conspiratorial tone, a similar cast of characters animates Johnson's narrative of his "people's government" standing in opposition to "liberal elites", "do-gooder lawyers", etc. The promise of right-wing populism is that neither the object/scene nor the attachment is compromised … a*s long as whatever is responsible for compromising the relation in the near-past is defeated and the sovereignty of 'the people' restored* (whether that be 'elites', 'liberal do-gooders', illegal immigrants', 'the EU, 'China', and so on). In other words, populism promises that the future has not been cancelled, the object of attachment *is still good;* there is no 'bad object', but only bad 'others' usurping and degrading the scene of attachment.

Populism is a politics of the return. The future politics of populism is

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a denial of the future, if by 'future' we mean the modernist time of openness and the new. This future is erased in an endless temporal loop whereby the good past becomes the hoped-for better future, with the promise that the immediate past will be negated and transcended. We could say, to develop this argument, that right-wing populism is a symptom of the "cancellation of the future" (Berardi, 2011) in a very straightforward way: because images of a different and better future are exhausted, what is left are lingering almost but not quite lost images of pasts, yoked to the available affective catalyst and empty signifier 'the people'. The only resources left to construct futures are the remnants of past presents kept just about alive in nostalgia, and structures of feeling such as postcolonial/postimperial melancholia and cruel optimism. We could go further and say right-wing populism is not simply symptomatic of the cancellation of the future, but another mechanism for that cancellation. For in articulating the future as the return of the past, in investing optimism in that return, the modernist future which animated so many progressive political movements is confirmed as lost.

There is clearly a lot to the diagnosis that the optimism of right-wing populism is of a return to a lost or threatened national pre-eminence in which the ebbing privileges of whiteness will be restored. If we accept it, we should note the cyclical rather than linear form of temporality right-wing populism is structured around. Whilst the political content and aims are completely different, we might place right-wing populism in the context of other ways in which the relation between past – present – future has recently been unsettled, rather than only debates about the cancellation or not of 'the future'. Recent progressive political movements also insist on the necessity of returning to the past, but in order to enable reckoning or reparation or redress for the violences that accumulated alongside and enabled the modernist promise of progress. Put simply, publics have sparked into being around the past in a way that renders the relation between past and present a matter and scene of public contestation. As well as the cancellation of the future, a second context for the emergence of right-wing populism would, then, be intensifying efforts to destabilize settled and invested pasts. During this uncertainty and the making of the past into a sphere of contestation, the promise of right-wing populism is not only of a return to the past but, more importantly, to restabilize the once hegemonic affect imbued meaning of increasingly publicly contested national pasts – as we saw in the Johnson and Trump speeches.

To summarize this argument, we could say that right-wing populism re-establishes an optimistic attachment to objects/scenes of nationalist feeling. By 'optimistic' we do not mean an attachment that necessarily feels good, although of course it may, particularly when connected to promises to restore dignity and recognition to those who feel their absence from 'elites'. Rather, and after Berlant (2011), we consider an optimistic attachment to be one where the object/scene promises something that is necessary, or the subject or group feels and thinks is necessary, for their continuation and/or their flourishing. As Berlant puts it, optimism involves a "… sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way" (Berlant (2011) 2). More precisely, right-wing populism makes previously fragile objects/scenes *unproblematic* in two ways (we use 'un-problematic' as the opposite of Berlant's 'problematic'). First, they counter any actual or perceived shaming or mocking of attachments, as expressed most intensely in the recent eruption of 'culture wars' and the backlash to Black Lives Matter. What right-wing populism makes available through the 'time loop' of a return which refuses the new futures a present reckoning might enable is a stable and positive relation to the object/scene. People can once again unambivalently attach to objects/scenes of past national pre-eminence and be recognized and valued by the populist politician for doing so. Second, right-wing populism promises that the conditions for the realization of the object/scene are *no longer compromised*. 'The people', the emptiness which enables right-wing populism to be available, becomes the means through which the good life fantasy can be realized. As faith in other

grounds for optimism wanes, 'the people' resurges as the route to a better future, made present through the excessiveness of right-wing populism.

This diagnosis is the inverse of Berlant's. Berlant (2011) tracks dramas of adjustment amid the *dissolution* of optimistic objects/scenes that held space for good life fantasies, many of which originated in the Fordist settlement. Theirs is a diagnosis of what happens to the forms of liberal optimism based on progressive betterment which were articulated through Fordist good life fantasies. Scenes/objects have become "problematic" because their conditions of possibility are "compromised." People's adjustment doesn't change the fact they are compromised. It is at best a slightly less desperate holding on. Perhaps the promise that right-wing populism offers is that *no adjustment is necessary*. Rather than their dissolution, right-wing populism makes available existing objects/scenes. It gathers and stabilizes them so they can once again hold space open for a series of conventional good life fantasies. We would hesitate before determining whether this optimism is *cruel* for those in the relation – in the specific sense that Berlant uses the phrase to articulate how "the very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible by the work of attachment in the first place" (Berlant, 2011: 25).[11] Perhaps we need to think of a variety of different optimisms, cruel and otherwise, that are entangled with right-wing populisms?[12] We could, instead, stress that the optimism of right-wing populism is 'cruel' to those who are determined to be outside of 'the people' – who must be reduced and devalued and, potentially, subject to material as well as symbolic violence if the better future is to return.

However, this emphasis on optimism as a relation or structure is only part of the story. At the heart of most populist claims is the promise of a break with the present and near past. Consider Trump's vision of the future of America in his January 2017 inauguration speech (Trump, 2017). Invoking an image of a dystopian present that featured "mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities" and "factories scattered like tombstones," Trump went on to promise that what has been lost will be brought back: "America will start winning again, winning like never before." Jobs, borders, wealth, and dreams will all be "brought back," a return to a better past. If Trump's vision enacts residual attachments to Fordism, Johnson's address immediately after his general election victory in December 2019 involves a similar attachment to the sovereign nation (Johnson, 2019). As with Trump, a break from the near past is necessary, mostly because of the actions of "politicians"

who have "squandered" time with "squabbles about Brexit." Leaving the European Union is the break from the present and near past that will result in "taking back control of our laws, borders, money, our trade, immigration system." From this break, after the resolution promised in the slogan 'Get Brexit Done' and amid the resurgence of a fantasy of national sovereignty around a supposedly lost 'control', a different future opens, one which yokes fantasies of sovereignty to a key element of the post-war settlement and national imaginary - the NHS, "a single beautiful idea"– mixed with a host of images of progress and world-besting. From policing and immigration to schools and green technology, "We'll do it."

The reasons for the necessity of the break vary, but what is common across Trump and Johnson's speeches is that even as they promise a return to mythical lost glory, they stress discontinuity with the present and recent past. Indeed, while Berlant focuses on the difficult work of enabling continuity in the objects/scenes of attachment in the midst of dissolution, critical work has often valued hope as an occasion of *discontinuity* (see Anderson et al., 2020). Likewise, right-wing populism promises a break after the reckoning with the 'elite', who are responsible for the damaged or compromised world: that something will end, that what has become 'normal' will not continue. It is after the 'break' that the good future, corresponding in part to the lost past of pre-eminence, will arise.

Populism's promised future is not quite the future of progress, the time of linear transparent betterment. Neither is it the knowable future, the rational, predictable and this programmable future. Unlike the future of progress, right-wing populist optimism is always fragile, always without guarantees, because of the actions of various actors who are external to and act against the empty signifier and affective catalyst 'the people'. Furthermore, the relation with the future cannot have the linearity of progress or prediction because there must always be disruptive discontinuity. Chronological time must be interrupted, a break must happen. Neither, though, is the future of right-wing populism the open future as advocated and practiced across the "freedom dreams" (Kelley, 2002) of radical groups, where the aim is to bring into being other, radically different worlds. The temporality of rupture, an interruption and disavowal of the present and near-past, is accompanied by a return to the lost but better past in the future, together with ready to hand images of a better future (often crouched in terms of infrastructure, reactivating the relation between infrastructure and modernity). In this sense, populist futures happen after the double cancellation of the future – where both the future as scene of progress and scene of novelty are no longer available. Rupture and return sustain the optimism which co-exists with the emptiness and excessiveness which are right-wing populism.

2. Concluding comments

Propositions are contestable. They open onto a changing present, temporarily holding something still in order to (re)orientate or disorientate attention, hopefully sparking disagreement, perhaps generating something new. They are always issued from a present, the boundaries of which are never given, as new tendencies and trajectories knit and fold past and future affective presents together. We were finishing a first draft of this paper and the three propositions in the strange days in late December 2020 and early January 2021 when Donald J Trump desperately clung to office after his election loss, a transitional period of intensified uncertainty preceded by feverish speculation about how and whether Trump would exit, and bookended by the mediated spectacle of insurrection in the Capitol. Whilst the events of January 6th, 2021 in the Capitol seem to have found their genre (indeed in this paper we have repeated the now dominant naming of it as an insurrection) at times the scenes from the Capitol hinted towards something stranger, something which resonated with our propositions. For a time, the events did not seem to quite fit with any one of the genres typically used to make sense of events. An attempted but always doomed insurrection, yes, but

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[11] Interestingly, when introducing cruel optimism, Berlant cites in a footnote Thomas Frank's (2004) 'What's the Matter with Kansas' as an example of cruel optimism (272, n2), indicating that the populist anti-elitist conservatism in the United States that Frank details revolves around a type of cruel optimism (especially as Frank details how fiscal conservatism harms economic interests). In the extensive application of the term cruel optimism to multiple groups and situations within the social sciences, the question of who judges that a relation is cruel has received little attention. This is not a simple matter, and raises questions of the position of the analyst, and the criterion upon which judgments or evaluations are made. Berlant (2011: 24) makes this clear in a rarely cited but vital passage: "One more thing: sometimes, the cruelty of an optimistic attachment is more easily perceived by an analyst who observes the costs of someone's or some group's attachment to x, since often persons and communities focus on some aspects of their relation to an object/world while disregarding others." 'More easily perceived' is doing a lot of work here. In short, who has the authority and on what grounds to determine a relation is 'cruel', and what happens if that judgment is not accepted or disputed by subjects/groups in an optimistic relation?.

[12] Berlant is ambivalent on the question of whether all optimisms are cruel, but settles on the position that some optimisms are crueller than others (Berlant, 2011: 24/25). This makes the cruelty or not of optimism the defining matter for distinguishing between forms of optimism. For us, as important is the relation with the future (and thus past and present) which different optimisms are organized around.

perhaps other things as well with other affects: tourist visit, protest, occupation, riot, looting, occasion for joyful social media sharing of selfies, media spectacle intensified through retweets and on some level enjoyed, and much more. Part of the strangeness of the event, no doubt a terrifying strangeness for many, was the scenes of excess which circulated afterwards: of violence and of calls for violence typical of insurrection, but mixed with placards pronouncing ever more outlandish conspiracy theories of baby eating and blood drinking, and featuring individuals dressed in outfits which seem to signify only their difference from normality, earning the event the moniker of "the cosplay coup" in Art Review (Gordon, 2021).

As we watched, we wondered and worried. Perhaps in this event we see what happens when the optimism of right-wing populism is threatened and an end, even if only temporary, looms for already violent fantasies (a more dramatic, dangerous, end than the 'fraying' or 'waning' of fantasies that Berlant (2011) diagnoses). The scenes at the Capitol may, of course, have been optimistic in the sense that protest and insurrection are orientated towards a future present to be brought about. Perhaps they were a dress rehearsal for a future election to come? But, as we have argued, the 'temporal loop' optimism of right-wing populism is constitutionally fragile – always menaced by the cast of characters who stand in antagonistic relation with a single, true 'people'. Perhaps the violence of the protests can be understood as a violent, but also tragic, response to the threatened ending of the 'temporal loop' which we have argued characterizes right-wing populism's affect structure. After Biden's victory, the past was not going to be returned to in a better future to come. Indeed, the threat to be stopped was that the forces responsible for a doomed present, for a betrayed world, would return, along with the promises of a multiracial liberalism. The desperate optimism of 'stopping the steal' is what happens when other optimisms rapidly disappear. And it is what happens when enemies who supposedly stand outside and against 'the people' are seen to steal a future that belongs, by right, to others. But the excessiveness of the event, its movement between genres, also reminds us of the *more* of populism's affective structure: the excessive gestures and statements and displays which introduce the feeling of agency, the affect of a kind of intensified personal sovereignty, into the realm of formal politics.

In this paper, we have proposed how right-wing populism works affectively. To be clear, right-wing populism is not somehow more affective than other political styles, even if all discourse on populism gives a role to affect. Nor does right-wing populism offer the elusive key to moving and mobilizing publics, even if the electoral success of populism has been alluring, fascinating even, for the left. Our aim in offering three propositions – that right-wing populism is *available*, *excessive*, and *optimistic* – has been to understand right-wing populism as a structure of feeling, an affect structure in Berlant's (2011) terms: a characteristic way in which affective investments and attachments are organized and become available to people as resources for making sense of themselves, others, and worlds. We have aimed, in short, to specify some of the affective-material conditions for the appeal of populism, whilst acknowledging that populisms happen and take hold in wider material-affective fields. Other formations – say the kinds of liberalism which resurge in a so called 'crisis of liberalism' or left formations post the 2007 financial crisis – will organize attachments and investments differently, albeit with overlaps and resonances. In the aftermath of the events in the Capitol, what might be the future of right-wing populism as an affect structure? The insurrection was a culmination that intensified the excess and optimism of right-wing populism into a space and mediated scenes of violence. While it failed to keep Trump in the White House in 2020, it did not prove to be an end to Trump and his supporters' hopes of continuation. As we write in late 2021, the events live on, serving as a warning of a future to come and sign of an unsettling present as claims are made that "Nine months after the storming of the Capitol, Trump is more popular with the G.O.P" and his "Big Lie is more widely believed"[13] With Republican leaders coalescing around Trump as their candidate for the 2024 election as early as October 2021, it no longer seems likely that right-wing populism, at least in the form of Trump and Trumpism, might shift to become a warning, consigned to the status of an exception, an aberration, tamped down by the return to 'normality' as embodied by Biden (and in the UK by Keir Starmer). For the 74,222,958 people who voted for Trump in 2020 (over 10 million more than in 2016), what will Trump and Trumpism become? Our analysis of the *available, optimistic and excessive* affective structure of right-wing populism leads us to hesitate before confidently proclaiming its future. We do not know what will happen to right-wing populism in the US and UK, particularly as the COVID-19 pandemic becomes the latest event in a non-linear sequence to intensify the question of what is ending and what is beginning as another impasse scrambles the relations between past and future. Just as uncertainty exists in the US context, so in the UK speculation abounds as to what Johnson's conservative government is and what might emerge once the emergency phase of pandemic response ends. Our orientation to right-wing populism's affect structure opens up different, if partially connected, questions of what ends and what begins in this impasse. Does 'the people' remain available to be invoked and, if so, how will it be summoned into being as an antagonistic front is constructed and populism is articulated with other projects, for example white supremacy or economic nationalism? Might the 'temporal loop' optimism of right-wing populism intensify as culture wars simmer and rage around the term 'woke', or will other types of optimism replace or coexist with it, or is optimism per se in crisis, as memories of betrayed past promises crowd out the future? And, finally, what becomes of the excess of right-wing populism? In the events at the US Capitol on January 6th, 2021, scenes of terror mingled with goofball poses, over-the-top get ups, and proud selfies. The excess of right-wing populism takes fun as one of its registers; rage and hate are others. How else might the excess of right-wing populism find its expression?

Declaration of competing interest

Acknowledgements

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[13] See Glasner, S. The Battle of January 6th has just begun', The New Yorker, 7.10.2021 https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-bidens-washington/the-battle-of-january-6th-has-just-begun?utm_campaign=falcon&mbid=social_twitter&utm_brand=tny&utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_social-type=owned.

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