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**Editors' Introduction:
Expressive Culture and
Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe**

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Abstract

This brief text is the editorial to the *JOMEC Journal* special issue on *Expressive Culture and Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. It situates the special issue within the existing body of literature on the intersections between the radical right and expressive culture. The editorial further outlines the main contribution of the special issue: the focus on hitherto largely ignored countries, and the more consistent focus on parties and organised politics. This includes taking into account the populist dimensions of the radical right's relation to artists and genres. The editorial also reflects on what the contributions, taken together, teach us about the differences and tensions between nationalist vanguard strategies typical of radical right activist subcultures and the populist dimensions of radical right party politics.

Contributor Notes

Benjamin De Cleen is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. His research is situated within discourse studies and focuses on political rhetoric and on the intersections between media, culture and politics. He has mainly worked on populist radical right rhetoric, and on the discourse-theoretical conceptualization of populism, conservatism, and nationalism.

Torgeir Uberg Nærland is a post-doctoral fellow at the Department of Information Science and Media Studies at the University of Bergen. His research mainly focuses on the political dimensions of expressive culture (music in particular) and how we may understand the role of aesthetics within political theory.

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The contributions in this special issue investigate the interactions between populist radical right political parties and various forms of expressive culture, with music as the most prominent case. The issue brings into focus the ways that expressive culture has been an instrument of populist radical right politics and of resistance to such politics, as well as an arena of political struggle between populist radical right parties and movements and their opponents.

The revival of the radical right – in a contemporary and often populist form – since the 1980s has attracted considerable academic attention. Although expressive culture has been a significant contributing force in the mobilisation for and against populist radical right politics, analyses of the relation between populist radical right political parties and expressive culture have amounted to only a fraction of the massive body of work on the populist radical right. Political science and sociology, especially in an earlier phase, have devoted attention to the electorate who vote for populist radical right parties, often explaining radical right electoral success in terms of macro socioeconomic and sociocultural processes whilst ignoring the agency of the populist radical right parties themselves (e.g. Betz and Immerfall 1998; Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Ignazi 1992). More recently, populist radical right (hereafter PRR) party programmes, party leadership and other ‘supply side’ factors have been considered much more extensively (e.g. Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2007), whilst discursive approaches have contributed significantly to knowledge about PRR rhetoric (e.g. Wodak et al. 2013). Yet the focus remains firmly on traditional political actors and forms of politics. Cultural studies and media and

communication studies, for their part, have studied PRR political communication as well as media coverage of PRR parties but have paid little attention to the connections between these parties and expressive culture. This is in line with a more general focus on the broader ideological-political aspects of expressive culture, rather than on the manifest intersections between expressive culture and politics proper.

This special issue aims to make a modest contribution to our understanding of the intersections of radical right politics and expressive culture in two main ways. Firstly, with the exception of Worley and Copsey’s article on Britain, the articles turn their attention to countries that have been largely ignored in academic work on the intersections between the radical right and expressive culture: Belgium (Flanders), Hungary, Norway and Portugal. Secondly, the issue looks closely at the intersections between expressive culture and radical right *parties* and *organised politics*. Existing work has looked principally at the role of expressive culture, mainly music, in radical right subcultures and activist groups (e.g. Brown 2004, 2011; Copsey and Richardson 2015; Cotter 1999; Futrell et al. 2006; Jipson 2014; Langebach and Raabe 2009; King and Leonard 2014; Shekhovtsov and Jackson 2012). These studies of white power and skinhead music scenes and other radical right subcultures have tended to focus on very important but extreme and relatively marginal subcultural forms of radical right expressive culture and activism. Whilst political parties have certainly not been absent from this work, the potential significance of expressive culture to their electoral politics and to their attempts to

appeal to broad groups of people have rarely been at the centre of attention.

Whereas populism has shifted to the centre of attention in much work on the radical right – to some extent even pushing the radical right dimension to the background – what is *specifically populist* about ‘populist’ radical right parties’ relations to expressive culture has received only scant attention (but see Gingrich 2002; De Cleen 2009, 2013; De Cleen and Carpentier 2010). For good reasons, analyses of radical right subcultures have strongly foregrounded radical ethnic nationalism. As most of the articles in this special issue show, radical ethnic nationalism, and not populism, is also at the ideological core of radical right politics’ engagement with forms of expressive culture beyond those typical of radical right subcultures. But the articles also make clear that if we want to grasp the connections between expressive culture and the professionally led, and sometimes very successful, contemporary radical right parties, we cannot limit ourselves to radical right subcultures or radical nationalism alone. As populism has become a crucial ingredient of the rhetoric of many radical right parties and a key to their electoral success and political impact, we need to consider the populist dimension as well.

In line with radical right parties’ differing degrees of populism, the collection of articles in this special issue indicate that populism is central to understanding certain parties’ connections to expressive culture, whilst for other parties it plays a far less important role. The articles also show how the engagement of radical right parties with expressive culture has been part and parcel of populist strategies aimed at a wide electorate *and* of more subcultural and vanguard strategies aimed at a core

of radical nationalist supporters. These populist and nationalist vanguard strategies are quite different. Indeed, the co-existence of both has caused tensions within radical right political parties. The coexistence of strategies has also caused tensions between parties aiming to acquire political legitimacy, on the one hand, and more ‘pure’ radical right movements and subcultures, on the other.

Expressive culture has been an important element of nationalist vanguard strategies, mainly because music and other cultural expressions have played crucial roles in radical right subcultures and in mobilising activists. This vanguard strategy has often gone hand in hand with a resistance to mainstream culture and often also with an orientation towards aggressive and disruptive aesthetics that alienate broad audiences. Many radical right parties have been closely connected to such radical right subcultures; but, as the articles in this special issue make clear, the populist strategies of radical right parties have also included (more or less successful) attempts to associate with the ‘popular’ culture that appeals to ‘ordinary’ people as well as rejections of certain forms of culture as ‘elitist’.

Expressive culture has indeed also – and in many European countries *mainly* – been mobilised *against* the radical right. The most famous and widely analysed cultural mobilisation against radical right politics has probably been the Rock Against Racism concerts. Rock Against Racism, like other cultural mobilisations against the radical right, was very much part of a context of political struggle *over* expressive culture, and especially over music subcultures and genres such as punk and Oi. Several articles in this issue discuss cultural mobilisations against the

radical right and struggles over certain genres between the radical right and its political opponents. These anti-radical right mobilisations, in turn, have been met by often strongly populist reactions from the part of populist radical right parties.

Throughout, it becomes clear how the cultural politics of and against the radical right draw on genre and other aesthetic dimensions of culture, as well as on the (assumed) audiences of particular genres and forms of culture. For example, alternative genres have been connected to the countercultural, subcultural and radical vanguard aspects of radical right politics. Aggressive music styles have been associated with militant radical right politics (and with virulent and sometimes extreme left reactions to such politics). On the other hand, the radical right *parties'* attempts to associate themselves with more popular genres such as schlager music and lowbrow pop music, and their resistance to for example contemporary art and literature, have been more connected to their populist claim to speak for 'the ordinary people'.

The mediated public sphere has a key function both as channel for the aesthetic articulation of PRR politics and resistance to such politics, and as a site for the struggle over the political meaning of specific music, genres and artists. Throughout Europe we have seen widely discussed and mediatized controversies over radical right cultural performances, such as Blood and Honour concerts but also popular artists' performances in support of PRR parties. Media have also covered the fierce radical right criticisms of certain artists, with the Austrian FPÖ's campaign against Elfriede Jelinek and other progressive artists as one of the best-known

examples (see Tieber 1996). And media also covered artists' and politicians' reactions to these radical right criticisms, which often accused the radical right of not respecting artistic freedom and freedom of speech.

Whilst also attending to other forms of expressive culture, this special issue primarily focuses on music. The contributions of this special issue make evident that musical aesthetics and genres may become integral to political action, both as political expression and as the object for political struggle. There is a vast and diverse body of research and theory that in various ways attends to the intersections between music and politics. In the broadest sense this intersection has been studied in terms of music's capacity to convey ideology (Frith 1998; Adorno 1973; Attali 1985; Street 2012), and as a site of ideological struggle and resistance (Garofalo 1992; Frith 1983) – including the role of music in various subcultures (Hebdige 1979). Furthermore, music has been studied in terms of its role in social, political, and not least nationalist, movements (Negus 1996; Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Peddie, 2005; Cvorovic 2012). More recently the role of music in political change and action has been explored in terms of its role within public sphere processes (Gripsrud 2009; Nærland 2014, 2015), and as a resource for (cultural) citizenship and political engagement (Inthorn et al. 2012).

This special issue, however, attends specifically to the various ways in which music may become significant to radical right parties and organizations. The contributions in this collection span the role of music in loosely organized and extreme subcultural organizations such as the British Blood and Honour, over populist radical right parties such as the

Belgian Vlaams Belang's connections to popular culture, to the intersections between 'light' versions of right wing populism such as the (currently governing) Norwegian Progress Party and hip hop music. It is thus a special issue that explores how music may intersect with organized radical right politics in both the margins and the mainstream of political life. The articles show the different degrees of connection between radical right politics, radical right subcultures and the mainstream cultural field in different European countries, the artistic resistance to populist radical right parties and movements, as well as the ways in which populist radical right parties have dealt with the criticism aimed at them by artists.

The issue kicks off with an article on the rather intense connections between Hungarian radical right political organisations and music. Áron Szele's 'Nemzeti Rock: the Radical Right and Music in Contemporary Hungary' discusses how Nemzeti Rock (National Rock) has served as an effective means of mobilisation for the populist radical right party Jobbik. He shows how in the period since 2005 part of the radical right music scene became more closely connected to radical right party politics whilst also becoming more mainstream. This mainstreaming has both a cultural and a political dimension. Nemzeti Rock's mainly hard rock, metal and groove-inspired music has a broader appeal than the more raw punk and Oi of much other and earlier radical right bands. Its somewhat more moderate lyrics, with their focus on national mythology, are more palatable and attractive to a wider audience than some other bands' outright racist and white power ideology. Szele shows how Nemzeti Rock lyrics and visuals express the main tropes and ideological themes

of the radical right: nativism, heroic masculinity, and populism. This populist dimension, he argues, links up in intricate and sometimes contradictory ways with the more elitist and counter-cultural dimensions of the radical right music scene.

Matthew Worley and Nigel Copsey's contribution 'White Youth: The Far Right, Punk and British Youth Culture, 1977–87' offers a rich historical account of the evolving relationship between British radical right organisations and British youth culture, with punk music playing a central role. This article brings to attention an important aspect of how music, and youth culture in general, may become entwined with radical right political agendas. Through the example of punk it elucidates how radical right organisations may seek to appropriate and subvert existing youth culture for their own political ends. The authors show how punk music, style and iconography became a means for the articulation of radical right politics. Yet at the same time punk also functioned as a symbolic site for political contestation against the radical right, thus becoming the *object* of political struggle, and a genre that eventually diffused into subgenres of radically divergent political leanings. Worley and Copsey's study assesses the efforts of extremist organisations to adopt or utilise punk as a means of recruitment and communication in light of the shifting cultural and political influences across the radical right, and further situates the relationship between the radical right and punk within British socio-cultural history. Drawing the lines up until the present, this study also highlights how expressive youth culture has hardly any relevance to more mainstream populist right wing political parties such as the UK Independence Party.

Riccardo Marchi and José Pedro Zúquete's contribution 'The Other Side of Protest Music: the Extreme Right and Skinhead Culture in Democratic Portugal (1974-2015)' historically charts the evolving relationship – or rather, the absence thereof – between the skinhead punk movement and radical nationalist party formations in Portugal. Situating this relationship in the recent cultural and political history of Portugal, the authors show that extreme right wing punk thrived only as a marginal subcultural phenomenon. More so than in the UK, attempts to fuse skinhead/punk culture with organised radical nationalist politics were ephemeral and had no long lasting effects. A significant reason for the absences of such intersections between music and politics, the authors argue, was the poor and unoriginal quality of the music itself and the lack of a fertile receptive climate. Compared to other European countries, the authors show, Portugal had a poorly developed alternative music scene in general and right wing music scene in particular. As a consequence the Portuguese right wing punk culture found more leverage outside Portugal and as part of the pan-European skinhead movement.

Benjamin De Cleen's 'The Party of the People versus the Cultural Elite: Populism and Nationalism in Flemish Radical Right Rhetoric about Artists' discusses the different roles populism and nationalism play in the Vlaams Belang's (VB) relation to expressive culture. De Cleen argues that radical and exclusionary nationalism is the ideological core of the VB's views on culture and of its relationships with artists. Populism, for its part, is a strategy the party uses to position itself as the political representative of the people, to present its nationalist demands as the

will of the people, as well as to dismiss opposition to the party and its radical exclusionary nationalist ideology as elitist. De Cleen argues that populism has been especially powerful as a means to dismiss the artistic opposition to the VB's radical nationalism. The VB has reduced artistic resistance to the VB and its ideology to support of the political elite. Moreover, it has presented artists themselves as an elite that is completely out of touch with the ordinary people who suffer from ethnic-cultural diversity and from the existence of the Belgian state. The VB's nationalist-populist rhetoric about expressive culture has thus contributed to the construction of the antagonism that is central to its politics: the anti-Flemish and multiculturalist political, cultural, media, and intellectual elite *versus* the people and the radical exclusionary Flemish nationalist VB as the party of the people.

The final contribution by Torgeir Uberg Nærland, 'Right-wing Populism and Hip Hop Music in Norway', explores the intersections between Norwegian hip hop and the right wing populist Progress Party (the FRP). The article brings into attention how the relationship between the hip hop genre in Norway and the FRP has been, and still is, characterised by mutual antagonism. It shows how this antagonism unfolds and is energised in the broader public sphere, thus giving the antagonism a wider significance. The article situates the antagonistic relationship within the wider socio-cultural and political context of Norway and considers it in light of the generic and aesthetic practices of hip hop music. The article shows that the hip hop scene in Norway is informed by leftist sensibilities and that the FRP constitute a routine target in the lyrical universe of hip hop. Like De Cleen's contribution, the article elucidates how expressive culture

becomes a key arena for populist mobilisations of people-elite narratives. It shows how hip hop music in Norway integrates into the more general and enduring contestation of the ideological balance on the cultural field in Norway, and how hip hop artists' criticism of the FRP has been used by the FRP to support its claim that it is the victim of the (left wing biased) cultural field and established media.

Individually and taken together, the contributions in this special issue reveal the complexity of the intersections between populist radical right politics and expressive culture. The articles show how expressive culture has served as a tool for radical right politics, how it has been used in the struggle against the radical right, and how this has

sometimes resulted in a struggle over certain forms of expressive culture. They reflect on the different and sometimes contradictory ways in which expressive culture has played a role in radical right subcultural strategies as well as in the radical right's populist party politics. In so doing, the articles show how the relevance of expressive culture to the radical right is not limited to white power music and other spectacular forms of radical right expressive culture but also includes what look like more mundane connections to popular artists and genres. Moreover, the articles indicate that in some cases the rejection of certain artists and genres as elitist is as significant to radical right parties' populist strategies as are its positive associations with expressive culture.

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