

# The symbolic politics of populism reflects the class alliances it attempts to assemble



[Linus Westheuser](#) links the study of populism as a stylistic repertoire with Bourdieu's class analysis. This repertoire, which draws on symbols of 'the popular' produced in non-political fields like food and leisure, is situated in the struggle over the classification of groups.

'Nigel Farage only drinks beer to be seen with it', the *Daily Star* reported in 2019, [quoting a Brexit Party source](#). Behind closed doors, the former party leader actually 'prefers Cava'. A spokesman of the party was quick to deny this allegation: 'Nigel certainly likes a glass of wine, [...] however, his love of an English pint of bitter has stood the test of time.' Why was the question of Farage's choice of drink newsworthy and serious enough for his party to set straight? Both the newspaper and the anonymous source knew that the pint had been a crucial prop to Farage's performance as a 'man of the people'. His taste for Spanish prosecco, by contrast, was a reminder that Farage had previously been a City trader and continues to maintain strong connections to networks of right-wing billionaires. 'Farage may be a prosperous, public-school educated MEP', [writes the BBC](#), 'but his language, style and character were shaped to appeal to working-class blokes and middle-class Eurosceptics'.

In my own [research](#) I argue that by paying attention to populist performances we can understand a crucial dynamic of contemporary class politics, which Bourdieu would call 'symbolic class struggle'. Populist appeals do not only rely on political anti-elitism, but also highlight a cultural alienation of ruling elites from 'the people'. The latter is mobilised through a sense of 'the popular' attached to seemingly mundane practices and objects, like the pint or regional accents, that function as culturalised metaphors for class relations. The context-dependent and relatively open nature of these metaphors makes them well-suited for building [cross-class coalitions](#) in demobilised and 'opaque' class societies. In the case of the populist right, 'the popular' takes on a double meaning as both the distinction of an economic middle-class fraction against its counterpart in the cultural middle class, and as a defiance of symbolic violence on the part of workers. Underneath the veneer of the unitary 'people', populist performances cater to the distinct self-understandings and expressive needs of heterogeneous groups crucially defined by their position in the class structure.

This perspective builds on the so-called [sociocultural or performative approach to populism](#) and extends it into a wider relational perspective on the symbolic mobilisation of social bases. The [sociocultural approach](#) has reconstructed typical features of the repertoire at play in populist performances. One of the most important findings was [the observation](#) that populist aesthetics dramatise the distinction between 'high' and 'low' habitus forms, where the 'low' describes performances of a coarse, uninhibited, and 'popular' kind, associated with informality, physical proximity, and being 'from here'.

The 'high', in turn, describes a well-behaved, polished, learned, worldly, and cosmopolitan habitus. In terms of political culture, the 'high' and 'low' poles correspond to proceduralistic and personalistic political styles. This distinction [lies perpendicular](#) to the left-right axis, with populists found both on the 'low right' and the 'low left'. Through self-assured breaches of institutional protocol, public swearing, colloquialisms, [displays of untamed emotion](#), or the conspicuous consumption of lowbrow food, or leisure activities like wrestling, populists 'flaunt the low' as a direct repudiation of the 'sociocultural high' lionized by anti-populists of the establishment:

[\[Witness\] the visceral distaste](#) those from the anti-populist high in the United States have for Donald Trump's taste for McDonald's, KFC and Diet Coke, and the media attention these tastes have garnered. This distaste has little to do with ideology, but rather, codes of what is 'appropriate' in sociocultural terms in the US: the implication, here, being that Trump's – and his followers' – tastes are vulgar, inappropriate and childish. Their 'lowness' marks them as populist, against a far more refined and proper anti-populist high.

It is immediately palpable that this dynamic indexes a sense of social hierarchy, status, and distinction. But the exact link between populist cultural performances and positions in social structure is complicated and has remained understudied. In which sense should we understand the 'flaunting of the low' as a class appeal?

I theorise one possible way of answering this question (with empirical applications to follow). It is based on Bourdieu's insight that cultural practices function as markers of social position, or put more technically, that there is a homology of the space of lifestyles structured by status and [the vertical and horizontal class differentiation of the social space](#). This primacy of the social space is why we should continue to speak about *class* rather than status politics, even though signifiers of the 'high' and 'low' most immediately reflect distinctions of the status order. As, among a host of studies, Koen Damhuis' brilliant [new book](#) shows, voting for the populist radical right is the result of [distinct trajectories](#) of radical conservative elites, anti-redistributionist small owners, and rural economic middle-class fractions, as well as declassed segments of the working class.

Reflecting this heterogeneous coalition, right-wing populist performances demarcate 'the popular' both against the cultivation, worldly 'openness', and reflexivity claimed by the cultural fraction of the middle class, and against the 'high' rules of propriety of the ruling class. This offers the 'right' wing of the middle class a swipe against their education-based 'left' counterparts, while also affording a form of symbolic revenge against 'those above' on behalf of a working class effectively [excluded from politics](#). Citing [Walter Benjamin's observation](#) of fascism 'giving [the] masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves', this type of performance might be discounted as a 'merely symbolic' distraction from economic interests. Against this, Bourdieu cautions us to understand the devaluation of peripheral and working-class lives, forms of speech, styles, appearances, etc. as an equally real dimension of domination as property, wages, and workplace control.

Conditioned by its potential class bases, the populist left conversely seeks to develop a culture of 'the popular' resonant with the self-understandings of workers and left-leaning cultural middle-class members. Such an attempt could be seen in [a central speech](#) of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's 2017 presidential run in which he demarcated his followers from 'the extreme market, this type of black magic that transforms suffering [...] into gold and silver', and addressed them as 'the central people, who aspire to live off their work, their inventions, their poems, their taste for loving the others'. As even in France hardly anyone can hope to live off their poems, this cultural reference, as well as 'inventions' and 'the love of others' are to be read as metaphors for the cultural, social, and technical professionals Mélenchon sought to unite with a working class following through a common demarcation from economic elites.

The symbolic politics of populist performances should be interpreted as reflecting the class alliances they attempt to build. The metaphorical enactment of 'the popular' as the '[authoritative core of peoplehood](#)' unites idealised self-understandings of populations in specific socio-structural locations. In this way, populist projects also [seek to impose specific visions](#) of society and its relevant cleavages. These visions should be seen as political artefacts, and their symbolic production and conditions of resonance among [different groups](#) should be analysed. This allows us to understand populist performances as one specific dimension of symbolic struggles in societies where class has been culturally and politically disarticulated but continues to structure social relations.

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## About the Author



**Linus Westheuser** is a PhD student at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence, Italy.

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