TITLE OF SPECIAL SECTION: Right-wing populism and education: interrogating politics, policy and pedagogic resistance.

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Right-wing populism and education: introduction to the special section

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Abstract: This introduction offers an overview of the concept of populism, the debates around its definitions and its relationship with democracy, the significance of attending to populist politics in the context of education, the political contexts in which authors have engaged with education and populist politics in the United Kingdom, Brazil and Israel, and the ways in which they understand populist shifts in education. Detailing the two main conceptions of populism used by authors in the special section, namely, populism as ideology and populism as political logic, we discuss how authors understand the construction of 'the people' and 'the elite', and the implications of the 'antagonism' between them in each case. Dividing the nine papers in the special section into three groups, we look at the ways in which rightwing populism has sought to (re)shape divisions based on race, religion, nationalities among other things; how political and pedagogic practices are being (re)imagined to counter these divisions and populist moves; and the stakes of bringing the question of populism into education. We show how this special section has brought together different conversations and disciplinary perspectives on right wing shifts in education, challenges to these and a potential way forward. Most importantly, we invite readers to think through the shifting role of education in democracy as well as the divisions and hierarchies that are entailed in institutionalised education.

Keywords: populism, democracy, education, pedagogy.

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In this introduction to the special section we offer an overview of the concept of populism, the debates around its definitions and relationship with democracy, the main conceptions upon which contributions to this section draw and what is at stake in studying populism in the context of education. We then lay out, in brief, the political contexts in which authors have engaged with education and populist politics in the United Kingdom, Brazil and Israel, ending with a summary of the way the rise of right-wing populist discourses have sought to shape education globally. In the following three sections we discuss the nine papers that form this special section on populism and education. The first of these sections looks at the ways in which rightwing populism seeks to (re)shape divisions based on race, religion, nationalities among other things. The succeeding section focuses on the ways in which political and pedagogic practices have been (re)imagined to counter these divisions and populist moves. We end with a discussion of Edda Sant and Anthony

Brown's paper in this special section and the stakes of bringing the question of populism into education. The introduction shows how this special section has brought together different conversations about right wing shifts in education, challenges to these and a potential way forward.

According to Katsembekis (2017, p. 203) the global ''populist surge' has brought renewed intensity to the debate around the crisis of democracy itself and the capacity of existing institutions to express and empower citizens, upholding democracy's promise for popular sovereignty'. This special section is an attempt to think through the evolving relationship between education and democracy via the notion and narratives of populism. While debates about what populism actually is – discourse, strategy, political logic, ideology, or political style – continue, there is agreement about what is at stake in studying populism: its relationship with democracy (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2016; Katsambekis, 2017). There is also agreement that populism fundamentally entails the construction of 'the people', of 'the elite' and of an antagonism between the two. The notion of 'the people' as 'a collective subject' is as old as modern democracies and represents one of its two tenets: popular will (the other being equality). According to Mouffe (2018) what distinguishes right-wing populism especially in contemporary liberal democracies, is a struggle over the construction of 'the people' that seeks to uphold the people's will at the cost of the liberal aspect of these democracies. However, as we shortly discuss, if there is considerable debate around defining populism, there is also a debate around its implications for democracy.

Drawing upon examples from the United Kingdom, Israel and Brazil, contributions to this special section show how populist leaders and programmes have sought to shape policy and practice in education as well as how these moves have been challenged. Some of the papers also offer examples of pedagogic approaches that may help teachers and young people in school and higher education challenge right-wing populism. Despite our attempts to bring in examples from a wider range of national contexts as well as to discuss left-wing populism, the special issue ended up being limited to these three contexts and a focus on right-wing populism. In engaging with right-wing populism in the context of education, this set of papers also questions afresh assumptions about the nature and character of liberal education as well the complicity of increasingly neoliberalised education in fostering unequal and undemocratic relations and practices. Thus, rather than assuming a necessarily 'emancipatory' role for education, the special issue foregrounds the contentious role and place of education in democracies and the limitations and possibilities for democratisation in and through education.

Some of the debates that contributions to the special issue engage with are not new. Scholarship in the fields of critical pedagogy, and citizenship education (e.g., Apple, 1993; Freire, 1996 Dewey, 2006; Darder et al., 2009; Biesta, 2011; Giroux, 2011; Simons & Masschelein, 2010; Freidrich et al., 2010; Reid et al., 2010; Alexander et al., 2012; de Oliviera Andreotti et al., 2012) and feminist and anti-race engagements with schooling have long grappled with the relationship between education and democracy, and the question of equality in and through liberal education (e.g., Mirza, 1992; Stromquist, 2001; Abu-Saad, 2004; Dillabough and Arnot, 2004; Taylor, Gillborn and Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lipman, 2011; hooks, 2014; Luke and Gore, 2014). The current special section (re)engages with these debates and questions via narratives and realities of the current populist moment across national contexts using a range of disciplinary perspectives. While this disciplinary diversity is a strength of this special section, it also makes it impossible to locate the special section in any one body of literature in terms of the concerns, theories or methodologies. We hope this special section will open up a conversation on how existing theoretical and methodological

tools can be combined with the lens of 'populism' to interrogate the role of education in creating this populist moment and the possibilities it may hold in expanding democratic values.

Reflecting on past and present contestations around the definition, meaning and implications of populism, Moffitt (2016, p. 11) rejects the view that populism has lost analytical relevance. Instead, he argues that contestation is inevitable with 'attempts to bridge the different literatures on populism'. Pointing to the increasing tendency, not only among academics but also politicians and journalists, to turn to the term to describe aspects of present-day politics, Moffitt (ibid) argues that 'there is something important, promising and resonant about the concept.' In the literature produced before the 1990s, populism was defined variously, based on its 'ideological core', its 'social base' and its 'forms of organisation'; there were also 'colonialist' perspectives that sought to make sense of dictatorships and 'the disillusioned intellectual' in 'Third World' contexts (ibid, p. 13-14). In order to move beyond this conceptual divergence that rendered the notion of populism analytically 'unwieldy', a conference was organised on populism at the London School of Economics in 1967. However, the conference and the subsequent volume, *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* edited by Ionescu and Gellner (1969), also produced largely descriptive accounts that did not result in greater 'conceptual specificity' (ibid, p. 14).

Impetus for the next wave of scholarship on populism came from political shifts in western Europe and Latin America in the 1980s-1990s. Four kinds of approaches to populism can be identified as characterising this contemporary scholarship; these approaches variously see populism 'as ideology, strategy, discourse and political lo[gic]' (Moffitt, 2011, p. 17). Contributions to this special section draw upon two of these approaches, viewing populism as (1) ideology, or as (2) political logic. While there are important differences between these two perspectives on populism, there is agreement that populism rests on an 'opposition' between 'the people' and 'the elite'. The notion of antagonism is fundamental to populism irrespective of its political nature, i.e., across left-wing and right-wing populist discourses, though the two may respectively construct the people and the elite in different ways (Kaltwasser, 2012; Katsambekis, 2017).

Cas Mudde, arguably, the most well-known advocate of the ideological approach (cf. Mudde, 2010; 2016; Moffitt, 2016), views populism as a 'thin-centred ideology, that is, as a belief system of limited range' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 1669). This is also referred to as an "ideational approach":

> a set of ideas that not only depicts society as divided between 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' but also claims that politics is about respecting popular sovereignty at any cost. (ibid)

The other prominent view upon which some of the authors in this issue build, draws upon Laclau's (2005) work and views populism as political logic, that is:

> 'an articulatory pattern - a *formal reason* or *logic* whose elements (grievances, demands, identities, etc.) can have as their source any number of ideologies.' (De Cleen et al., 2018, p. 652; emphasis in original)

While both views centre on the opposition between the people and the elite, they differ in their conceptions of democracy and consequently, their view of the implications of populism for democracy (Kaltwasser, 2012; Moffitt, 2016). The proponents of populism as a political logic work

within a radical understanding of democracy (Mouffe, 2000; Laclau 2005). In this view populism flags a crisis of representation and a possibility for 'incorporation' (Katsambekis, 2017) thus, acting, ultimately, as a 'corrective' for democracy (Mouffe, 2018). The proponents of populism as ideology, which is currently the most prominent perspective, work within a liberal understanding of democracy, and view populism as a threat to the liberal aspect of contemporary democracies (Kaltwasser, 2012; Moffitt, 2016; Katsambekis, 2017). Lastly, there is the body of literature that is more 'equivocal' about the relationship between populism and democracy (Moffitt, 2016). This perspective derives from a 'minimal' understanding of democracy and argues that populism has different effects on different kinds of democracies (Kaltwasser, 2012; Moffitt, 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018). Irrespective of whether they see it as a 'threat' or a 'corrective' for democracy, scholars working with both radical and liberal understandings of democracy understand populism to indicate a crisis in democracies, albeit of different natures (Mudde, 2016; Katsambekis, 2017; Mouffe, 2018; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018).

Political backdrop of current populist moment in the UK, Israel and Brazil

Building on her and Laclau's earlier work on radical democracy, hegemony and populism (Mouffe, 2000; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 2005), Mouffe (2018) traces the rise of right-wing populism in the liberal democracies of the United Kingdom and western Europe back to 'the neoliberal hegemonic formation' that 'replaced the social-democratic Keynesian welfare state'. She argues that economic liberalism and a free-market ideology have undermined the two central tenets of democracy: equality and popular sovereignty. Neoliberal reforms introduced under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the UK resulted in the intensification of economic disparities. These inequalities worsened with the financialization of the economy which led to rising unemployment and decreasing benefits and security, adversely affecting the working class. Thatcherism combined a traditional conservative agenda with neoliberal economics which put paid to the idea of equality as a guiding principle for policymaking. New Labour under Tony Blair continued to implement and extend Thatcher's programme of state withdrawal, fiscal austerity and privatisation. Thus, over the last three decades, oppositional politics has been replaced by a consensual and centrist agenda supported by both Labour (left) and Conservative (right) parties in the UK.

As inequalities have continued to rise, democracy has increasingly been reduced to the exercise of free elections without different parties offering meaningfully different alternatives; and people find mainstream leaders and their programmes being more responsive to the interests of international trade bodies than to that of voters (Mudde, 2016; Katsambekis, 2017; Mouffe, 2018). Successive leaders' slogan of 'there is no alternative' to neoliberalism and globalisation further added to people's lack of faith in existing institutions and mechanisms. This meant that the second 'pillar' of democracy – popular sovereignty – also began to disintegrate as large sections of the society in the UK and Europe struggled to find a party which represented their interests. Mouffe diagnoses this crisis of representation facing liberal democracies as the 'elimination' of 'agonistic spaces where different projects of society could confront each other', i.e., where the tensions between political liberalism and democracy which constitute liberal democracies, could play out.

> 'The democratic logic of constructing a people and defending egalitarian practices is necessary to define a demos and to subvert the tendency of liberal discourse to abstract universalism. But its articulation with liberal logic allows us to challenge the forms of

exclusion that are inherent in the political practices of determining the people that will govern.' (Mouffe, 2018, p. 15)

The political vacuum created due to the elimination of this 'tension' between liberalism and democracy was appropriated in many of these democracies by right-wing parties; for example, Marie Le Pen's Front National in France, Viktor Orban's Fidesz in Hungary, and the United Kingdom Independence Party in the UK (Mudde, 2016; Katsambekis, 2017). As Mouffe (2018) put it, these leaders promised to 'give back to 'the people' the voice that they had been deprived of by the elites.' These leaders and parties promised to challenge the diktats of international bodies like the European Union and the International Monetary Fund, and offer alternatives to the Washington consensus. They offered an exclusionary right wing populist narrative which sought to construct 'the people' on the basis of nationality, race, or ethnicity, leaving out groups like immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities. Despite the rhetoric of giving people back their voice and the consequent political success these leaders did not really roll back neoliberal programmes in their countries, instead, seeking to play on cultural anxieties and construct 'divisions' in 'cultural and ethnic terms' (Katsambekis, 2017, p. 206).

In the aftermath of the global recession of 2008, leftwing populists have also seen substantial success, for example, Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, and earlier, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (Mudde, 2016; Katsembekis, 2017; Mouffe, 2018). If right-wing populism has sought to construct 'the people' based on cultural anxieties emerging in globalisation and immigration, left-wing populist narratives have done so based on economic anxieties and disparities (Kaltwasser, 2012; Katsambekis, 2017). Whilst left-wing populism works with the people vs. elite or establishment dyad, right-wing populism has a triadic strategy whereby they champion the people against the elite who they accuse of coddling the 'non-people' such as immigrants, religious minorities like Muslims, and even liberals and leftists (Judis, 2016).

At the same time, not all cases of populism fit neatly into these categories of left-wing and right-wing populism, for example, the Five Star movement, or the M5S led by Beppe Grillo in Italy (Katsambekis, 2017). Notably both, the 'ideology' and 'political logic' views of populism, scholars stress its 'impure' form; that is, they recognise it as operating alongside a number of other 'host' ideologies (Mudde, 2007; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018) or as being 'articulated' with 'other elements' like authoritarianism or class politics (De Cleen et al., 2018). Therefore, while all three national-political contexts discussed in this special section can be understood as populist, the construction of 'the people' and 'the elite' and what is at stake in the confrontation between them – that is, the ramifications of this confrontation for that particular democracy – varies with socio-political context.

Brazil is an interesting case, which has seen a dramatic shift in electoral preference from left-wing populism under Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, to right-wing populism in 2018 under Jair Bolsonaro. Brazil was under a dictatorship between 1964 and 1984 which ushered in a period of 'growth' based on extraction and exploitation, which left it 'vulnerable to the flow of international commerce and the dictates of international bankers.' (Lewis 2001) These exploitative economic shifts and the IMF-imposed structural adjustment led to the emergence of multiple people's movements in the 1980s and 1990s creating political space for left-wing populist movements across Latin America. The early 2000s saw leaders like Evo Morales in Bolivia, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil bring in the 'pink tide' (Silva 2019) which resulted

in programmes to reduce poverty and inequalities and a challenge to the global order led by the United States. However, Brazil's economic recession in 2015-16 allowed right-wing leaders and parties to successfully mobilise large sections of the population around their socially conservative agendas. Bolsonaro is a former army captain who vowed to 'liberate' his country from socialism. Attacking the Left for encouraging crime and corruption, he has also supported Brazil's long dictatorships (Phillips, 2019), opposed LGBTQ+ rights and publicly encouraged 'Catholic' values (McNamara, 2019). Bolsonaro's government views the country's university system as a hub of cultural Marxism and of critical thinking, which constantly counters the government's Christian, far-right, anti-LGBTQ rhetoric (Perez, 2019). Beginning with Philosophy and Sociology programmes, his government has cut funding for all federal universities and public education, more generally, disproportionately affecting the poor and Black students.

The third context discussed by authors in this issue is that of Israel. It has been argued that Israel's populism deserves attention because of its distinctive features (Agbaria and Silberberg, *this issue*; Levi and Agmon, 2020). Unlike the other cases of populism identified in contemporary literature, Israeli populism falls neither in the category of economic anxiety, nor in that of cultural anxiety, deriving instead from anxieties around national security. Further, the longevity of Isreal's populist regime and its 'tightening relationship' with other similar regimes, namely, Bolsonaro's Brazil, Modi's India as well as central European populist leaders also make it a globally significant case (Levi and Agmon, 2020). It has been argued that rightwing populism in Israel emerged as a result of the radicalisation of the Israeli right which experienced a 'crisis and transformation' in the aftermath of the 'Oslo Accords' of 1993 and 1995 (Filc and Lebel, 2005; cf. Filc, 2018; Ilouz, 2014). Israel's biggest political party, the Likud – National Liberal Movement, has also become increasingly radicalized over the last two decades as part of this trend and has 'rejec[ted] the ideas of liberty and equality' in recent years (Filc, 2018). More recent scholarship also points out that in addition to 'the Arab citizens of Israel and African asylum seekers', rightwing populist constructions of 'the people' have also systematically excluded and 'delegitimised' the 'Jewish left' (Levi and Agmon, 2020, p. 2).

It is in these historically specific national-political contexts of the UK, Brazil and Israel that the papers in this section undertake an examination of how the ground of education has been understood and reshaped through populist narratives, and programmes. Even though scholars of the radical right have been analysing and explaining its upsurge globally for the last several years, this special section comes at a peculiar time in history- both for democratic institutions and for educational institutions. The global democratic dissonance has become even more evident amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and the wide-ranging global BLM protests in response to the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, USA. On one hand the racial fault lines in our democratic and educational institutions have been laid bare (again!) leading to grassroots movements for change including calls for decolonization of education. On the other hand, the pandemic has further strengthened state surveillance involving the monitoring, collecting, and/or processing of personal data by governments. Commentators have observed that the pandemic has created forms of 'acceptable authoritarianism' leading to the roll back of civic liberties (Bloomfield, 2020). For Monahan (2010, p. 92) such surveillance systems are against democratic governance because of differential treatment and automated control of populations, 'functions which both produce marginal identities and resist democratic participation or oversight.' For the education sector, this has led to the enactment of particular forms of securitization through the construction of face-to-face teaching as a threat to the community (Murphy, 2020) leading to mass exodus towards flexible/

online teaching and learning. When interrogated critically, these flexible modes of teaching and learning can be seen to produce subjectivities in-sync with ongoing neo-liberalisation of education (Houlden and Veletsianos, 2020). Recent events in the UK, such as students 'occupying' University of Manchester's buildings in a protest against 'extremely high' rents and lack of support during the coronavirus pandemic (BBC, 2020) expose some of the fault lines emerging within the neoliberal higher education in the UK. These fault lines are likely to shape the post-pandemic political context in which right-wing populism will be understood and enacted.

Education as (contested) ground for populist programmes

Papers in the special section discuss shifts in policy and political discourses as well as pedagogic practice and education policies, thus, unpacking the ways in which populist rhetoric has driven and been driven by these shifts. Authors engage with different aspects of education, including texts, practices and policy initiatives, and a range of sites of educational discourse and change. They analyse the meaning and purpose of education, teachers' social media discourse, pedagogic experiments, politicians' speech and policy texts, race and ethnicity politics in state policy and educational practice, as well as curricular texts. We begin with a look at the four papers (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood; Watson; Craske; Agbaria and Silberberg; Alves, Segatto and Pineda) that draw out how political leaders and politics of policymaking have sought to further right-wing populist programmes in and through education. An important contribution of these four papers is also that they demonstrate the complicity of the state in these constructions of the people *versus* the elite. We then turn our attention to the three papers that challenge such efforts through critical engagement with the assumptions and institutions of liberal education, experiments in resistance through pedagogic practices (Knijnik, Kitchen, Blencowe), Freirean critical pedagogy and political participation of teachers and students. Finally, we turn to a reflexive theoretical engagement with the limitations and possibilities of education by Sant and Brown.

Reflecting contemporary patterns in scholarship on populism the majority of authors in this special section also understand populism as ideology. Jennifer Kitchen's analysis explicitly draws upon Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), and Muller (2016). Blencowe, and Mac an Ghaill and Haywood writing in the British context, Agbaria and Silberberg exploring the Israeli context, and Alves et al. and Knijnik writing in the Brazilian context also understand 'populism' in 'ideological' terms, equating it with radical right incursions into institutions of education and democracy. On the other hand, Watson's contribution, draws upon Laclau's (2005) and Mouffe's (2018) view of populism in his effort to understand how individual aggrievement becomes aggrega[ted] in the context of Twitter wars between 'progressive' and 'traditional' teachers, a phenomenon he terms, 'micro populism'. James Craske's contribution also builds on Laclau and adopts a discourse-theoretical approach in order to unpack populist narratives around education under Tory leaders like Nick Gibb and Michael Gove. Drawing upon Lacan (2007) and Laclau (2005), Sant and Brown argue for a more cautious approach to institutionalised education, and for a relentless scrutiny of both the power relations inscribing education and our own investments in knowledge production about education. What papers in the special section also show clearly is that constructions of 'the people' and 'the elite'/'the establishment' do not neatly map onto socioeconomic or cultural identities. Therefore, attending to the larger political programmes, the strategies through which oppositions are constructed and the historically specific contexts in which populist politics play out, is important.

Mairtin Mac an Ghaill and Chris Haywood's paper, *The British State's production of the Muslim School: A simultaneity of categories of difference analysis*, offers a critical focus on the populist discourse of the British securitised state that seeks to police minority ethnic groups, especially Muslim young people in schools and universities in an ostensible 'war on terror'. The authors locate their discussion in the larger polarising narrative of modern 'British Values' as opposed to 'intolerant' Islamic values. This discussion also needs to be grasped in conjunction with Blencowe's critique of the secularist narrative of modern liberal institutions of education that sustain a binary of 'secularism' versus 'religiosity'. Interestingly, the 'liberal' worldviews attributed to university education and academics that were seen as 'elitist' by UKIP leader, Nigel Farage in the context of Brexit (Britain's exit from the European Union) are the ones being presented as those of the 'tolerant' (non-Muslim) British people, and by extension, the British state. Analysing the *No Outsiders* programme aimed at inclusion of LGBTQ+ pupils in British schools, Mac an Ghaill and Haywood show how the debate around South Asian Muslims shifted from the religious freedom of ethnic minority communities to that of their cultural integration. This shift also entailed racialisation of a religious community and discursive linking of the narrative of 'homophobic Muslims' with that of Muslim young people being a 'radicalised' and 'suspect community'. Thus, in this instance of populist discourse an interesting rhetorical and political move can be discerned: that of simultaneously articulating 'progressive Left sexual politics, Conservative traditional patriotism and Far-Right Islamophobia'.

In grappling with the rise of populist leaders and parties scholars have also underlined the significance of the internet and contemporary forms of media, like social media platforms which offer new avenues for expressing and (re)shaping worldviews and developing social and political identities, as well as for leaders to 'perform' politics (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2016). Therefore, analyses of populist rhetoric and its ramifications need to engage with online discourses, including those taking place on and via social media platforms like Twitter. Indeed, Moffitt (2016, 39) has offered a powerful conceptualisation of populism as 'political style' arguing 'that contemporary politics are intensely mediatised and 'stylised', and as such the so-called 'aesthetic' and 'performative' features of politics are particularly (and increasingly) important.' Craske's and Watson's respective contributions to this special section offer examples of what such an engagement may look like. These papers show what new forms of engagement and expression are enabled by contemporary social media platforms and other online mediums, as well as demonstrating how these virtual discourses are implicated in furthering specific political programmes.

Adopting a discourse-theoretical approach to analyse policy-making in education in his paper, *Logics, rhetoric and 'the blob': Populist logic in the Conservative reforms to English schooling*, James Craske shows how political leaders' talk constructed teachers or parents as 'the people' and the 'educational establishment' as an 'illegitimate "elite"'. He shows how certain policy moves are sought to be established as the 'right' ones for 'the people' while existing policies are projected as anti-'people' during Conservative rule, especially under the leadership of Michael Gove as Education Secretary. Drawing upon newspaper columns and public speeches by the two politicians, the author shows how analysis of rhetorical strategies in political discourse can help understand education policy. He argues that the discourse theoretical approach underscores the 'strategic dimension' of populism by focusing on 'how the contents of populism (the demands, ideologies and grievances of speakers) are articulated as a strategy for achieving political goals.' An

important implication of this view is that it allows us to recognise that a *range* of groups and demands are being brought together in the construction of 'the people'; this helps 'avoid treating voters for different populist parties and their motivations for voting as homogeneous' (De Cleen et al. 2018, p. 651), for example, seeing all Trump voters, or all Brexiters, as racist. Craske also shows how a binary opposition is constructed between educational change guided by 'an apolitical, evidence-driven and "what works" frame' on the one hand, and multiculturalism and 'progressive' practice, on the other. In doing so, the paper also unpacks how support for neoliberal reforms in curriculum and teacher recruitment has been sought to be obtained.

Steve Watson's paper in this issue, *New Right 2.0: Teacher populism on social media in England*, also shows that education is a site of articulation of certain demands of the people, i.e., 'ordinary teachers', and has been used as part of Tory strategies to justify pervasive, ongoing neoliberal reforms in education. The author uses the term 'micropopulism' to represent 'teachers' populism' under 'the *New Right 2.0*', and focus on the way social media has been used under the current Conservative regime in the UK to generate and sustain a debate around 'traditional' practice of 'ordinary' teachers as opposed to the 'progressive' pedagogic practice of 'the elite'. Drawing upon Laclau (2005) Watson argues that teachers identifying as 'Trads' construct themselves as 'the people' in the context of education reforms. In the process, Watson underscores the significance of social media platforms like Twitter as the site and means of creating a chain of equivalence for their set of demands. Thus, this paper also begins to unpack the relationship between content, medium and political strategy; and how current populist discourse around education is shaped by long, complex and interlinked histories 'of politics, economic policy and emergent technology.' Lastly, in a politically and intellectually important move, Watson also shows how classical liberalism, free market reforms and 'civic conservatism' have come together to shape this discourse.

Political shifts driving rightward educational change in the British context are quite different from their counterpart in Israel. In their paper, *Legitimising populist education in Israel: The role of religion*, Roi Silberberg and Ayman Agaberia offer insights into the workings of a populist logic within the framework of national security through an analysis of the political nature of curriculum revision in Israel. Building on Brubaker's (2020) critique of a 'strict conceptual separation' between populism and nationalism, the authors argue that right-wing populism in Israel entails 'majoritarianism, anti-institutionalism and protectionism.' Brubaker (2020, p. 44) argues that:

> 'The ambiguity and two-dimensionality of appeals to 'the people' do not result from the conflation of populism and nationalism; they are a constitutive feature of populism itself, a practical resource that can be exploited in constructing political identities and defining lines of political opposition and conflict.'

Silberberg and Agbaria point out that it is in the context of rising social and political support for the settler movement that rightist interventions in education policy and school curricula have become intensified since 2010. These interventions have meant that 'an important task of Israeli school books [became] to connect the students to their origin in the Land of Israel through a secularised version of myth.' Budgetary allocations for curricular reforms, especially in the direction of underscoring the importance of Jewish identity in a previously 'secular' curriculum have also had the effect of increasing attachment among young Israelis to a 'hyper ethno-nationalist ideology' and a normalisation of 'racial aggression and hatred towards Palestinians'.

The authors discuss how the Israeli state seeks to construct 'the people' as the Jewish Israeli people who must hold on to the desire to establish a 'Land of Israel', in and through curricular texts. Wider political discourse simultaneously promotes increasingly distrustful attitudes towards 'the elite' i.e., institutions like the judiciary, media and major political parties, especially the Israeli Left that is constructed as 'weak'. To theorise populist politics in Israel Silberberg and Agbaria borrow sociologist Eva Illouz's notion of 'hyper solidarity' based, in this case, on religion and nativism, thus, preventing critical engagement with the ideology and political positions of one's group. Consequently, support for increased subjugation of both Arab minorities and Jewish human rights activists has risen even as policy has moved rightward.

A similar political shift to the right entailing the use of religion to construct 'the people', can also be observed in Brazil as Mário Aquino Alves, Catarina Ianni Segatto and Andrea Martini Pineda show in their paper, *Changes in Brazilian Education Policy and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism*. The authors unpack how right-wing conservative discourse and evangelical religious proselytism in Brazil coalesced around the 'No Partisan School' movement's programme to move education policy away from a feminist, Marxist and Frererian praxis. Even though predicated on the framework of education as 'non-partisan' or 'neutral', the identification of opposing ideologies as the 'enemy' automatically creates a binary social division of 'us' against 'them' and 'deservers' versus 'non-deservers'. In doing so the rightwing religious and political alliance in Brazil was able to deny the existence of gender diversity within Brazilian society. The authors focus on the ways in which right-wing populist activism captures religious discourse, thus, also underscoring the importance of understanding the role of religion and religious discourse and their mobilisation towards populist ends for scholars of education. Alves et al. outline how a conservative tactical alliance developed a populist platform (Müller, 2016; Katsambekis, 2017) that was able to convince and mobilize different actors to oppose inclusiveness and diversity in education through legislative proposals and new national curricular parameters. In the process, right-wing populists' alliance with evangelical religious proselytisers, uses a form of Othering that targets women's and LGBTQ+ rights by controlling educational spaces and policies.

Challenging right-wing populism (but who will question 'liberalism'?)

The aforementioned contributions to this special section show how institutions of education can actually lend themselves to projects of nationalism, militarisation and securitisation. We now turn to the three papers that focus on possible ways of critically engaging with right-wing populist discourses in the classroom, as well as developing oppositional politics in the context of education policy. One of these papers is Jorge Knijnik's *To Freire or not to Freire: Educational freedom and the populist right-wing 'Escola sem Partido' movement in Brazil.* Knijnik shows how Paulo Freire's philosophies can be an ally in the struggle for democratic education in contemporary Brazil. Brazil's right-wing populist President, Jair Bolsonanro came to power in 2019 riding on a traditionalist, ultra-conservative Christian, anti-Communist and anti-Freirean agenda spearheaded by the *Escola sem Partido* (ESP) movement. Under Bolsonaro privatisation and spending cuts have intensified, alongside changes to content and practice, the most striking being the idea of appointing personnel from 'military reserve teams' to act as teachers and use 'authoritarian and disciplinary methods' for teaching in schools. Renowned Brazilian educationist, Paulo Freire's work sees education as a site for developing critical consciousness as much through content as pedagogic processes and relations. However, these ideas have been termed 'communist

indoctrination' by Bolsonaro and the ESP who have sought to eliminate Freirean ideas from the education system. Knijnik suggests that Freire's dialogical method, instead, informs pro-democracy struggles by students, parents and educators in both school and higher education in Brazil today. These struggles challenge the overall right-ward shift in education policy as well as 'witch hunts' targeting teachers perceived as 'left wing'. Such political practice is significant in that Freire's work was characterised by an insistence that 'theory and practice walked alongside each other.' Thus, Knijnik's proposal to 'return' to the practices and possibilities of emancipation through Freirean education can be viewed as a possible pathway of 'educated hope' (Giroux, 2003), a pedagogical and intellectual challenge to radical right policies and practices in education.

If Knijnik focuses on political practice, Jennifer Kitchen and Claire Blencowe turn to classroom practice in their respective efforts to resist rightwing populism. In her paper, *Theatre and drama education and populism: the ensemble 'family' as a space for dialogic empathy and civic* care, Kitchen draws upon Muller's (2016) view of populism as dangerous and 'fundamentally anti-democratic'. She argues for deploying strategies from theatre education which can help teachers and pupils address conflicts and tensions within and between communities, thus leading to 'democratic social justice outcomes.' Her ethnographic work with a UK GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) drama class draws upon the idea of the 'ensemble family' and shows that the 'care-led and relational identity work' within the group creates a space for participants to share and reflect upon their experiences and how they make sense of their ethnic, religious and/or racial identities. She, thus, engages with the notion of the ensemble family as an 'educational metaphor for the enactment of democratic civic care within the classroom'. Underscoring the 'collaborative, egalitarian and performative nature' of theatre education she explains how this can be harnessed in classroom settings more generally to help practice democracy. Kitchen's contribution can be seen as instantiating modes of education that link learning to the conditions necessary for developing democratic forms of political agency and civic struggle. Further, following Giroux (2002), theatre education, and classrooms can be seen as a public forums, for debating norms, critically engaging ideas, making private issues public, and evaluating judgments.

Claire Blencowe's contribution to this section, *Disenchanting secularism (or the cultivation of soul) as pedagogy in resistance to populist racism and colonial structures in the academy*, poses more fundamental challenges to the assumptions and social relations underpinning liberal education. 'Taking inspiration from Gloria Anzaldua, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Sylvia Wynter,' Blencowe offers an alternative proposal of ethics around which to structure education: aesthetic education. In doing so, her paper achieves two important tasks, an intellectual one and a pedagogical one. First, it takes forward Spivak's intellectual task of 'imagining the other', i.e., 'an imaginative exercise in experiencing the impossible – stepping into the space of the other – without which political solutions come drearily undone into the continuation of violence'. According to Blencowe, it is the requirement to embrace irreconcilable demands that renders it so powerfully educative; and it is the (in)ability to imagine a humanised 'other' that has been a crucial failure of western liberal democracies.

This argument echoes Poor's (2017, p. 220-21) commentary on the 'blindspot' of liberal democracies, namely, their inability to 'nurture, criticize and revise their own democratic theories often as a reaction to the opponents of democracy'. This inability has been evident in the ways in which the 'war on terror' has permeated every policy in western liberal democracies and created unacceptable levels of violence. In such a context, aesthetic education is proposed as a training in

ethical capacity and habit which involves learning to live with, and through, impossibility and contradiction. Blencowe also argues that secularism 'has, since its inception, been a signifier of western civilisation figured as progress or political maturity'. This paper makes an important contribution to thinking about the 'double bind' – between the supposedly irreconcilable demands of secularism associated with western liberal democracies on the one hand, and the religion and spirituality associated with non-western societies. The second contribution of the paper is a pedagogical one. Blencowe uses her location as a white woman academic in an elite UK university to challenge 'secular' hegemony in social theory, thus, creating pedagogical space for the growth of ethical subjectivity in resistance to waves of racist nationalism, militarism, and despair. Such a pedagogical manoeuvre can both, disrupt us/them binaries used to push populist programmes, and offer healing for wounded peoples, for grappling with 'clashing realities, commitments and authorities; [*and*] recognising our own and other's failures and complicity with violence.'

Rescuing education from 'populist' and 'anti-populist' fantasies

We chose to discuss Edda Sant and Anthony Brown's contribution, *The fantasy of the populist disease and the educational cure*, at the end because in engaging with discourses *about* education rather than *in* education, they underscore the importance of the other papers in the issue as well as indicating a path beyond these discussions. Sant and Brown use the Lacanian concept of 'fantasy' to interrogate how populist and anti-populist narratives not only create fantasies around how the world should be, but also the role and place of education in achieving these respective worlds. Drawing upon Laclalu (2005), Lacan (2007) and Žižek (2006) to analyse dominant populist and anti-populist narratives in public, policy and political discourses, the authors contend that the meaning, role or purpose of education cannot be *assumed* to be intrinsically emancipatory. Indeed, more fundamentally, they point to the limits of both democracy and education. While recognising the risks in right-wing populism Sant and Brown also argue against seeing all supporters of populist politics and leaders as 'ignorant or uneducated', and consequently discarding their critique of 'institutionalised education' and the relations embedding it. Critically reflecting on the role of education as imagined in populist and anti-populist fantasies the authors foreground the crisis of an education which is essentially 'a universalising/socialising machine of liberalist and capitalist princi[ples]', as well as the fundamental impossibility of emancipatory education, i.e. the 'educational cure' that the anti-populist narrative imagines for the 'populist disease'.

Most significantly, the authors problematise not only institutionalised education, but the fundamental hierarchy erected between the educated and the uneducated (or less educated). To this end, they offer a critique of the notions of epistemological, economic and political wholeness that emancipatory education is expected to deliver. Firstly, citing Biesta (2006, p. 7) they point out that within emancipatory education, '[f]reedom is paradoxically achieved through 'the insertion of newcomers into the pre-existing order of modern [Western] reason'. Secondly, they remind us that economic inequality cannot be addressed through an education embedded in a capitalist system. Thirdly, they problematise the idea that 'democracy' can only be based on 'consensus' and 'deliberation' which, in turn, require 'impartiality and rationality' on the part of participants.

In bringing together feminist, critical and anti-race analyses of education in a populist moment, papers in this special section offer important ways to reflect on the way education is imagined in an

anti-populist fantasy that, according to Sant and Brown, 'does not acknowledge its own ideological nature.' At the same time, it is important to recognise that, as scholars, we are also complicit in the hierarchy of educated/uneducated, not only because it continues to (re)produce power relations but also because, as Sant and Brown argue, it 'creates … a fantasy of a meritocratic system, in which everyone can succeed and where no one will be left behind.' The authors, thus, do the vital job of reminding us that we are deeply implicated in the knowledges we produce about populism and education, and as such, must remain relentlessly critical and vigilant of our own biases and investments. To them, the 'populist fantasy' points not only to a crisis of democracy, but also, to an associated one of education. Thus, the authors also underscore the (im)possibilities of both populist and anti-populist fantasies: that neither imagination of education, within or outside formal institutions, can escape power relations. While we question and critique education we also must constantly try and grasp the power relations in which our own research/politics/critique is embedded, and through which it is enabled; further, we must constantly scrutinise the extent to which the idea of institutionalised education acts as a precondition to participating meaningfully in contemporary models of consensual, deliberative democracy.

Finally, in line with Sant and Brown's arguments, Biesta's (2011, p. 142) critique of citizenship education shows how 'the task of education can be conceived differently from that of reproducing the existing political order.' Biesta (ibid) views existing notions of citizenship education – though this is applicable to education, more generally as well (cf. Bingham and Biesta, 2010; Simons and Masschelein, 2010; Friedrich et al., 2010) – as ensuring socialisation and '*domestication* of the citizen'. If we take populist politics to indicate a crisis of 'representation' and 'incorporation' (Katsambekis, 2017), and one which emerged in the 'elimination' of 'agonistic spaces where different projects of society could confront each other' (Mouffe, 2018), then it is important that we imagine education not as a 'rational' project but a deeply 'political' one (Biesta, 2011, p. 151). Drawing upon the work of Rancière and Mouffe Biesta (2011, p. 142) imagines education not as providing 'knowledge about what the citizen is or should become' but as a space appreciative of acts and moments of 'political subjectivation'. He argues (ibid, p. 142):

> 'While the first focuses on the question how 'newcomers' can be inserted into an existing political order, the second focuses on the question how democratic subjectivity is engendered through engagement in always undetermined political processes.'

Thus, Biesta (2011, p.152) invites us to reimagine both education and democracy while also questioning the assumed relationship between the two: it is not education that *prepares* us for democracy, rather participation in democracy in 'fundamentally open and undetermined' ways that *educates* us in possibilities of democratisation. Contributions to this special section invite readers to think through the shifting role of education in democracy as well as the divisions and hierarchies that are entailed in institutionalised education. We hope that the conceptual lens of 'populism' would deepen and renew our engagement with how education may be implicated in maintaining and/or challenging the 'exclusions' and inequalities 'inherent in the political practices of determining the people' (Mouffe, 2018).

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