

Populist performance(s) in contemporary Greek rap music

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Abstract

In recent years, rap music has been growing rapidly within the Greek cultural landscape. This paper places emphasis on a particular politicised current within the genre, examining closely two recent examples from the Greek context. Although such performances have already been broadly discussed as ‘populist’ within public debate, this paper aims at rigorously assessing this claim. To do so, it first turns to contemporary populism research in order to articulate a consistent and operational approach that can be utilised in the analysis of rap performances. Against the background of a minimal definitional consensus highlighting populism’s people-centrism and anti-elitism, this contribution will then focus on (a) the performative dimension of populism and its occasional extra-political conditioning and (b) populist performances within popular music, namely rap. Could one designate rap music as a locus of populist performance(s)? How could such a hypothesis be substantiated through the analysis of concrete examples from the contemporary Greek scene?

Introduction

Rap music is quickly increasing its impact within Greek popular music. Obviously, the genre cannot be essentialised as *a priori* political; it certainly entails competing tendencies and orientations (for example, commercial and non-commercial currents). Not all rap artists are politically motivated, especially because rap is a richly diverse musical field in Greece (and elsewhere in the world) encompassing a wide range of styles, discourses, aesthetics, market politics (from multi-million euro labels to fringe experimentation) and performance contexts, ‘mainstream’ or ‘alternative’. At the same time, one could locate a distinct political current within rap music, which often acquires an oppositional tone. This article enquires into the origins and development of this trend. It then focuses on two recent examples from the Greek rap scene and discusses their potentially ‘populist’ character. This rubric has already been explicitly highlighted within public debate in the Greek context and needs to be addressed in a conceptually consistent and analytically rigorous manner. To do so we first seek help from political theory and the analysis of (political) populism before engaging with the cultural sphere, specifically Greek rap and our two empirical vignettes.

There is overwhelming consensus in the relevant political science literature that populism indicates a particular meaning structure that involves an antagonistic scenario pitting 'the people' against 'the elite' within a polarised schema. This is a point on which both ideational and discursive approaches seem to agree (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Laclau 2005; Stavrakakis 2017). This agreement is not premised merely on deductive assumptions, but formulated on the basis of a sustained choreography between conceptual hypotheses and empirical analyses (see, for some notable empirical applications: Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; Kim 2022), which seems able to produce an operational research toolkit for the productive analysis of populism. Disagreements remain, of course, among other issues, mainly with regard to the degree of purity and homogeneity of the people/the elite required to designate a particular phenomenon as populist, the political implications of populism (especially its relationship to democracy) and the additional criterion of moralisation employed by ideational perspectives (the validity of such criteria has been questioned from a discursive point of view; see Stavrakakis & Jäger 2018; Katsambekis 2022).

Against the background of this minimal definitional consensus, this contribution will focus on the performative dimension of populism, and populist performances within rap. The former argument will draw on Laclau's observation that (populist) discourse is not purely linguistic but involves a crucial performative dimension (Laclau 2005), an insight premised on the long tradition of hegemony theory (Gramsci 1971), which has inspired a whole analysis of populist performance (Moffitt 2016). The latter argument will rely on relevant theorisations of rap music (Owari 2018; Rose 1994, 2008; Perry 2004) and will usher in two case studies from the contemporary Greek musical and political landscape, Δωδέκατος πίθηκος [Dodekatos Pithikos – The 12th Monkey] and Μιθριδάτης [Mithridatis]. An additional hermeneutical tool guiding our analysis of populist performances within the cultural sphere will be sought in Pierre Ostiguy's socio-cultural approach to populism highlighting the importance of high/low performativities (Ostiguy 2009, 2017).

Where exactly can we locate performativity and the socio-cultural dimension in relation to the minimal criteria necessary for a rigorous identification of populism? Can we designate rap music as a locus of such populist performances? How can such a hypothesis be substantiated through the analysis of concrete examples from the Greek scene? In order to address these research questions, we will try to examine how 'the people' and 'the elite' are illustrated in (Greek) rap. Arguably a certain current within rap music seems to be ultimately situated on the low spectrum and this may be significantly related to its populist political potential. Specifically, it forcefully claims to represent something like the 'voice of the people', orchestrating a particular type of polarisation in addressing its target audience. These are the main research questions and hypotheses that will guide the account that follows. Apart from an analysis of the lyrics and some additional performative characteristics of the songs selected, the empirical examples will be situated within the broader (Greek) context and the role of populism (and anti-populism) within it. Through such an exchange between political theory/analysis and the assessment of a particular cultural field, the potential and limitations of contemporary theories of populism will be registered within the broader hegemonic context. In addition, the political – and specifically populist, proto-populist or pre-populist – impact of (Greek) rap music will be highlighted.

Conceptual and methodological framework: discourse, performativity and music

Identifying populism: minimal criteria

As we have seen, both ideational and discursive approaches seem to converge on a certain core as far as the definition of populism is concerned. Apart from their clarity and salience, these two perspectives are chosen because they stress the dimension of meaning production, focusing on ideology (ideational approach) or meaningful practices more generally (discursive approach). Within this context, two basic questions could be put forward to guide our analysis of a concrete phenomenon, for example, the political meanings articulated by a populist leader. First, do we encounter a priority given to 'the people', to the construction of an underdog collective subject as the main agent that registers grievances and is credited with voicing them publicly and pushing forward social change? Second, is this prioritisation of popular empowerment seen as taking place within an antagonistic, polarised representation of the social-political field, within the frame of a politicised division between 'us' and 'them', 'us' being the people and 'them' being the establishment, the power bloc, the 1%?

We can then understand (political) populism primarily as a specific type of discourse, which claims to express popular interests and to represent associated identities and demands (most often articulated as the 'will of the people') against an 'establishment' or elite, which is seen as undermining them and frustrating their satisfaction. Accordingly, populist discursive representations typically articulate a dynamic and polarised framing of the socio-political field in a bid to inspire and mobilise frustrated/excluded social groups. The latter are called to develop links of tentative unity, which will enable them to potentially challenge the established power structure and influence decision-making. In this sense, the main criteria highlighted by a discursive approach – and also shared, more or less, by ideational scholars – to facilitate a minimal definition, are people-centrism and anti-elitism. The first notion considers 'the people' typically as a nodal point around which other peripheral and often antithetical signifiers and ideas can become articulated; the second identifies a split representation of the socio-political field between us (the marginalised, the underdog, the people) and them (the establishment, the 1%, the elite) (Stavrakakis 2017, pp. 527–8).

Codifying such criteria, De Cleen and Stavrakakis have defined populism as:

a dichotomic discourse in which 'the people' are juxtaposed to 'the elite' along the lines of a down/up antagonism in which 'the people' is discursively constructed as a large powerless group through opposition to 'the elite' conceived as a small and illegitimately powerful group. Populist politics thus claim to represent 'the people' against an 'elite' that frustrates their legitimate demands, and present these demands as expressions of the will of 'the people'. (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, p. 310)

Most importantly, forming part of broader hegemonic struggles, populist calls and mobilisations are not restricted to the political level narrowly defined. In the words of Margaret Canovan, populism targets 'both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society' (Canovan 1999, p. 3).

Performative and socio-cultural aspects of populist discourse

Against the background of this minimal definitional consensus, one needs to highlight two further inter-related aspects particularly relevant to our inquiry, the

performative status of populism, and its strong socio-cultural dimensions. Arguably, the production of ‘the people’ as a unified (but not necessarily ‘pure’ or homogeneous) political agent is the outcome of particular appeals facilitating an (always partial) unification process and does not refer to the coherence of a pre-existing social category. For Laclau, the basic unit in the analysis of populism, the pre-existing material processed by populist hegemonic operations, is not ‘the people’ as a fixed sociological locus (a particular group or population) but the notion of demand. Populist discourse articulates unsatisfied grievances and demands in relations of equivalence against a power holder that is regarded as unwilling or unable to fulfil them. It is only when this strategy proves successful that ‘the people’ emerges as a powerful historical force to antagonise the established order. Hence, populism invariably involves constructing a potentially hegemonic popular identity out of a plurality of demands (Laclau 2005, p. 95). In that sense, ‘the people’ is always something retroactively constructed, an empty signifier that needs to be invoked (Panizza and Stavrakakis 2021), a performative call that creates what it is supposed to be expressing:

[T]he construction of the ‘people’ is a radical one — one which constitutes social agents as such, and does not express a previously given unity of the group [...] [W]e are dealing not with a conceptual operation of finding an abstract common feature underlying all social grievances, but with a *performative* operation constituting the chain as such. (Laclau 2005, pp. 118: 97, emphasis added)

At what level is this performative operation taking place? If hegemony, as Judith Butler observes, ‘emphasizes the ways in which power operates to form our everyday understanding of social relations, and to orchestrate the ways in which we consent to (and reproduce) those tacit and covert relations of power’; and if ‘[p]ower is not stable or static, but is remade at various junctures within everyday life; [if] it constitutes our tenuous sense of common sense, and is ensconced as the prevailing epistemes of a culture’ (Butler in Butler *et al.* 2000, p. 14), then the employment of populist (or anti-populist) discursive patterns may operate as a distinct dynamic shaping sociality on a multitude of levels. Consistent with Gramsci’s take on hegemony, this play is never limited within a strictly defined terrain of political institutions, but encompasses social and cultural life on many levels. The crucial question here is whether ‘the people’, even ‘before entering the stage, might begin to be constituted offstage’ (Feinberg 2021, p. 106) or rather, on another stage. For example, researching the role of populism beyond politics, Feinberg observes that popular culture research has already identified ‘otherwise unmarked or denigrated modes of expression’ (Feinberg 2021, p. 107) that demonstrate the operations marking the production of a popular subjectivity outside the registered field of political institutions.

This possibility is reinforced by the fact that Laclau’s take on populism is predominantly formal, it concerns the particular framing and energising of representation(s) and not their particular subject matter (content), or the sphere in which they are articulated (parliament, culture, etc.): ‘The concept of populism that I am proposing is a strictly formal one, for all its defining features are exclusively related to a specific mode of articulation – the prevalence of the equivalential over the differential logic – independently of the actual contents that are articulated’ (Laclau 2005b, p. 44). At the same time, as Laclau and Mouffe have repeatedly stressed, hegemonic struggles (and populist articulations within them) are both linguistic and material,

simultaneously symbolic and affective. In their work, the term 'discourse' does not refer merely to words and ideas, but denotes all 'systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects' through the construction of antagonisms and the drawing of frontiers (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, pp. 3–4).

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that populism operates in a performative way, something initially highlighted by Laclau and then further developed by Benjamin Moffitt and others (Moffitt 2016). Most crucially, performativity, together with the (counter)hegemonic, formal constitution of populist representations arguably allows one to study cultural instances like music from the point of view of populism research. Indeed, the socio-cultural approach to populism initiated by Pierre Ostiguy further suggests that political struggle never takes place in isolation from the broader socio-cultural terrain. As Raymond Williams had already observed in his *Keywords*, the word 'populism' embodies – adding a political dimension – many variations that pertain to the word 'popular' directly associated with 'popular culture' (Williams 1983, p. 179). In Ostiguy's perspective:

Populism is characterized by a particular form of political relationship between political leaders and a social basis, one established and articulated through 'low' appeals which resonate and receive positive reception within particular sectors of society for social-cultural historical reasons. We define populism, in very few words, as the flaunting of the 'low'. (Ostiguy 2017, p. 73)

Along these lines, and drawing on many empirical examples, Ostiguy sees populism as a 'transgressive' performance articulated on the basis of materials emanating from the socio-cultural distributions between 'high' and 'low': a transgression 'of the "proper" way of doing politics, of proper public behaviour, or of what can or "should" be publicly said'. In that sense, '[p]opulism claims to speak on behalf of a "truth" or a "reality" that is not accepted in the more official, larger circles of the world. If there is not thus some kind of "scandal", [...] then one is not really looking at a case of populism. When it has the wind in its sails, populism is the celebratory desecration of the "high"' (Ostiguy 2017, p. 76).

The 'high–low' axis, in Ostiguy's sense, is 'cultural' and very concrete: 'High and low have to do with ways of relating to people. [...] They certainly include issues of accent, levels of language, body language, gestures, and ways of dressing' (Ostiguy 2017, p. 77). Hence '[o]n the low, people frequently use a language that includes slang or folksy expressions and metaphors, are more demonstrative in their bodily or facial expressions as well as in their demeanor, and display more raw, culturally popular tastes' (Ostiguy 2017, p. 78). Such patterns can certainly be adopted and reproduced by populist politicians in order to broaden their direct political appeal and increase their embeddedness within particular social (usually plebeian) sectors. Nevertheless, they could also be observed in cultural production (popular music) that purports to have political effects or encompasses political dimensions. The frontiers between politics, society and culture are porous and involve continuous two-way movements, which highlights the importance of 'researching the articulation of politics in popular culture' (Papović and Pejović 2015, p. 114). At any rate, as Canovan observes, '[p]opulist appeals to the people [whether in politics or in the socio-cultural field] are characteristically couched in a style that is 'democratic' in the sense of being aimed at ordinary people. [...] they pride themselves on simplicity and directness' (Canovan 1999, p. 5).

Music, oppositional politics, and populism

In this article, we utilise this conceptual framework to account for certain cultural performances in the field of rap music. In general, in agreement with Chantal Mouffe, we see politics and aesthetic practices as two inter-related fields:

There is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art. [...] From the point of view of the theory of hegemony, artistic practices play a role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order or in its challenging and this is why they necessarily have a political dimension. (Mouffe 2007, p. 4)

Music, especially, has interacted with politics closely, starting from classical music and all the way to the British punk and post-punk movements, the DIY scene, the European Nazi punk scene and the Boneheads, or the rap scene. Often, this is a conscious strategy, but this is not always the case: 'the arts can function as political mediators without intention or conscious effort, as unintended consequence, or even despite the intentions of their creators or producers' (Eyerman 2002, p. 445). Interestingly enough, Eyerman describes the political input of music in a way that is relevant to the creation of an oppositional collective subjectivity characteristic of populist politics as they have been described up to now:

One can say that music and other forms of cultural expression can articulate as well as fuse a group, offering a sense of group belonging and collectivity as well as strength in trying situations, such as confronting violent resistance and repressive authority. Through song, a collective, such as a movement, can objectify itself and its history, making itself visible to others, as well as creating and establishing a sense of continuity. (Eyerman 2002, p. 447)

Interaction between the two fields has been particularly crucial in the Greek case where, echoing past traditions, popular music has operated as a multiplier of the force of emancipatory politics in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s and then throughout the post-authoritarian era (post-1974). The case of Mikis Theodorakis is instructive, both through his own personal trajectory – from communist political prisoner to political activist to minister – and through the impact of his popular music of which certain songs operated as 'a symbol of the struggle of the Left' and then of resistance during the junta of the colonels (1967–1974; Tambakaki 2019, p. 58). Of course, music is not an *a priori* privileged outlet merely for left-wing sensibilities. On the contrary, it can be channelled in a multitude of antithetical political orientations. In Eyerman's aforementioned study, the role of music within the American Civil Rights movement is studied together with far right White Power (Vit Makt) music in Sweden (Eyerman 2002). Likewise, in the contemporary Greek context, music has not been the exclusive privilege of a left-wing imaginary; certainly, 'one could hardly describe "Greek popular music" as a unified field of study' (Tragaki 2019, p. 4). For example, an elected MP of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn (later to be convicted as a criminal organisation by Greek courts), Kaiadas, was a member of a fairly well-known black metal band.

Rap music, populism and the Greek case

In her book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Tricia Rose sketched a very accurate definition of what rap music was at that time and how

it staged (in an often complex and not linear way) societal and/or political oppositions and contradictions, some of which will be highlighted further on. According to Rose:

Rap music brings together a tangle of some of the most complex social, cultural and political issues in contemporary American society. [...] These unusually abundant polyvocal conversations seem irrational when they are severed from the social contexts where everyday struggles over resources, pleasure and meanings take place. Rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America. (Rose 1994, p. 30)

In fact, since their inception in the 1970s, and notwithstanding their complexity, rap music and hip hop culture have been quite vocal against what they perceive as oppression. Countless songs have been written about police brutality, racism, systemic inequality and, in some cases (quite a few actually), about flat-out opposition to the *status quo*. And the majority of these cases stem not only from some DIY rappers or militant ideologues but also from the mainstream core of the hip hop community, including household names like Kendrick Lamar, N.W.A. or T.I.

Quite often, rap artists claim to operate as the collective voice of the voiceless, transferring their demands and their worldview towards the top of the hierarchical *status quo*. They seem to model themselves, in other words, on the 'prophetic' operation; they claim to be and often get accepted as the voice of the crowd, echoing Canovan's distinction between pragmatic and redemptive politics: rap often recalls the idea of 'vox populi, vox dei', which seems to dominate the politics of faith, redemptive politics, that is to say, the populist side of democratic practices (Canovan 1999, p. 10). What is the predominant priority here is 'power to the people; we, the people, are to take charge of our lives and to decide our own future' (Canovan 1999, p. 11), something close to the oppositional/resistance profile of certain rap performances.

Populist sensibilities in rap music: us/them and 'the people'

In that sense, a certain part of rap music is no stranger to a politicised discourse, often exhibiting the characteristics of a proto-populist poetic representation: 'hip hop music may function as a powerful vehicle for the articulation of political sentiments and opinions' (Naerland 2016, p. 99). It often operates as a vehicle of politicisation by putting forward antagonism and opposition to a *status quo*, which is perceived as establishing and reproducing exclusion and injustice. As Alexis Pate notes:

Perhaps the most important idea embodied by the language of rap and the language of African American literature in general is that it can reflect an oppositional position. [...] If the speaker is given access to thousands of people who are lured by a magnetic beat, this power that comes from self-expression can be multiplied exponentially. (Pate 2009, p. 27)

This oppositional sensibility can obviously take many forms, often contradictory, even when 'populism' is invoked (see, in this respect, Papović and Pejović 2015; Naerland 2016). What seems to remain constant is the idea of someone 'speaking truth to power' and thus giving voice to the unseen and unheard; the pattern of the 'truth-teller' is a very powerful cultural and political tool. In rap's case, this tool has been used against the perceived *status quo*, again and again.

Indeed, the concept of a politicised music genre was partly re-invigorated in the US during the time that the Black Lives Matter movement broke out, in 2012, making its waves felt in other countries within the post-2008 crisis landscape (which also triggered mobilisations throughout the world). In many cases, the already existing rap scene has quickly incorporated these new political overtones, contextualising them in a way that fits each respective country. And so, capitalising on a long tradition of anti-racism and anti-elitism in rap music (external and internal), rappers in the UK started rapping about police brutality and their anti-Boris sentiment, rappers in France articulated new demands about systemic racism and exclusion in the French suburbs and so on (Lanre 2020; Oliver 2020).

Such politicising tendencies were already evident even in the early days of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, when they spread 'The Message', rapping about social realism: about poverty, racism and systemic inequalities (Dyson 2004, p. 61–2). In addition, the populist connection also became evident in 2016, when A Tribe Called Quest, talking on behalf of 'the people' in a song characteristically entitled 'We the People', rapped as representatives of 'we the people' who 'eat the same fucking food' and 'don't need you' ('You in the killing-off-good-young nigga mood').

The core populist ideas (strong socio-political division and the need to represent the popular side, which shares a certain predicament) are presented here in a performative (musical) way. A Tribe Called Quest identify as part of the people, the majority, the wretched. At the same time they also challenge the Other, the authorities, and claim that the majority does not need them anymore. The days when the regular folk used to sit silently in the back of the bus (actually and figuratively), before the time of the Civil Rights Movement have now passed and resistance can be quite vocal about it. 'The people' have nothing to fight over among themselves since they are in the same boat. When they get hungry they eat the same food, arguably meaning that the common folk share the hardships of being poor and oppressed. The *status quo*, on the other hand, are actively trying to silence 'the people'. It is here, in these lyrics, that we find the articulation of populist-style demands, from the many to the few, from the people to the elite. In these few lines, A Tribe Called Quest are not only ostensibly operating as part of 'the people', but as an incarnation of the will of the people, and they are demanding that they are given back their rights and their dignity.

These political formulations overdetermining certain instances of rap music seem to partly emanate from the conditions that created it. Although certainly not all rappers feel part of the 'below/low', some of them seem to position themselves as members of the working class, even members of the lumpen proletariat, themselves victims of police brutality or the mass incarceration phenomenon. Often, they do not act as outsiders, as some sort of detached artist/intellectual in an ivory tower, looking down towards the lower masses with a condescending gaze. Arguably, some of them feel the need to identify with the marginalised multitudes, shaping them as 'a people' in order to represent their demands as loud as possible, becoming the cry, 'the voice of the people'.

As Matthew Oware notes:

[M]any rappers' words speak to the realities faced by the populations they come from, whether men, women, gay, straight, bisexual, white, black, Latino, rich, poor, disenfranchised, powerful or some other aspect of their identity. Moreover, these individuals may express the lived reality

of a listener, fan, activist, or scholar. Thus, artists' words have the capability to inspire, motivate, or challenge some aspect of American society. [...] Only when scholars engage in a critical analysis of their words can audiences better understand the world around us. Rap music reflects and refracts our current understanding of gender, race, sexuality, and politics. (Oware 2018, p. 207)

A certain current within rap music, then, ostensibly functions both as an art form and a politicised discourse, greatly influenced by a populist sensibility, with the division between us and them, those above (high) and those below (low), playing a central role. Surely, the general idea of Oware, that rap music, as a cultural product of society, refracts and reflects certain belief systems, ideologies, power structures and relationships, must be relevant not only in the US but in any place where rap music (or similar artistic movements) exists. If this seems to be the case in the US, is it also the case in Greece?

The Greek case

In Greece, the idea of the rapper as either part of the majority or as the voice of the majority itself, demanding recognition and criticising the establishment, has been evident almost from the start. Overall, rap music has at least a 30-year-long history in the country. Hip hop in Greece began as a subculture in the 1980s with modest commercial success and recognition starting from 2003 onwards, especially with the adoption of Greek lyrics, melodies and instrumentation (Elafros 2013, pp. 83–4). To be precise, Greek rap music started as a very niche musical genre, with F.F.C. (Fortified Concept), the first hip hop band, performing for very small audiences and releasing tracks on tapes in a DIY fashion. At the start of the 1990s, other bands emerged and, slowly but steadily, hip hop became a youthful subculture that thrived in major Greek cities like Athens and Thessaloniki. During the 1990s, a multitude of bands and acts started to emerge, many of them influenced in different ways, mainly by their North American counterparts.

Currently, rap is modestly influential in Greece (both mainstream and underground). It is possible to distinguish at least three ideal-typical currents/waves from the 1990s up until today. There was originally the current influenced by gangsta rap, hardcore battle rap and boom bap sounds, which is now considered 'old school'. Parts of this 'old school' legacy continue up until today, with some aesthetic differences from their 1990s roots. There is a smaller current within the scene, which is located on the consciously political side of rap music (influenced by earlier boom bap sounds like Onyx or Psycho Realm). This trend always had ties to the younger generation of activists, anarchists and anti-authoritarians in general, with political movements and sectors critical of the *status quo*. Finally, there is the 'new school' wave, which developed in the early 2010s and mostly shares the now standard, over the top consumerist, sometimes overtly sexist and masculinist, 'trap' aesthetics that is dominating this music scene in many countries (France, UK, US, etc.). Of course, these categories are not strict and can overlap.

At any rate, Greek rap music never escaped its 'marginalized' status and always remained relatively 'alternative' or 'independent' (Elafros 2013, p. 85) within Greek popular music. No wonder that, intervening from such an alternative position, groups like Terror X Crew, Active Member, Παρεμβολές [Interferences] and many others have steadily, since almost day one, been giving political connotations to

their music, presenting themselves as part of the suffering majority, as the collective mind of the oppressed: 'In Greece, a generalized discourse against forms of central power – such as police, government and mainstream media – has been present in the lyrics of rappers from the very first moment' (Efthymiou and Stavrakakis 2018, p. 208).

This is evident, for example, in the song 'Να τους δω να τρέχουν' ['See them running'] from the group Terror X Crew, released in 1995, where the group declares that they 'don't want to be a part of their system, [they] won't be their servant, or slave'; instead, 'all [they] want to do is to see them running'. The pronoun 'them' reveals an antagonistic spirit (presumably against the elite, the government officials, the ideological state apparatus). The rap duo makes consistent use of the first person narrative, in both singular and plural forms, and at the same time constantly creates the image of an adversary, through the use of 'them/they'. This identification arguably concerns many agents identified with the power structure. Ultimately, 'they' are the few, the corrupt, the ones who seek to uphold the *status quo*, in the eyes of the rap duo.

From 2013 onwards, after the murder of Pavlos Fyssas, a young rapper, activist and syndicalist, by the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn (which eventually led to its downfall and criminal conviction), rap music attained somewhat of a heightened acclaim within the broader public sphere. This also made rap music – and the oppositional culture within hip hop in particular – increasingly relevant to public political discourse, because obviously other – less politically conscious – currents within the genre (for example, trap) had already gained relative prominence and continue to enjoy recognition. Fyssas was the first notable native victim of Golden Dawn, and, shortly after his assassination, became a symbol for various political movements in Greece as well as a symbol of anti-fascism within the rap scene itself (strengthening the anti-racist echo of its origins in the US) (Strickland 2017). Since then, 'anti-fascist discourse has held a prominent place in Greek rap music of the recent years and has been a common point of reference for rappers of various political positionings' (Efthymiou and Stavrakakis 2018, p. 208).

Indeed, Pavlos Fyssas gained a significant posthumous legacy as rapper and anti-fascist. These two identities, the identity of the anti-fascist activist and the identity of the rapper/mc became intertwined after his death, resulting in the attribution of a martyr-like status. Accordingly, his songs were gradually acknowledged as the voice of the anti-fascist struggle from 2013 onwards, with most of them averaging at around 1 million views on YouTube and some breaking into 2 or 3 million views. In addition, there is now a special day (18 September) dedicated to him as a symbol of anti-fascist struggle. Thus, his example had a significant and multi-level impact on the Greek public sphere, facilitating the creation of an anti-fascist movement, which is still strong today, almost 10 years later. Last but not least, today an annual rap music festival is held in his memory and the exact location where he was murdered has now been renamed to Pavlos Fyssas Street.

Analysis: vignettes from the contemporary Greek rap scene

After sketching the relevance of populism research for locating the broader political impact of rap music and having also introduced the Greek scene, we now turn to two songs by two well-known Greek rappers: 'Ένα καλύτερο αύριο' ['A Better

Tomorrow'] by Δωδέκατος πίθηκος [Dodekatos Pithikos – The 12th Monkey] and 'Για να μην στα χρωστάω' [So That I Don't Owe You] by Μιθριδάτης [Mithridatis].

Case selection has been predicated upon three criteria. The first is political (oppositional) relevance, since both examples are full of political connotations and infused with intense anti-government/establishment sentiments. The second is impact on the public sphere as both became an instant success with, respectively, 2.5 million views on YouTube to date, and 2.3 million views. The final criterion is time-frame since both songs were released during the Covid-19 crisis, in 2021. During this period, the handling of the crisis by the governing party (New Democracy) attracted sustained criticism by many sides. Obviously, the pandemic created a very challenging situation, introducing significant uncertainties for all governments around the globe. Criticism of the Greek government mainly focused on its handling of the medical side of the pandemic (for example, on whether it strengthened the national healthcare system to the required degree), and on its disproportionate reliance on stringency and restrictions (for example, curfews, heavy policing in neighbourhoods, fines, the prohibition of public gatherings, etc.; see Petsinis 2021; Papanicolaou and Rigakos 2021; Christopoulos 2021; Stamouli 2021; Poulakidakos 2021; but also see, Sotiropoulos *et al* 2021 and Karavokyris 2021 for a more positive assessment). As a result, trust in its handling of the pandemic crisis seems to have deteriorated over time and many people started expressing doubts and straightforward criticism and opposition. It is within this general context that the following two examples need to be understood.

'A Better Tomorrow' by Dodekatos Pithikos [The 12th Monkey] (2021)

In April 2021, Δωδέκατος πίθηκος [Dodekatos Pithikos – The 12th Monkey], a rapper from Thessaloniki, released a song entitled 'A Better Tomorrow (protest)' in response to the government's handling of the pandemic. In general, Dodekatos Pithikos seems to belong to a group of rappers that 'address contemporary socio-political problems in most of their lyrics, reacting against certain forms of authority and oppression, and usually reject modes of production and promotion that are not in control of or exploit the artists and their audiences' (Efthymiou and Stavrakakis 2018, p. 211). Here the rapper seems to show a particular interest in the construction of an ostensibly populist-type discourse not only through his song, but also with regard to the song's and its music video's general aesthetic.

The music video (Δωδέκατος πίθηκος 2021) starts with an interview with Stelios Kazantzidis, a very well-known Greek popular music (*laiko*) singer from the 1950s and 1960s who famously charmed conservatives, progressives, working- and middle-class people alike, as well as sections of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, Kazantzidis managed to cross over cultural, class and political boundaries and gained the status of a symbol of Greekness itself. Dodekatos Pithikos seems to position himself as a (somewhat similar?) symbol that could possibly unite different social sectors – regardless of their political identities or social constituencies – against a common foe, the government. The ability to draw power from different quarters in order to create a populist-like (equivalent) assemblage of slogans and mottos is key in this example. Quickly the video cuts to an image of Dodekatos Pithikos's head being stepped on by a boot (presumably a boot belonging to a person in a position of authority?) giving flesh to the classic Orwellian quote

from 1984 ('If you want a picture of the future imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever'; Orwell [1949] 1990, p. 280). Despite his left-wing heritage, Orwell is a symbol that transcends political frontiers and is easily appropriated by the left as well as by parts of the right.

Dodekatos Pithikos seems to be referring to cases of aggressive policing that unfolded during the period(s) of covid-related lockdown measures in Greece, with many such occasions of police misconduct 'leaking' to the public sphere through amateur videos (Petsinis 2021). Consistent with certain biopolitical arguments, the main idea here is that lockdown measures themselves may have been largely an excuse for the expansion of policing activities: 'Ωραία λέξη είναι το lockdown αντί να πείτε εγκλεισμός, φυλακή καραντίνας' ['Lockdown might be a fancy word, instead of saying incarceration, quarantine jail'].¹ The song also highlights the significant funding provided by the government to mass media outlets during the pandemic, an additional issue of much current debate: 'Πόσα εκατομμύρια δώσατε στα βοθοκάναλα για τα σποτάκια; Για να σας γλύφουν τον κώλο ε' ['How many millions have you paid the sewage media for the spots? To kiss your ass?']. With respect to this matter, the government has singled out this funding as necessary support in such difficult times and as essential to the communication aspect of pandemic management. Yet the opposition denounced it as an act of securing positive publicity for the government (Christopoulos 2021; AFP 2021). As a result, a special committee of the Greek Parliament has now been set up to examine the issue.

In the case of rap and, specifically, in the case of Dodekatos Pithikos, older generations – which have often adopted a very specific kind of anti-populist and anti-youth rhetoric, delegitimising calls for change as an 'anomaly' – are directly accused of creating the economic crisis of the late 2000s and, furthermore, of upholding the ensuing unjust and unequal *status quo* presently: 'Οι προηγούμενες γενιές μας σακάτεψαν, τώρα τους πειράζει που αντιδράμε' ['The previous generations destroyed us, now they mind that we fight back'].

What seems to be the main idea behind the song is the clash between 'the people', on whose side Dodekatos Pithikos seems to position himself, and 'the elite', the government, which is dividing and violating 'the people' ('Τον λαό να διχάζετε, τον λαό να βιάζετε' ['you are dividing the people, you are violating/raping the people']): 'Δικαιοσύνη μόνο για τον πλούσιο ξύλο, γαμήσι για τον φτωχό' ['Justice only for the rich, beating, fucking for the poor']. In addition, the institutional establishment seems to be denounced for using the pandemic as an excuse to control and discipline, instead of actually and effectively combating covid-19 as a public health emergency. The rapper takes on, once more, the mantle of 'Vox Populi', the voice of the people, ostensibly expressing their feelings along with his own, which are presented as one and the same. Yet excessive policing on health grounds is also seen as having the indirect effect of unifying those who feel affected and energising their truth-teller, who assumes the task of performatively revealing reality *as it is*.

Throughout the music video, the camera is centred around Dodekatos Pithikos, with instances of being brutalised by an obscure actor visibly dressed in some kind of official uniform. Here, he seems to be making a confession, and, at the same time,

¹ The lyrics cited in this article were translated from Greek to English by Kostas Savvopoulos.

suffering for it. The personal connection with the viewer/listener is facilitated by the constant zoom-ins on the figure of the rapper. By showing the rapper repeatedly as a victim of violence, the video reaffirms that truth tellers, such as Dodekatos Pithikos, always suffer at the hands of the ruling class. This becomes especially evident in the rapper's lyrics when he claims: 'Το μόνο έγκλημα που έχω διαπράξει ονομάζεται ελευθερία του λόγου' ['The only crime I have committed is called freedom of speech']. On another note, during the entirety of the music video, the performer is surrounded by pitch-black darkness, making it seem like he is in some sort of solitary confinement. This confinement is only interrupted by instances of figures wearing helmets (arguably representing a repressive apparatus) brutalising him. This may be an example of how he views the government measures against covid-19, already indicated in the part of the lyrics where he names the lockdown as 'incarceration, quarantine jail'.

'So That I Don't Owe You!' by Mithridatis (2021)

After discussing the first example from the contemporary Greek rap scene that may qualify as strongly engaging with a populist sensibility in terms of its lyrics and performance, we should also, at this point, highlight an additional dimension of much recent interest. This relates to the broader public sphere where – against the background of a predominantly anti-populist mainstream, a political and media mainstream that is always quick to denounce all references to 'the people' as irresponsible populism and a major threat to political normality – certain political or cultural projects (like rap) may be discussed as 'populist' in the pejorative sense of the word in order to vindicate the *status quo* threatened by such initiatives or to – consciously or unconsciously – delegitimise criticism. Whether they are themselves populist or not, the fact that such (political or cultural) projects – from particular political forces to rap music – are demonised as such brings them within the scope of the research field of populism studies, which must encompass discourses about populism in addition to populist discourses themselves. Indeed '[n]ot much attention has been paid to such dynamics underlying and perpetuating debates about populism' (De Cleen and Glynos 2021, p. 188, emphasis in the original); yet such 'meta-reflections on discourses about populism' (De Cleen and Glynos 2021, p. 190) are crucial in illuminating the field in all its complexity and paradoxical dynamics.

As an oppositional political force, SYRIZA was targeted in this way, between 2010 and 2015, by being demonised by its political opponents, the established media and various pundits as 'populist' (seen here as a synecdoche of any conceivable political pathology; Stavrakakis *et al.* 2017). However, following SYRIZA's term in government and its defeat in 2019 by the right-wing New Democracy, under the leadership of premier Kyriakos Mitsotakis (in power at the time of writing, September 2022), SYRIZA's opposition has not been able to draw much attention to or create significant obstacles to the implementation of the new government's agenda. Here is where the potential political impact of the Greek rap scene enters the arena. What the main opposition party did not manage to achieve was indeed attempted by rap music. First, in 2020, rapper Θύτης [Thitis – Hunter/Perpetrator] released a diss track – an *ad hominem* song in rap culture – against the Prime Minister himself. This was entitled 'Έι Μητσοτάκη!' ['Hey Mitsotakis!'] and made

use of shocking, desecrating and obscene – by public standards – language, to underline the rapper’s opposition, indignation and even hatred towards the government.

Another very recent case, that of Mithridatis – a rap star from the 1990s, who resurfaced in May 2021 with ‘So That I Don’t Owe You!’, a 12 minute-long song, organised as a seven-act one-man show – is even more instructive. Here, seven verses, each with its own theme, are presented as singular diss tracks. Each act has a specific theme and is colour-coded in the video. In the aforementioned song, this rapper heavily criticises the government and the ruling party on a number of subjects ranging from corruption, the management of the pandemic and the economy as well as its general political orientation. The song was successful enough to get the attention of mainstream media. Having attracted more than a million views on YouTube within a few days (Μιθριδάτης 2021), it was predominantly discussed in the public sphere in terms of its ‘populism’ and whether this was compatible with artistic merit (Kavatziklis 2021). It was, as a result, defended by left-wing circles and media, and attacked by anti-populist mainstream pundits and media as oppositional propaganda and a poor substitute for political art proper (Sideris 2021; Mandravelis 2021).

The lyrics are divided into seven verses and the music video into seven corresponding acts. The first verse is dedicated to the government and the party of New Democracy. The second verse concerns the party’s voters, the *petit bourgeois* that supposedly elected the current government. The third verse stands against the mass media, whom the performer views as systemic and corrupt. The fourth verse has to do with the pandemic and the measures that were taken by the government. Earlier it was pointed out that these measures were viewed by many as overtly focused on policing and discipline. The fifth verse, the shortest of the seven, is about the *faux* resentment expressed by ‘social media’ activists. The sixth verse follows and builds upon the fifth verse, addressing more broadly the social media culture that has taken hold of many people, preventing them from actually mobilising, keeping them docile and harmless in a never-ending scroll down trapped within a digital simulation of real life. The seventh and final verse, concerns the artistic community, of which Mithridatis is part, and their lack of artistic and activist responses to the covid-19 measures and the country’s lapse towards what Mithridatis perceives as a more or less ‘illiberal’ direction (also see, Christopoulos 2021).

The lyrics comprise, among others, the following axes. First, the oppositional tone encompasses, once more, a variety of dominant institutions and values (the elitism of the prime minister and the government, etc.), paying particular attention to the media and its much-discussed (especially during the pandemic) association with mainstream politics. Essentially, reference is made to the nepotist and ostensibly ‘aristocratic’ character of the administration and its leadership. Government elitism is explicitly and ironically addressed, with supposedly super-intelligent ‘golden boys’ sponsored by the current administration, and the latter denounced as a ‘dynasty’.

Against a strategy currently examined by the Greek Parliament and often perceived in oppositional circles as a beatification avalanche involving handouts to particular media in order to paint a prettier – often idealised – picture for the government and the Prime Minister, Mithridatis seems to aim at creating the exact opposite, speaking on behalf of a people (painted with, more or less, plebeian ‘colours’) trapped within a dystopian reality: ‘ένας λαός σε δυστοπία κι ομηρία’ [‘A people in dystopia, kept hostage’]. In the third act he raps about the media, which are seen as sustaining and constituting the hegemony the government now

enjoys. Full of ‘propaganda’ and ‘fake news’, journalism is accused of promoting ‘του καθεστώτος [την] αγιογραφία’ [‘the regime’s hagiography’].

Distrust of the media has been a major issue in the country’s public discourse, especially since the Greek austerity crisis, from 2012 onwards. The media is often denounced as the extension of a corrupt political elite; in this type of representation, they are seen as distorting what is at stake in social and political life. Distrust towards the media constitutes a central theme in hip hop culture as well – affecting many rappers and fans alike. Advancing the claim that rap music itself is the original truth-teller and not the media, the attack on mainstream institutions and values associated with populism seems to encounter an almost ideal vehicle in rap music, which obviously shares this oppositional attitude and manages to articulate it using a ‘low’ grammar that highlights the socio-cultural references of an arguably populist dynamic in the making.

The emphasis that, as with Dodekatos Pithikos, is placed around the covid-19 measures becomes strong in the fourth act and the corresponding lyrics. In it, Mithridatis raps:

Τώρα βγες, μουσαφίρηδες, τουρίζμο
 Τώρα φταις, μπουντρούμι και εγκλείζμο
 Ασφαλής, χωρίς εισόδημα κι εσώκλειστος
 [Now come out, the tourists have arrived
 Now it’s your fault, get back into lockdown
 Safe, with no income, imprisoned]

Here, the performer seems to be castigating the many unexpected U-turns of the government in the management of the pandemic – trying to balance economic priorities with the public health emergency. In particular, after a very aggressive lockdown during the first phase, boosting the tourism industry assumed priority and tourists were invited to return to Greece and enjoy the sunny resorts during the summer of 2020. Rather predictably, covid-19 cases started spiking some time later, with blame often put on supposedly reckless young people. The performer also castigates the economic aspect of the pandemic management, which seems to have affected sectors of Greek society: ‘Η δυστυχία των πολλών, των λίγων η βουλιμία’ [‘The unhappiness of the many, the bulimia of the few’]. Most important, from our point of view, is the political criticism incorporated in the song. The government’s insistence on restrictive measures is highlighted, with the Constitution becoming ‘ένα όνομα απλά σε μια πλατεία’ [‘just a name for a square’]. The implication here is that, as a result, rights and constitutional provisions have no meaning to people anymore and the category ‘Σύνταγμα’ [Syntagma – Constitution] itself has only one meaning left, that of naming the central square in the country’s capital (Syntagma Square in Athens).

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined two recent Greek rap performances from the perspective of political science and populism research. In both cases, many listeners (both in favour or against the songs examined) have perceived these rap performances as anti-government anthems, characterised centrally by an aggressive oppositional profile antagonising the *status quo* as well as mainstream values and institutions. Furthermore, this politicised profile is articulated through a radically

iconoclastic – almost scandalous – rhetoric utilising slang and other ‘low’ socio-cultural resources. Such instances of rap music and overall performativity are capable of articulating a ‘discursive construction of social division’ that constitutes a paradigmatic element in populist choreographies to the extent that ‘[f]rontiers are the *sine qua non* of the emergence of the “people”’ (Laclau 2005, p. 231).

This construction is invested with much symbolic violence in line with the grammar associated with rap culture and other contemporary media like video games, films and social media. One should not forget that rap music has the ability to articulate all aspects of human sociality (like sexuality, substance abuse, etc.), utilising a consciously scandalous and obscene tone. At any rate, what this oppositional or antagonistic schema involves is the first necessary pre-condition of a populist rupture: the dichotomic drawing of frontiers – that is to say, the articulation of a relatively appealing anti-elitism, reinforced, in this case, by the ‘low’ location and operation of the genre. As we have seen, this performativity can occasionally attract the attention of millions of people, thus allowing one to risk hypotheses about its (future) political implications.

Obviously the artistic transformation of suffering into anger and protest involves a certain political act. To the extent, however, that the ensuing performance is not directly associated with any political party, movement and/or organised mobilisation, one could only imagine the discourse put forward here – from the point of view of contemporary populism research – operating mainly as a proto-populist stimulus, a trigger designating a pre-populist moment that may be putting forward resources to be used at a later stage to construct a – potentially – full-blown populist initiative. No doubt, it also alters the stance and increases the potential political availability of many subjects (citizens) who gradually start to identify with the oppositional schema performed. At the same time, the rap performances examined designate a set of subject positions and related grievances and frustrations – as well as demands – that indicate the beginning of an articulation in terms of an expanding chain of equivalences. By coming together, such separate demands gradually lose their differential particularity in favour of expressing a common opposition to the *status quo*, which is seen as frustrating all of them. The ensuing opposition performatively produces a new antagonising force: the underdog as an emerging popular pole and its – cultural and potentially political – representatives and spokespersons. Obviously, this process cannot be concluded within the context of a song or a rap performance – which is an unlikely vehicle for the emergence of a full-blown political alternative. However, and once more, rap performativity constructs frontiers and new subjective, underdog positionalities, that may operate politically in the future, assisting in the formulation of a favourable inter-textual environment for the emergence of a ‘people’ (radically antagonistic to ‘the elite’).

One wonders, of course, whether the symbolic violence and slang rhetoric characteristic of rap will facilitate further unification between different social sectors or whether it will mark a limit when, for example, the younger audiences of rap will encounter older generations with different grievances and cultural tastes, a more traditional sense of morality or means of expression. Eventually, this may be revealed as a limitation of the political effectivity of rap performances as far as the creation of potentially majoritarian populist equivalences is concerned. On the other hand, something else is also crucial here, specifically in the intimate (often obscene) language utilised, which feels like a private conversation between close friends feeling a similar frustration and indignation that suddenly becomes

aggressively public: what if such an operation has the potential of acquiring a 'charismatic' status and thus further increasing the populist potential of rap music? Indeed, the political anthropologist, James Scott, has put forward a discursive theorisation of charisma that focuses on such a movement from private to public. In Scott's account, every social order, every process of domination, 'generates a hegemonic public conduct and backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power' (Scott 1990, p. xii). Hence, both a public and a hidden transcript emerge; the latter pertains to 'discourse that takes place "offstage", beyond direct observation by powerholders' (Scott 1990, p. 4). Within 'normal' conditions, these hidden transcripts rarely emerge in public. Occasionally, however, when social and political conditions enter the realm of the extraordinary, they can surface to disrupt the public domain, dislocating the political *cordon sanitaire* between hidden and public transcripts (Scott 1990, p. 18). In that sense, charisma has less to do with 'personal magnetism' and more with a socially produced reciprocity (Scott 1990, p. 221). Such a reciprocity unfolds when something hidden (foreclosed by the power bloc) – the frustrations, the grievances and the associated demands of a subordinate group(s) – suddenly becomes publicly sayable in the most desecrating way (slang), ostensibly creating a charismatic bond between this subordinate group and the agent openly voicing the 'hidden transcript', the truth-teller, in this case rap music.

Artistic performativity and the socio-cultural axis emerge, thus, as crucial dimensions implicated in the triggering and emergence of populist scenaria. This is a dimension, which is often missed, but could be highlighted by a focus on populism (and political performativity more generally) in the contemporary study of a variety of cultural fields and musical genres like popular music. Significant currents within rap music, especially, with their radically oppositional profile and their staging of 'low' credentials, could be seen as directly implicated in contemporary populist choreographies. However selective and limited, our examination of two examples from the contemporary Greek scene amply demonstrates that rap performativity encourages the creation and broader appeal of frames of meaning that connote a proto-populist sensibility – and are also opposed as 'populist', in the pejorative sense, by the political and cultural mainstream. By claiming to voice plebeian indignation, rap songs introduce antagonism and polarisation, often painted with a desecrating impulse, drawing on the 'rhetoric of hyperbole and exaggeration, typical of hip hop' (Naerland 2016, p. 101). Such a registering of socio-political division indicates a direct correspondence to a (proto)populist discursive operation that manages to attract much attention and seems to set in motion an equivalential process of (partial) unification that may, in the future, result in the emergence of a new collective subject with potentially hegemonic pretensions. In that sense, the current analysis helps us capture 'what happens before that moment, when the people has not yet entered the sphere of political appearance' (Feinberg 2021, p. 105). Only the future can tell if such a potentiality (the political appearance proper) will materialise, but this is something that cannot be guaranteed by rap performances themselves, especially given the obscene grammar they often utilise. The latter (obscenity, incivility) may increase their salience and legitimacy within their primary audience and also attract general attention, but may also limit severely their ability to operate hegemonically in a broader as well as sustainable sense. This will obviously depend on their ability to articulate themselves with other oppositional instances and acquire further political

visibility and salience in the public domain without alienating their potential co-travellers.²

To study such ongoing developments, populism research of popular (music) culture will have to enhance its research toolkit in ways effectively accounting not only for the political operation of lyrics, which is often a limitation to be overcome, but also for the performative aspects of rap music more broadly. In this text, a first such attempt was undertaken in a limited and cautious way. As far as future research is concerned, much will depend on its capacity to enlist ethnographic methods focusing on the various practices, affectivities, and discourses, marking the production of musical subjectivities *in situ* as well as their reception (audience research; also see Papović and Pejović 2015, p. 121). Last but not least, to the extent that ‘populism’ has often been discussed, not only as a ‘pathology’ of (Greek) politics, but also as a ‘pathology’ explaining the supposed marginality of neohellenic music as well as its ‘failed Europeaness’ (here European modernity is associated with a superior – and elitist – ‘high culture’ legitimising eurocentrism; Tragaki 2019, p. 6), an analysis of Greek rap music through the lens of a nuanced conceptualisation of populism also involves the potential of taking this field beyond euro-centrism and avoiding the dominance of constraining stereotypes.

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² However, what should also be noted, in this respect, is that the lack of ‘respectable’ outlets for the voicing of oppositional criticism may currently be triggering an acting out of generalised incivility: the vulgar expression of such sentiments through the obscene ridiculing of the prime minister and the government in social media (one such incident took place around 13–15 January 2022 through the posting and massive circulation of irreverent verses), thus popularising a rap-style grammar and potentially increasing the latter’s impact.

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