

Popular Music, Populism in Germany, and the Politics of Critique

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Abstract: In this chapter, we first seek to define the nexus of popular music and populism. We argue that musical performances of populism cannot be reduced to party politics or musical politics, but that they are widespread in popular music culture, both in Germany and beyond. Against the backdrop of this broad approach to the field of popular music and populism, we ask: what does it mean to critique populism in (German-language) popular music? And what are the challenges of critiquing populism in popular music?

We discuss these questions by focusing on the music video “Der Osten rockt” (2015) by the East German Deutschrock band Goitzsche Front, one of the most popular and successful Deutschrock bands since the early 2010s. We demonstrate how the music video of “Der Osten rockt” exemplifies a specific variety of populist performances based on the construction of an East German underdog identity. Based on our analysis of this video, we argue that developing a nuanced understanding of practices of critique inherent in populist performances is a prerequisite for a differentiated critique of populism.

1. Introduction

The term populism is currently omnipresent. Politicians are quick to criticise statements and demands made by their colleagues as populist, and it is difficult to keep track of the number of academic papers, scientific articles, and journalistic writings on populism. In public discourse, at least in Germany, where the term is strongly associated with the political right, populism has predominantly negative connotations. It also tends to be used in association with party politics in general and the party Alternative for Germany (AfD) in particular.¹ Although

1 For a discussion of populism discourses in contemporary Germany, see Dunkel 2021a.

populism in Germany cannot be reduced to the AfD, it is worth mentioning that music does play an important role in the party's politics. The AfD's musical strategy mostly relies on appropriating music that is not directly related to the party for their own purposes. As we have demonstrated elsewhere, the AfD's musical strategies include the use of populist songs by mainstream artists such as Reinhard Mey, Gunter Gabriel (Dunkel 2021a, 129), and Xavier Naidoo (Dunkel and Kopanski, forthcoming), appropriating German-language folk music (in particular the music of the mid-19th century democratisation movement), Hollywood film music, German Schlager, and German classical music (e.g. Richard Wagner). In addition, their strategy includes the creation of sonic "threat scenarios" – for instance by playing Islamic religious music at demonstrations (Dunkel 2021b, 154).

However, the AfD is not the sole representative of populism in Germany and the populism of the AfD is not equivalent to other kinds of populism we may find endorsed in the vast field of popular music. Elements of populism are widespread in popular music beyond party politics, and they are by no means limited to the political right. In this chapter, we will therefore take a broader view of the relation between popular music and populism in Germany. Against the backdrop of such a vast field, what does it mean to critique populism in (German-language) popular music? What are the challenges of critiquing populism in popular music?

We would like to discuss these questions by focusing on the song and music video "Der Osten rockt" (in English: "East Germany rocks") (2013) by the Deutschrock band Goitzsche Front, which, we argue, can be approached by applying the frame of populism – but not necessarily right-wing populism. "Der Osten rockt" is one of the band's best-known songs: by March 2023, it had been streamed about five million times on Spotify and the official music video has had more than 10 million views on YouTube since its release (Goitzsche Front 2013). We chose the video clip for three reasons: first, Goitzsche Front is representative of a number of bands from the genre of so-called 'Neuer Deutschrock', many of which are highly successful in German-speaking countries. Second, many of these bands – including Goitzsche Front – are criticised by both anti-fascist and centrist writers for allegedly providing affordances for right-wing populism (e.g. Betzin 2016; Sommer 2018a; Majewsky and dpa 2020). Third, this video clip, in particular, is interesting because it contains numerous (nostalgic, but also ironic) references to the German Democratic Republic (GDR). We argue that popular music with populist affordances should be approached as a form of

critique which we need to take seriously when critiquing populism. Formulating such a critique requires a nuanced concept of populism.²

2. Critiquing Populism, Populism as Critique

There are quite divergent scholarly approaches to populism. It has been defined as a historically grounded social movement dating back to the People's Party in the late-nineteenth-century US (Postel 2009; Kazin 2017; Goodwyn 1976), a type of economic policy (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991), a communication style (Block and Negrine 2017), a political strategy (Weyland 2017), a "thin-centred" ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013), a discourse (Wodak, KhosraviNik, and Mral 2013; Laclau 2005), and a performative style (Moffitt 2016). It has also been subclassified into various varieties: left-wing, right-wing, inclusionary, exclusionary, Latin American and European, among others (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017; Moffitt 2020).

Despite these differences, there is a broad consensus in populism research that populism is based on a binary distinction between two groups: 'the people' and 'the elite'. These two groups are conceived as being antagonistic to each another (Moffitt 2020). This antagonism can be described as primarily vertical: cast as a 'power bloc', 'the elite' is placed on top of the social order, seeking to maintain its hegemony by exerting control over 'the people' at the bottom (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; 2020). Importantly, we do not regard populism as an inherent threat to democracy, or as essentially anti-pluralist or anti-democratic. Our approach thus differs from what may be termed a "populism as threat"-approach, which is popular in German-speaking contexts and is associated with political scientist Jan-Werner Müller (2016) and the populism surveys ("Populismus-Barometer") of the Bertelsmann foundation (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020). In our view, such a generalizing perspective on populism as an inherent social threat risks actually being elitist itself, since it entails an attribution of the roots of illiberalism and anti-pluralism to political phenomena that are primarily characterised by their determination to oppose an elite. By contrast, we hold that populism is highly adaptable; it may have authoritarian and egalitarian, anti-democratic and democratizing functions, varying from case to case.

2 This article is part of the research project "Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe" which was funded by the German Volkswagen Foundation grant (project number 94754).

We mostly draw on discursive-performative approaches to populism. Developed by the political theorist Benjamin Moffitt (2020) and drawing on Ernesto Laclau's (2005) discursive definition of populism, discursive-performative approaches focus on how populist discourses and performances articulate, affirm, and emotionally charge 'the people', 'the elite', and elements that help to construct the antagonism between these groups. Populist performances, for instance, may negotiate group identities, group resentments, and affective communities or "communities of feeling" (Berezin 2002). A shared group identity of 'the people' can, for instance, be constituted by what populism researcher Pierre Ostiguy (2017, 73) has called the "flaunting of the low" – that is the celebration and circulation of what is widely considered lowbrow: seemingly "bad" manners, transgressive and uncouth behavior, coarse language, rawness, disregard for social etiquette, and so on. The "low", in Ostiguy's sense, is a culturally relative concept; it can be framed differently depending on its cultural and historical context (Ostiguy 2017, 73). In general, however, the performance of antagonistic styles and aesthetics is a central aspect of populism. In addition, although populism is not nationalist in and of itself, it is often enmeshed with a potentially wide range of other political discourses, which may include socialism, nativism, and nationalism, among other discourses (Moffitt 2020).

In European and US contexts, the last decade has seen the rise of what Lawrence Rosenthal (2020) calls "populism's toxic embrace of nationalism". We may add that populism and xenophobic nationalism had embraced one another long before the 2010s – if we think of Austrian politician Jörg Haider, for instance.³ However, the large-scale rise of far-right populist discourses throughout European countries is a rather recent phenomenon. Many factors have been identified that led to this development, from the political response to the financial crisis of the late 2000s, and the neoliberal financial regime that caused this crisis, to an increase in economic insecurity, the erosion of the welfare state, changes in migration dynamics (such as the so-called refugee crisis of 2015), larger technological transformations and developments in media culture (Wodak, KhosraviNik, and Mral 2013, xvii; Reckwitz 2019), progressive value change leading to a far-right populist backlash (Inglehart and Norris 2019), and the diminishing influence of an "old establishment" in various social, political, and economic sectors (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), among others.

3 Ruth Wodak, Majid KhosraviNik and Brigitte Mral also refer to the rise of syncretic and far-right varieties of populism in Europe as the "Berlusconisation" and "Haiderisation of politics" (Wodak, KhosraviNik, and Mral 2013, xvii).

Notwithstanding these explanations, we hold that the large-scale popular success of populism and nationalism would be unthinkable without corresponding changes on a cultural level – in the structures of feeling, systems of meaning, and orders of knowledge with which people make sense of their everyday lives. Popular music is a fundamental aspect of those changes. Popular music culture not only provides a realm in which politics, in a narrow sense as the business of government and party politics, is reflected upon, but is also political itself in a broader sense, as it helps to create bonds between people, to form affective communities, and to negotiate interests and meanings. As John Street, Sara Inthorn and Martin Scott (2013, 4) emphasise, the practices of popular culture “are closely allied with the ways in which citizenship is lived”.

3. Populist Aesthetics in Goitzsche Front’s “Der Osten rockt”

Performances of populism in popular music that lack a direct association with political programmes are difficult to pinpoint and assess. For this reason, they may prove to be quite instructive when discussing the intricacies of critiquing populism. In our view, populist affordances in popular music are exemplified in the music video “Der Osten rockt” (2013) by the East German rock band Goitzsche Front (see Dunkel 2021a). The band is anything but a niche phenomenon on the German music market. After forming in 2009 in the East German town of Bitterfeld-Wolfen (Saxony-Anhalt), the band achieved its first major chart success in 2016 with the album *Mo[nu]ment*. Since then, three of the band’s albums have been in the Top 10 of the German album charts. *Deines Glückes Schmied* [Smith of Your Happiness] (2018) made it to first place of the German charts, and the album *Ostgold* (2020) reached second place.⁴ The band’s live album, *Live in Berlin*, released in December 2020, is their most recent chart success.

Musically, Goitzsche Front can be located in a development that has been called ‘New Deutschrock’ or ‘Neuer Deutschrock’ (Hindrichs 2014, 156). However, this genre designation, like many genre labels, is quite inadequate. On the one hand, it is understood to comprise those bands that oriented themselves thematically and stylistically to the Böhse Onkelz⁵ in the 2000s and 2010s

4 See <https://www.offiziellecharts.de>

5 The band Böhse Onkelz was founded in 1980 and, after a brief start in the punk scene, quickly turned to the political right and started playing ‘Oi!’ music – a musical genre rooted in the working-class which emerged around 1980 and combined aspects of punk and skinhead aesthetics (see Worley 2013). In 1984, the band released the record *Der nette Mann*, an album that provided a blueprint

and tried to build on their success. Among the most popular bands of this kind are the South Tyrolean groups *Frei.Wild*, *Unantastbar*, and a number of other groups with similar aesthetics and themes, including a self-staging as underdogs antagonizing an elite. In particular, the band *Frei.Wild* has been criticised widely in this context for their ethnonationalist songs (e.g. Schiedel 2014; Büchner 2019) – and ethnonationalism is not uncommon among other bands in the scene⁶ (see Hindrichs 2014). On the other hand, the popularity of *Frei.Wild* should not narrow the view of the entire ‘Neuer Deutschrock’ scene too much. For example, leftist bands with strong punk rock leanings, such as the *Broilers*, could also be subsumed under this label (Ahlig 2012). In recent years, there have also been political disputes within the scene. ‘Neue Deutschrock’ bands such as *Berliner Weisse* have repeatedly attacked Neo-Nazis in their lyrics (ASP n.d.)⁷, and the band *Haudegen* has sharply criticised *Frei.Wild* and other bands of the ethnonationalist spectrum (Sommer 2018b).

Goitzsche Front must be regarded against the backdrop of these developments within the scene. Although the group is not known for actively criticizing the political attitudes of specific bands, it has clearly distanced itself from Nazism and the alt-right. To give just one example, singer Pascal Bock said in a documentary produced by Central German Broadcasting (MDR): “I am against hatred and racism and things like that. I don’t know if this point of view is left-wing. If one speaks out against the political right, that one is automatically a leftist, I don’t know. The fact is, if that is the case, well then I am a leftist.” (Lakatoš

both thematically (violence, nationalism, etc.) and stylistically for right-wing extremist, German skinhead bands of the following years – many of which played ‘Oi!’ music. Nevertheless, there are also ‘apolitical’ and leftist bands within the ‘Oi!’ genre. After a few years, the *Böhse Onkelz* turned away from the skinhead scene and musically transformed into a German-language (hard) rock band. Although the band became more and more successful in the 1990s, it remained controversial for a long time due to its past. Today, the *Böhse Onkelz* are one of the most successful German-language (hard) rock bands. For further reading see Schwarz (1995) and Elflein (2014).

- 6 We understand the term ‘scene’ in the sense of Roland Hitzler and Arne Niederbacher (2010) as a loose network in which an unspecified number of persons are interconnected (Hitzler and Niederbacher 2010, 16).
- 7 Songs by *Berliner Weisse* expressing disdain for neo-Nazism include “Thor Steinar” (2008), “Keine Toleranz” (2009), and “Fahren im Wind” (2013). “Fahren im Wind”, in particular, calls out the ‘Neue Deutschrock’ scene for its openness to neo-Nazism. The lyrics contain the lines: “You don’t give a fuck / That the brown soups / Are applauding for you / The main thing is that the dough is right.” (“Es ist euch scheißegal / Dass die braunen Suppen / Für euch applaudieren / Hauptsache die Kohle stimmt.”).

2021, 8:59, our translation).⁸ Goitzsche Front achieved their commercial breakthrough following Frei.Wild's wave of success in the early 2010s, when three consecutive albums of the South Tyrolean band reached first place in the German album charts. Like Frei.Wild, Goitzsche Front turned their local origins into a trademark from the very beginning. Even the name, which derives from the Goitzsche open pit mine in the Bitterfeld mining district that was closed shortly after reunification, refers to the region where the band members grew up and live.⁹ Subsequently, the construction of a larger, "East German" identity became one of the band's most important themes. The band's last major German tours were titled "Ostgold" and "Ostgold Part 2", and the music video for the track "Der Osten rockt" is one of the band's most popular videos. However, the "oi" in the band's name can also be read as a reference to the 'Oi!' music style – a common naming practice within this music scene (e.g. Loikaemie). The music of Goitzsche Front also echoes 'Oi!' music stylistically. The scant, simple, but robust guitar sounds as well as the singer's brusque, abrasive vocal style recall central 'Oi!' music characteristics. In addition, the band thematically refers to 'Oi!' music: The vocals glorify masculinity and excessive drinking, for instance, although in an ambivalent way that seems at the same time affirmative and playfully tongue-in-cheek.

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- 8 Original: "Ich bin gegen Menschenhass und gegen Rassismus und sowas. Ob das jetzt links ist, weiß ich nicht. Also wenn man sich gegen rechts ausspricht, dass man gleich links ist, weiß ich nicht. Also Fakt ist, wenn das dann halt so ist, dann bin ich halt ein Linker." In addition, the drummer has repeatedly been shown wearing a shirt with the line "FCK NZS" (Fuck Nazis) at live shows and in music videos. The shirt is commonly associated with antifascism.
- 9 The word "Front" is likewise controversial. According to the band's singer "Bocki" [Pascal Bock], "the word 'Front' has a rather negative reputation for historical reasons. For us, this word simply stands for friendship and solidarity. We knew from the beginning that this name will trigger diverse discussions. We decided to use it nonetheless. We want to prove that the word 'Front' does not always have to be associated with right-wing extremism or war, but can also have a peaceful and communal meaning ("Front' hat ja, nicht zuletzt geschichtlich bedingt, einen eher negativen Ruf. Für uns steht dieses Wort schlicht für Freundschaft und Zusammenhalt. Wir haben von Beginn an gewusst, dass dieser Name diverse Diskussionen auslösen wird. Dennoch haben wir uns dafür entschieden. Wir wollen beweisen, dass das Wort 'Front' nicht immer mit Rechtsextremismus oder Krieg in Verbindung gebracht werden muss, sondern auch eine friedliche und gemeinschaftliche Bedeutung haben kann.") (Bocki in Clio69 [Nickname] 2013). The band's explanation – which in and of itself could be read either as sincere or as a far-right justification technique common to the far-right's culture war – has to be seen within the larger context of the band's politics discussed below.

“Der Osten rockt” is essentially staged as a performance clip with some narrative elements. It starts with the arrival of three band members who stop in an old car – a Wartburg 353¹⁰ from the GDR – in front of the entrance to a run-down warehouse. The predominant colour is grey, the windows of a building opposite the warehouse are secured with heavy iron bars holding a basketball hoop. Weeds have taken root in the cracks in the walls, and the street seems to be in need of repair (Goitzsche Front 2013, 0:08). The band members get out of the car and walk towards the warehouse gate. The singer knocks at the entrance (Goitzsche Front 2013, 0:22), whereupon the door opens and the three men go inside. In the warehouse, they are welcomed by a small, cheering crowd while the band’s drummer is already playing the drums inside, providing a somewhat brash, metallic soundtrack to the video’s first scenes before the beginning of the actual song.

The musicians walk to a stage set up on the loading platforms of two lorries parked back to back, where they join their drummer. After the singer puts his foot on a black-and-white television in which a carefully reproduced scene from the film *Go Trabi Go* (Timm 1991) is screened (Goitzsche Front 2013, 0:43), the band begins to play.¹¹ This is followed by shots alternately showing the band or individual musicians and the audience, consisting of 20–50 people. Some shots show how concertgoers are drinking beer from plastic cups. The predominantly male audience is made up of young adults whose visual appearance evokes reminiscences of both punk and skinhead aesthetics (Goitzsche Front 2013, 0:49; 1:13; 2:35). Only a few shots show women singing along and moving rhythmically to the music (Goitzsche Front 2013, 1:14). While the band is performing the song, there are individual shots showing a mechanic working on a car with a welding machine (Goitzsche Front 2013, 1:00) and the bass player smashing an acoustic guitar on a wooden block in a decrepit backyard (Goitzsche Front 2013, 1:30). About halfway into the song, some of the male audience members start pogoing. Until the end of the song, such shots can be seen repeatedly (Goitzsche Front 2013, 2:35). In the third verse, there is a change of place: now the singer is driving around in a Trabant car (Goitzsche Front 2013, 2:16). This is followed by a shot of the band toasting with bottled beer. The rest of the video clip again consists of shots of the band and its audience, with individual shots showing

10 This model of the Wartburg, which was produced between 1966 and 1988 and of which more than one million vehicles were sold, was the second most produced car in the GDR. Only the 601 model of the Trabant brand, produced between 1964 and 1990, was more successful; almost three million vehicles were sold.

11 There is no doubt that Goitzsche Front re-shot the scene for the video clip (see Czerwonn 2021). However, it remains unclear why the band did not use the original scene from the film.

the guitarist playing his instrument in the body of a Trabant car suspended on chains (Goitzsche Front 2013, 2:39).

Drawing on a performative concept of populism, it would be quite accurate to describe the aesthetics of this video as populist. The video helps to construct a proud “East German” identity in contrast to an unnamed other. The visuals underscore this trope of East German pride. The tattoo “Proud” on the singer’s upper arm is clearly visible in several shots (Goitzsche Front 2013, 2:51). In addition, the chorus says: “We will show you what it means to be an East German.” (“Wir werden es Euch zeigen, was es heißt, ein Ossi zu sein”).

Although it remains unclear who is being addressed in the second person, the piece generates the ‘us vs. them’ antagonism common in populism, in order to articulate and celebrate a shared group identity. The self-designation as “Ossi” is remarkable, as the term – at least in West Germany – is used rather pejoratively for people from the GDR. In the song, however, the term serves as a proud affirmation of an East German identity. This identity hinges on positive reinterpretations of objects that are commonly regarded as backward, worthless, and out of date, but are held in high esteem by people in the video, who are staged as local. This is facilitated by the video clip’s setting, a large workshop hall, where GDR Trabant cars are repaired. The black-and-white television that is sitting on the stage and playing the film *Go Trabi Go* seems technologically antique. The film clip shown at the beginning of the music video – in which a father from the town of Bitterfeld tells his daughter¹² “to turn off this monkey music” (Goitzsche Front 2013, 0:40) – can certainly be read as an example of nostalgia or “ostalgie” (nostalgia for the GDR) (see Littlejohn and Putnam 2010). However, it also exemplifies a West German gaze transfiguring a supposedly East German culture after the fall of the Berlin wall. After all, *Go Trabi Go* was central to derisive West German depictions of an ostensibly East German awkwardness and provinciality. The film excerpt suggests that the second person in the line “We will show you what it means to be an Ossi” may indeed indicate a West German addressee and that the song’s main antagonism is between an underdog East German position and a vaguely insinuated, potentially West German elite. Music, lyrics, and visuals combine to create an intermedial narrative style which, in the course of the video, serves to reevaluate cultural artefacts that are read as “East German”, constituting an ostensible “East Germanness” that is imbued with defiance and pride. This includes references to the welding work on cars associated with working-class aesthetics, as well as to the simple

12 The father calls his daughter by her name Jaqueline – a popular name in the 1990s and a socially deprecating, classist code to refer to people from a poor social milieu especially in East Germany and West German post-industrial areas.

clothing styles of band members and concertgoers, and to toasting and “pogoing” exclusively with bottled beer. If populism has to do with the enactment of a transgressive style that distinguishes one’s own group from an “elite” – “the flaunting of the low”, to cite Ostiguy again (2017, 73) – then this music video exemplifies a central aspect of populist aesthetics. East Germany is not only a geographical region here, but it is also a marker of a classed identity.

The distinction between the in-group (“us”) and the out-group (“them”) is also performed via the prism of gender. Both the band and the majority of the audience consist of (white) men; the welding is done by men; and self-pride is likewise associated with pride in one’s own masculinity. Men are clearly in charge in this video. A sign reading “I Love My Penis” hangs from the rearview mirror of a Trabant driven by the lead singer, and the lyrics praise East German men for having “the hottest chicks and concerts” (“wir haben die geilsten Weiber, Konzerte sowieso”). The sexism at play here, even if it is performed with a degree of self-irony, serves to assert male dominance. At the same time, it also functions as a marker of social distinction. The trashiness of the singer’s “I Love My Penis” sign, for instance, not only distinguishes men from women, but it also separates the band’s social milieu, characterised by the performance of male sexual pride, from other milieus. It is a performance of transgressive “bad manners” – of the flaunting of the low – as much as it is a performance of male power. Class, social milieu, and gender are inextricably entwined here.

A problematisation of “Der Osten rockt” as nationalistic is supported especially by the inherent nativism evoked by lines like “our homeland, yes we were born here” (“unsere Heimat, ja hier sind wir gebor’n”), which are quite common in the genre of ‘Neuer Deutschrock’. According to this line, people who were not born in East Germany do not belong to the in-group – no matter how long they have lived there. The nativism inherent in this line ethnicises the notion of belonging to a region, so that not only people who were not born in East Germany, but also people with a migration history are excluded. Moreover, the song contains various catchwords that can also be found in the lyrics of far-right bands, such as the notion of an “unbroken will that still lives in us today.” The absolute will (to the cause) is a central pillar of National Socialist ideology and a motif often used in so-called “Rechtsrock” (e.g. Slepniir *Glaube & Wille* [Eng. *Faith & Will*], 2017). Phrases like “hold up the flag” are similarly reminiscent of National Socialist songs, such as the “Horst-Wessel-Lied”, and overlap with the language of the extreme right. The musical style of Goitzsche Front also creates sonic similarities to the ‘Oi!’ genre – and may therefore echo the sound of far-right bands within this genre – despite the fact that the genre is actually politically quite diverse (see Worley 2013, 606). In sum, from an ideology-critical perspec-

tive, the song conveys a form of nativism that, if it remains unfractured, lends itself to ethnonationalist uses.

A reading of this video as an example of ethnonationalism, however, is complicated by some major differences between Goitzsche Front and songs by such bands as *Frei.Wild* that do reaffirm ethnonationalism: first, the song lyrics and the music video accentuate how the concept of “Ossi” is constructed as that of a social group rather than as an ethnic one – even though these categories are at times blurry, as the association of home and birthplace suggests. Nonetheless, the video performs East Germanness as a primarily social category, with references to cultural practices rather than unfractured transhistorical continuity, family lineage, and ancestry. Consider the selection of *Go Trabi Go*, for instance. Not only is the film excerpt a gesture of self-ironic mockery, but the sequence also underscores generational conflict between a father and his daughter rather than family unison. Second, despite the ‘us vs. them’ antagonism, the song does not devalue the outgroup. Quite the contrary, the line “We will show you” contains a reference to representation: it centers on a struggle for recognition that depends on, and thus includes, the addressee. Third, (self-)ironic refractions are prevalent in the work of Goitzsche Front. Consider how the bassist plays with performances of hypermasculinity by awkwardly smashing a wooden guitar in a backyard. In the song “Men Made of Steel” (“Männer aus Stahl”), the band ironically celebrates East German Trabant cars, singing “Only men made of steel / Drive cars made of cardboard” (“Nur Männer aus Stahl / Fahren Autos aus Pappe”) (Goitzsche Front 2016). In sum, Goitzsche Front oscillate between reaffirming and playfully undermining fragments associated with ethnonationalism and hypermasculinity.

4. Conclusion

The video clip raises a number of questions regarding the practice of critiquing populism. Our first question concerns the social position of those who engage in the practice of critique. To what extent does one’s social position condition the view of populist performances in music?¹³ As we (the authors) grew up in the countryside and tried to play songs by such punk rock bands as *Die Toten Hosen* and *Die Ärzte*, as well as songs by *Böhse Onkelz*, when we were kids, we do have a certain biographical connection to the musical aesthetics of Goitzsche Front. However, our musical preferences have changed since then, and we are

13 Our self-reflection is inspired by what Olúfemi O. Táíwò discusses as “stand-point epistemology” (Táíwò 2022, 71–80).

not personally drawn to the piece or the video. As academics raised in West Germany and employed at West German universities, we can only listen to and watch this music video from a great cultural distance. Thus, the first time we watched this video, we were immediately put off by the obvious sexism. We still think that this sexism is problematic, yet we also wonder to what extent the milieu-specific style in which sexism is performed here contributed to our immediate affective response. As we discussed this video with other members of our research project, we debated whether the way some of our team members experienced the line “We will show you what it means to be an Ossi” as menacing had to do with our social position as economically privileged, West German or Austrian academics. After some reflection, we (the authors) think that the music video does not really warrant such an interpretation: the band members and their audience are mostly shown doing harmless things such as driving slowly in a tiny Trabant car, smashing a cheap acoustic guitar against a wooden block, drinking beer, and watching clips from a trashy 1991 movie.

Second, to return to our question about the adequacy of populism as a concept, we believe that this example demonstrates the importance of a nuanced use of populism in dealing with popular culture. At first viewing, we may be quick to make associations between the musical aesthetics of the band and the great success of the far-right populist AfD in East Germany, for instance. In the 2021 federal election, the AfD was the strongest party in Saxony and Thuringia, and it continues to be highly popular, especially in East German states. However, not only has the band repeatedly distanced itself from the far-right and the alt-right, but its music videos in some ways thwart appropriations by the far-right political spectrum.

Goitzsche Front, up to this point, have refrained from the unfractured ethnonationalism we find in the music of Frei.Wild and some other Deutschrock bands. Although Goitzsche Front do talk about being proud of the place where they were born, unlike Frei.Wild, they do not want enemies to “burn in hell” (in the song “Südtirol”) (Frei.Wild 2003/2009), and they do not refer to East Germany as the transhistorical place tied to their ancestors (in the song “Wahre Werte”) (Frei.Wild 2011; also see Hindrichs 2014), but rather as a culturally defined concept.¹⁴ By simply labeling Goitzsche Front “right-wing populist” we would make the mistake of lumping them together with the AfD. At the same time, the great popularity of the song “Der Osten rockt” with (not only) East German audiences does go some way towards explaining why election campaigns

14 The special meaning of the song “Südtirol” for Frei.Wild is shown by the fact that the band still plays the song at their concerts (Hänky 2022).

that promise to restore respect for cultural achievements that are framed as “East German” may have been successful in East Germany.¹⁵

Of course, a song like “Der Osten rockt” can be instrumentalised by right-wing populists, for example by decontextualizing individual lines and charging them ideologically. However, this use is not inherent to the song, but results from practices of appropriation. And this is rather common in popular music culture. The song “Der Druck steigt” (Eng. “The Pressure Is Rising”) by the rap-rock musician Casper, who identifies as left-wing alternative, was repeatedly played at the anti-Islamic PEGIDA demonstrations in 2015, to name just one example (Schimanski 2015). The populist core element of an “us” against “them” antagonism is an integral part of rock music, which ultimately finds expression in ‘Neuer Deutschrock’. Certainly, it is a task for us as scholars to keep an eye on such phenomena and to criticise them when necessary. However, not only is popular culture often messy and contradictory, but the problem of different and sometimes conflicting readings always remains (see Kopanski 2021; 2022). It is therefore important to consider where the interpretive authority over such phenomena lies. By hastily labeling bands right-wing populist, we may unjustly push them into a corner, thus providing fodder for reactionary audiences and political actors. Hence, developing a nuanced view of such phenomena that considers the critic’s positionality is central to critiquing populism.

The great challenge in addressing a music video like “Der Osten rockt”, then, lies in developing a mode of critique that, on the one hand, is able to criticise politically problematic aspects – such as the fragments of sexism and nativism we find in this music video – for what they are, while at the same time avoiding reproduction of the classism and placeism that may result from the critic’s situatedness in an economically privileged cultural milieu. This can only be achieved if we understand populist performances in popular music as a form of critique that we need to take seriously when critiquing populism.

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- 15 For an AfD campaign video seeking to capitalise on this sentiment, see the 2019 spot for the state elections in Thuringia (AfD Thüringen 2019). For recent statistics regarding the continuing under-representation of people from East Germany in elite positions in the areas of politics, economy, science, justice, and media, see OWF (2022).

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