

## **Cultural Rupture: Popular Music as a Discursive Tool of Contemporary Polish Populism**

This excellent thesis, written by Joanna Zienkiewicz of the University of Groningen, tackles the role that music plays in populist political discourse. To understand this larger problem, the author focusses on the specific circumstance of Poland, where, since 2015, the Prawo i Sprawiedliwo c Party (Law and Justice Party, henceforth PiS) has implemented a political programme blending populism, nativism, and authoritarianism. This party has had a substantial impact on Polish society and is arguably an example for other European populist movements. Studying the PiS example can therefore illuminate the role that music plays in broad populist political discourse. The central research aim, to probe ‘what role cultural discourses can play in creating, maintaining, or challenging a situation of “populist rupture”’ (p. 9), is therefore highly relevant. Zienkiewicz tackles this question by focussing on three high-profile case studies: the emergence of ‘disco polo music’ on pro-government television; the marginalisation and discrediting of the prominent intellectual radio programme *Tr jka* by portraying it as out-of-touch, elite, and in need of reform; and the responses to the protest song ‘Polish Tango’.

The jury is impressed, first, by the author’s considerable nuance in her approach, not merely framing these developments as a straightforward dispute between populist and non-populist forces, but as a complex dialectic that even produces ‘anti-populist populism’. The jury also greatly appreciates the range of sources and theoretical frameworks on which the author draws, which go considerably beyond the disciplinary boundaries of musicology, and include extensive literature from political and sociological sciences. Particularly insightful are the semi-structured interviews that the author conducted with six participants, half of whom were pro-PiS, and half against. Although the jury feels that a larger number of participants, and a more substantial discussion of the methods by which they were recruited, would have strengthened the validity of the findings of this thesis, the transparency, consistency, and responsibility with which the results are treated are nonetheless impressive. In the three extensive chapters that make up the core of this thesis, Zienkiewicz succeeds in teasing out nuanced differences between respondents’ answers within the larger discourse in the media about these three musical case studies and in creating a subtle and complex picture of the recorded opinions against the background of her extensive literature research and theoretical framework. Notably, Zienkiewicz draws music-technical features of her repertory into her arguments when it would have been possible to leave these aside in favour of other aspects such as text. The critical acumen with which all sources are treated lends the results great authority and conviction.

The jury finds the thesis’s conclusions concerning protest songs particularly hard-hitting. Zienkiewicz clearly sets out the paradoxical claim of right-wing populist discourse of the kind espoused by PiS, both to represent the vox populi, while, at the same time, using authoritarian methods to curtail the rights of those it claims as its power base. Zienkiewicz effectively argues that, at least within the field of protest songs, the only thing that can stop a right-wing populist discourse is a left-wing populist discourse: anything else will largely end up strengthening the status quo. It is an uncomfortable conclusion, but one that conforms with political developments in several European countries since this thesis was written.

In sum, Zienkiewicz’s work is an important and insightful contribution to understanding the cultural discourses around populism and popular music. The jury is pleased to note that the author is building on this ambitious work in her NWO-funded PhD project on ‘Transcending the Divide: Contesting Authoritarian Populism in Protest Music’ at the University of Groningen, and looks forward to seeing the further fruits of this pioneering research in the future.

22 December 2022

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