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Assemblages of Pandemic Populism: Populism, Social Media and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Assemblages of Pandemic Populism: Populism, Social Media and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Paige Isaacson

Introduction

Throughout the pandemic, we have witnessed an upsurge of demonstrations, sieges, and violent outbursts. The siege of the US Capitol by far-right-wing populists on 6 January 2021 was largely organised on social media and messaging apps and fuelled by Tweets by Donald Trump.¹ Global anti-lockdown, or “anti-hygienic” protests, as Ulrike Vieten describes far-right political protests during mandated lockdowns, were also widespread across the globe and organised through both on- and offline communication.² Violent anti-lockdown protests and other sensational manifestations of the more general turn to right-wing populism attest to the urgency of understanding the structures of feeling underlying right-wing populist logic and the tactics used to spread them.

The intense pressures precipitated by the pandemic and the myriad ways it has affected our lives certainly contributed to these extreme displays of dissent. Accordingly, I began to question what other collective feelings and strategic opportunities the pandemic was opening up (or closing off) for right-wing populism. For instance, far-right populist actors and media have taken advantage of the confusion around public health measures to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction to fit the effects of the pandemic into their pre-existing, emotionally driven narratives.³

The socio-economic crises and moral panics associated with the pandemic are also contributing to far-right populist resentments and creating conditions that could lead to wider-spread adoption of populist ideals in the future. As a result, the intensification of collective feelings such as anger and dissatisfaction by the pandemic and consequent lockdowns requires urgent attention. It is important to note that my research homes in on right-wing populism in particular, as it is inherently anti-democratic

¹ Rami Molla, ‘Posting Less, Posting More, and Tired of It All: How the Pandemic Has Changed Social Media’, *Vox*, 1 March 2021.

² Ulrike M. Vieten, ‘The “New Normal” and “Pandemic Populism”: The COVID-19 Crisis and Anti-Hygienic Mobilisation of the Far-Right’, *Social Sciences*, 9, 165–179 (2020).

³ Vieten, p. 171.

when attached to exclusive ideologies such as racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia etc., while left-wing populism can be beneficial to democracy if its ideological attachments are inclusive.⁴

I ultimately argue that we should think of the current conjuncture of right-wing populism across the globe as composed of overlapping and interconnected assemblages. Here I highlight populist communication, (infra)structures of feeling and social media as key elements in assemblages of right-wing populism, examining the complex ways they were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. I conclude with some final thoughts on how these elements come to form an assemblage of pandemic populism and speculate as to where populism might be headed next.

Populism, assemblage and (infra)structures of feeling

There is disagreement over what exactly populism is, but it can be defined simply as a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be separated into two homogenous and hostile groups: ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’.⁵ Populism can be bolstered by more substantial ideologies such as nativism or authoritarianism because its ideological thinness means it lacks comprehensive solutions to basic political questions on its own.⁶ Scholars have offered alternative definitions such as populism as a type of discourse or style. Benjamin Moffitt, for instance, points to the performative dimension of populism, highlighting how populists perform crises to construct the distinction between the people and the elite.⁷ However, while performance and style can be attached to and reinforce populist ideology, at its core, populism always includes the simple separation of ‘the people’ from ‘the elite’.⁸ Again, this ideological thinness means it is infinitely flexible, capable of taking on different political ideologies, styles, logics etc.⁹

⁴ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁵ Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012), p. 150.

⁶ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

⁷ Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2016).

⁸ Alan Tomlinson, Bryan C. Clift and Jules Boykoff, *Populism, Sport, Leisure, and Popular Culture*, 1st edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

⁹ Richard Gruneau, ‘Whither “the People?” Populism, Ideology, and the Contested Politics of Sport’, in *Populism, Sport and Leisure, and Popular Culture*, ed. by Alan Tomlinson, Bryan C. Clift and Jules Boykoff (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 26–40 (p. 27).

Following Laclau's theory of populism, itself a reworking of Gramsci's hegemony, we can further imagine populism as a political project whose ideology draws on popular constructions of the people which exist in opposition to the power bloc.¹⁰ According to Laclau and Mouffe, different social elements such as feminism and antiracism enter into a chain of equivalence in which they come to stand for other elements and the coalition as a whole.¹¹ For instance, antiracism comes to stand for feminism, which comes to stand for anticapitalism etc., while still maintaining its difference from other elements.¹² Accordingly, each component in a coalition maintains a balance between equivalence and difference.¹³ In this way, the social realm remains open to new combinations and political movements.

Laclau argued that populism has been overly permeable, floating 'midway between the descriptive and the normative'.¹⁴ He viewed populism as a sort of assemblage of 'floating signifiers', as 'a series of discursive resources which can be put to very different uses' depending on the political and historical context.¹⁵ Here I utilise Laclau's work as well as Manuel DeLanda's understanding of assemblage as the amalgamation of different, distinct components which come together to form a contingent whole.¹⁶ These components can include anything from humans and non-humans, nature, culture, technologies, symbols, energies, etc.¹⁷

Imagining populism as an assemblage is useful because it allows us to take into consideration its underlying ideological commitment to 'the people' while leaving open its operations of discourse, style, leaders, media strategies etc. It recognises that these factors can be multiplicitous, contradictory and are contingent—they can be infinitely adapted and moulded to accommodate shifting political and historical contexts. Unlike more deterministic models of society in economics or political science, assemblage theory does not view any component to have the 'competence to determine consistently the trajectory'

¹⁰ Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, 1st Edn (London: New Left Books, 1977).

¹¹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 2001).

¹² Gianmaria Colpani, 'Two Theories of Hegemony: Stuart Hall and Ernesto Laclau in Conversation', *Political Theory* (2021), 1–26.

¹³ Laclau and Mouffe (2001), p. xiii.

¹⁴ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 3.

¹⁵ Laclau (2005), p. 176.

¹⁶ DeLanda (2016), pp. 9–12.

¹⁷ David L. Andrews, *Making Sport Great Again: The Uber-Sport Assemblage, Neoliberalism, and the Trump Conjuncture* (London: Palgrave, 2019), p. 47.

of the assemblage.¹⁸ It also compels us to think about the diverse human and non-human technological elements invoked in overlapping assemblages during the pandemic including the virus itself, public health measures to prevent its spread, social media etc.

David L. Andrews describes Trumpism as an assemblage, as an expression of a ‘conjunctural authoritarian populism’, incorporating elements of neoliberalism, neoconservatism and neopopulism, expressed through celebrity persona and blurred boundaries between media, entertainment, business, and politics.¹⁹ The Trump assemblage used various media sources, including social media, to garner support while outside media actors also played a significant role in shaping the salience of Trump’s messages, facilitating his eventual victory.²⁰ Viewing right-wing populism as an ‘assemblage of assemblages’, consisting of smaller component parts, allows us to examine how its overlapping elements are glued together, contingently, by power relations and the specific material forces of the present conjuncture.²¹

One pivotal element of right-wing populist assemblages is structure of feeling, Raymond Williams’ popular concept describing the collective and emergent *feeling* or *tone* of a period before it recedes into the past as a fixed form. We can think of the last few years, with the election of Donald Trump, Brexit, and the rise in popularity of several populist leaders across the globe, as having certain felt characteristics.²² Certain collective feelings have emerged which contrast with other periods, but which are difficult to describe and engage with as they are experienced.

Rebecca Coleman usefully extends Williams’ structures of feeling, combining it with key concepts in media studies so it can be brought into the present to disentangle the temporal and affective qualities of digital media. Infrastructures of feeling takes into consideration how digital media work transmedially across one another in ‘complex architectures of texts, textures, platforms and devices’, creating dynamic presents while integrating multiple affective temporalities into the present moment.²³ Time is not

¹⁸ Jane Bennett, *The Agency of Assemblages* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 24.

¹⁹ Andrews (2019), p. 1.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 109–110.

²¹ Brigitte Hipfl, ‘Affect in Media and Communication Studies: Potentials and Assemblages’, *Media and Communication*, 6.3 (2018), 5–14.

²² Raymond Williams, ‘Structures of Feeling’, in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 128–35.

²³ Rebecca Coleman (b), ‘Theorizing the Present: Digital Media, Preemergence and Infra-Structures of Feeling’, *Cultural Studies*, 32.4 (2018), p. 600.

thought of as linear in this formulation but involves anticipating and orienting around the future so that it is brought into the present, mediating actions regardless of actual future events.²⁴ This dynamic is apparent for instance on pro-Trump and Brexit Facebook groups, where visions of idyllic pasts and alternative futures with and without Donald Trump or Brexit are cultivated. These narratives produce certain feelings and, critically, can be utilised for political purposes.²⁵

Thinking about the infrastructure of digital media is also helpful in bringing to the fore the technological and institutional linkages from which structures of feeling might emerge and be organised and how digital media platforms mediate those feelings. It urges us to pay attention to the novel ways right-wing populism and feelings underpinning right-wing populist ideology are manifesting across the internet. Before returning to this point in relation to populist communication via social media, I turn now to the strategies used by right-wing populist actors to normalise and spread their ideals, in what I view as their altering of populist assemblages.

Populism and the COVID-19 ‘crisis’

One common tactic used by populist actors is to co-opt crises or manufacture the conception of crisis, by taking advantage of some failure of the current government to sow dissatisfaction.²⁶ Bobba and Hubé refer to populists as ‘crisis entrepreneurs’, as they strive not only to take advantage of crises but to create a *permanent crisis cycle*.²⁷ In order to discursively ‘own’ crises, populists name, blame, and claim systemic failures and contradictions which suit their pre-existing worldview.²⁸ According to Benjamin Moffitt, ‘crises are never ‘neutral’ phenomena, but must be mediated and ‘performed’ by certain actors,

²⁴ Rebecca Coleman (a), ‘Social Media and the Materialisation of the Affective Present’, in *Affect and Social Media*, ed. by Tony D. Sampson, Darren Ellis and Stephen Maddison (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018).

²⁵ Ben Anderson and Helen F. Wilson, ‘Everyday Brexits’, *AREA*, 50.2, 291–95.

²⁶ Giuliano Bobba and Nicolas Hubé, eds., *Populism and the Politicization of the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 1–2; Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, “Populism and the Pandemic: A Collaborative Report”, *POPULISMUS* (Thessaloniki, June 2020), pp. 1–53; Moffitt (2016) pp. 118–137.

²⁷ Bobba and Hubé (2021), pp. 140–141.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–10.

setting the stage for populist success'.²⁹ The performance of crisis serves to divide the people from the elite and make demands by presenting populists as the 'voices of the sovereign people'.³⁰

For Laclau, crisis is a necessary precondition for populism. He argued it was the crisis of the dominant ideological discourse which spurred populism³¹ and that any populist 'outburst' results from a crisis of representation and a crack in the hegemonic discourse. This crack presents an opening in the social realm for new political discourses.³² However, there is mixed empirical evidence of a *causal* link between populism and crisis as opposed to crisis as a political conjuncture which populist actors can utilise.³³ I therefore recognise the performance of crisis as a strategy to strengthen connections between heterogeneous elements of populist assemblages—for instance, Brexit and migration or xenophobia and the financial crisis, as opposed to a necessary precondition for populism.

Moments of crisis present opportunities for populist actors in part because they exaggerate socio-political divisions and create new rifts in society, especially between the elite and the people.³³ For instance, the pandemic has exposed the extent to which our lives are experienced radically differently along lines of race, gender, and socio-economic class, among other factors, paving the way for populist, counter-hegemonic appeals on both the left and right. Populists exploit the concomitant insecurity of a crisis by fusing their own ideas into it, confusing its causes and consequences. With regard to the 2008 financial crisis, Sylvia Walby argues that while the crisis originated in the failure to regulate finance, the primary focus of the political debate surrounding it concerned fiscal crisis and austerity.³⁴ According to Vieten, the discursive construction of the "migrant crisis" and the crisis of COVID-19 highlight that their negative connotations are embedded in the distortion of causes and consequences leading to a 'moral-panic cycle'.³⁵

²⁹ Moffitt (2016), p. 119.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 123.

³¹ Laclau (1977), p. 128.

³² Laclau (2005), p. 139.

³³ Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, p. 4.

³⁴ Sylvia Walby, *Crisis*, 1st edn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

³⁵ Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978), p. 322.

A moral-panic cycle describes a situation in which, in order to pacify social anxieties, systemic crises are ideologically displaced with moral discourse while claiming to solve the crisis with its cause. This results from preying on social anxieties in a process that repeats during times of societal unrest, strategically transforming insecurity into collective structures of feeling such as bitter resentment against a perceived Other. For instance, nativism and xenophobia became attached to the 2008 financial crisis as a symptom of ‘capitalism in crisis’.³⁶ Similarly, in the run-up to the Brexit referendum, immigration was a key topic of concern and became linked to the social welfare crisis.³⁷ These exclusionary causal narratives have similarly become attached to the economic, social, and global public health crisis epitomised by the COVID-19 pandemic. They have been funnelled toward anti-Asian racism and xenophobic policies, linking the pandemic with immigration and ethnic minorities and strongly supporting border closures.³⁸

Right-wing populist actors have fostered confusion around the virus, from how it originated to the contradictory governmental responses to control it to forge connections between, for instance, COVID-19, immigration, and powerful elites. The limited expert knowledge of the virus and the absence of effective antiviral drugs and vaccines at the early stages of the pandemic led to much confusion. There were differing or seemingly contradictory views about how to stop the spread of the disease and how to mandate and ease lockdown measures.³⁹ This rendered populist emotional appeals—such as fear of the other, pride in one’s nation or betrayal by elites—most effective, fomenting support for populist ideals.⁴⁰

Further, in discursively creating and co-opting crises, populists aim to unify those who are in some cases quite ideologically different from one another.⁴¹ For example, there have been over 5,000 COVID anti-lockdown, ‘re-open’ protests between January 2020 and April 2021 across the world.⁴² Many of these protests were united wealthy donors opposed to both increased government spending to support

³⁶ Heiko Feldner, Fabio Vighi and Slavoj Žižek, *States of Crisis and Post-Capitalist Scenarios*, 1st edn (London: Routledge, 2014).

³⁷ Vieten, p. 171.

³⁸ Brett Meyer, ‘Capitalising on a Crisis? Assessing the Impact of Covid-19 on Populist Parties in Western Europe’, *LSE EUROPP*, 16 March 2021; Jakub Wondreys and Cas Mudde, ‘Victims of the Pandemic? European Far-Right Parties and COVID-19’, *Nationalities Papers*, 2020, 1–18.

³⁹ Vieten, p. 176.

⁴⁰ Sven Engesser, Nicole Ernst, Frank Esser and Florin Büchel, ‘Populism and Social Media: How Politicians Spread a Fragmented Ideology’, *Information, Communication & Society*, 20.8 (2016), 1109–26.

⁴¹ Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, p. 4

⁴² Institute for Economics & Peace. ‘Global Peace Index 2021: Measuring Peace in a Complex World’, June 2021.

unemployed workers, small businesses or states and municipalities, those who oppose their impinging on economic activity, anti-vaccination activists and COVID-19 conspiracy theorists. Importantly, these groups share a populist affinity rather than a substantial ideological one and the demonstrations served as a visual spectacle representing ‘the people’, the act of assembling performance of their popular will.⁴³

In Germany, frustration over state-mandated lockdowns helped pave the way for new alliances between the far-right and the alternative left in social networks and on the streets. Street demonstrations (initiated by Querdenken 711 and Widerstand 2020), especially those in Berlin, have provided a shared space between the alternative left and the far-right, which has been co-opted by neo-fascist groups and the AfD party. These alliances lead to cooperation with the far-right and to racist, anti-Semitic and anti-democratic views being subsumed by a generally critical view of the government’s response to the current crisis, effectively normalising these positions.⁴⁴ We can think about these processes as the altering of political assemblages at times where they are most open to change and to the formation of new connections and discourses. Populist actors worked to mediate the various preventive measures to control the spread of COVID-19, attaching them to populism’s ‘floating signifiers’ such as the people, elites, and personal liberty, as Laclau’s strategic, ‘discursive resources’.⁴⁵ These elements—discursive constructions, public health measures, infrastructures of feeling underpinning populist ideology—come together to form the contingent assemblage of pandemic populism.

This pushes us to think about the relations between people, things and phenomena, which are always in the process of becoming, and therefore house infinite potential to become otherwise through the breaking and making of new connections.⁴⁶ For instance, it is important to point out that far-right populism fared very differently during the pandemic in different places. This depended on a host of relations such as whether right-wing populists were in power, the severity of restrictions placed on movement, the extent of government support provided, collective narratives around the role of government, etc.⁴⁷ Co-opting crises is a key strategic element of populist assemblages which itself utilises assemblages

⁴³ Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, p. 55

⁴⁴ Vieten, p. 173.

⁴⁵ Laclau (2005), p. 176.

⁴⁶ Hipfl, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2020); Wondreys and Mudde (2020).

of structures of feeling, moral-panic cycles and ideological commitment to ‘the people’. Another key component of populist assemblages is social media, an avenue of communication exceedingly popular amongst populist actors, especially during the pandemic where mandated lockdowns led to significant limitations on in-person communication.

Pandemic populism, feeling and social media

Social media was a significant component of populist communication during the pandemic and here I examine some of the dimensions of this particularly entangled pair, illustrating how they connect to the wider assemblage of pandemic populism. Throughout the pandemic, social media became a lifeline for many for social connection and COVID-19 information. However, it was also a source of mis- and disinformation⁴⁸, appeals to populism based on distrust of experts and the failure of political elites to handle the virus⁴⁹ and even outright COVID-19 conspiracy theories.⁵⁰

Social media platforms themselves comprise complex assemblages, bringing multiple actors, including users, developers, and advertisers, into the same interaction space where algorithms, targeted ads, bots, and a host of other technical factors grant them agency in influencing discourse.⁵¹ Social media is particularly seductive to populist actors as it enables them to communicate their differential messages directly with the public⁵² in a laxer media environment where non-legacy news organisations and non-journalists enjoy greater gatekeeping capacity.⁵³

Further, populist actors use more emotion eliciting appeals than non-populists and these tend to be more persuasive than non-emotional appeals.⁵⁴ They also use communication to mobilise collective emotions, so it is key to think of how right-wing populist communications work on an emotional level and

⁴⁸ Molla (2021).

⁴⁹ Bobba and Hubé (2021); Vieten (2020); Pepijn Bergsen, ‘Why the Pandemic and Populism Still Work Together’, *Chatham House Expert Comment*, 2020.

⁵⁰ Molla (2021).

⁵¹ Ben Light, Jean Burgess and Stefanie Duguay, ‘The Walkthrough Method: An Approach to the Study of Apps’, *New Media & Society*, 20.3 (2016), 881–900.

⁵² Engesser, Ernst, Esser and Büchel (2016).

⁵³ Jacob Groshek and Edson Tandoc, ‘The Affordance Effect: Gatekeeping and (Non)Reciprocal Journalism on Twitter’, *Computers in Human Behavior*, 66 (2017), 201–10.

⁵⁴ Dominique S. Wirz, ‘Persuasion Through Emotion? An Experimental Test of the Emotion-Eliciting Nature of Populist Communication’, *International Journal of Communication*, 12 (2018), 1114–38.

how they are amplified by social media.⁵⁵ Literature on populism has acknowledged collective feelings of resentment, anger, threat, and fear but also optimism and hope in mobilising support. Regarding crises, populist actors construct crisis narratives while providing the solution, mobilising collective feelings of hope, and positioning itself, the people, in opposition to the elites and the negative status quo.⁵⁶

Several scholars have aimed to engage with the inherent affectivity of social media, to the active and flexible present they engender, and posit that one of the main ways they are experienced is via feeling.⁵⁷ Infrastructures of feeling speaks to digital media's capacity to stretch and contract time to involve multiple temporalities so pasts and futures can be engaged in the present. This might include memes urging us to remember what life was like before our lives were so restricted, the slew of projections of when the pandemic might 'end', or what life with the virus might look like one, five or ten years from now. Emotional engagement on social media can incite feelings that serve as conduits for exclusionary, populist narratives in line with traditional anti-expertise beliefs and which are resistant to claims of expert knowledge.⁵⁸

The heightened emotionality of populist communication, coupled with social media's inherent affectivity, helps explain why social media is so popular amongst populist actors. It is especially concerning given that emotional language, especially negative emotional language such as anger and outrage, is far more enticing on social media than non-emotional language, leading users to engage more with platforms.⁵⁹ A 2017 study found that Tweets discussing controversial political topics using 'emotional-moral' language led to what psychologists call 'emotion contagion', causing them to spread far more prolifically than non-emotional Tweets.⁶⁰ This is partly due to algorithms that reinforce feedback to increase user satisfaction, measured in terms of time spent on platforms. Different feelings such as anger

⁵⁵ Sandra Obradovic, Séamus A. Power and Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington, 'Understanding the Psychological Appeal of Populism', *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 35 (2020) 125–131.

⁵⁶ Obradovic, Power and Sheehy-Skeffington (2020).

⁵⁷ Coleman (b), p. 16.

⁵⁸ Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis, 'The Affective Politics of the "Post-Truth" Era: Feeling Rules and Networked Subjectivity', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 27 (2018), 75–85.

⁵⁹ Luke Munn, 'Angry by Design: Toxic Communication and Technical Architectures', *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 7.53 (2020).

⁶⁰ William J. Brady, Julian A. Wills, John T. Jost, Joshua A. Tucker, and Jay Van Bavel, 'Emotion Shapes the Diffusion of Moralized Content in Social Networks', *PNAS*, 114.28 (2017), 7313–18, p. 1.

and outrage compel users to stay longer on a platform than they otherwise would without emotional stimulus.⁶¹ Further, some of the mechanisms for spreading and tapping into emotions on social media, such as liking, capitalise on the human desire for recognition, acceptance and belonging. They also serve as an intermittent feedback system, entangling negative emotions such as fear and outrage, with positive emotions such as acceptance and belonging.⁶²

Right-wing populist actors are acutely aware of the technical mechanisms of social media, which allow them to spread their emotionally driven narratives. This includes the use of bots and trolls to influence emotions and sway political opinions. Populist actors are using increasingly sophisticated online tools for political gains, from spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories to sowing confusion in general in order to attach narratives to their pre-existing ideologies. Emotional appeals and the spread of mis- and disinformation have long been tactics in the populist arsenal. However, the new array of digital tools which act on collective emotions to amplify these communication practices is what makes social media so key to populism in the present conjuncture. Populist actors can target specific emotions amongst audiences to manipulate feelings such as identity, belonging and difference,⁶³ and be more effective than ever in doing so.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Throughout the pandemic we have witnessed eruptions of political dissent across the globe. This was the result of the amalgamation of extreme economic stress, the spotlighting of government's failures to cope with the pandemic, or the illusion of political failures, greater use of social media, extreme limitations on freedom of movement, populists vying for control of the articulation of the 'crisis', and populist coalition building. This culminated in the formation and strengthening of political assemblages compelling publics to organise sensational demonstrations of dissent.

⁶¹ Boler and Davis, pp. 83–84.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 83

⁶⁴ Wirz (2018).

I argue that populism, as a thin-centred ideology lacking answers to basic political questions, should be thought of as an assemblage that populist actors create and aim to strengthen in various ways. In order to succeed ideologically, affectively, and electorally, populist assemblages require attachment to more substantial ideologies, practices and styles. I have aimed here to illustrate some of these attachments visible within the present conjuncture: crisis ownership, emotional communication, and social media and explore the ways they have been intensified by the pandemic.

Far-right populism has not gained traction everywhere during the pandemic, at least in terms of numbers of supporters and voters.⁶⁵ Indeed, in some countries and regions, the pandemic has been a unifying force that reduced support for populism or at least did not pan out in any uniform manner.⁶⁶ This was apparent in Stavrakakis and Katsambekis' collaborative report of the pandemic's effects on populism across the globe. In Greece, for instance, the populist left SYRIZA party supported the strict lockdown proposed by the centre-right government.⁶⁷ In the Netherlands, COVID-19 reduced parliamentary divisions among all but the far-right parties, Party for Freedom and Forum for Democracy. These parties argued that the measures proposed by the cabinet were far too lenient, and the former eventually switched to supporting the lockdown. In France, badly hit by the pandemic in the early stages, Marine Le Pen of the National Rally failed to garner support after aligning herself with anti-lockdown movements, while President Emmanuel Macron saw his approval rating increase.⁶⁸

These variations in populist assemblages demonstrate their contingent nature. While there were trends and patterns, particularly with regard to the tried and tested tactic of crisis ownership, the pandemic did not have a universal effect on populist assemblages. Populism manifested differently in different countries during the pandemic, depending on a host of mutually affecting elements and the strength of their connections to the wider whole. Still, the pandemic has paved the way for certain underlying conditions which could lead to greater populist support in the future, even in countries that handled the pandemic well in many respects.

⁶⁵ Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2020); Wondreys and Mudde (2020); Jon Henley and Pamela Duncan, 'European Support for Populist Beliefs Falls, YouGov Survey Suggests', *The Guardian*, 26 October 2020.

⁶⁶ Bergsen (2020); Henley and Duncan (2020).

⁶⁷ Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, pp. 6–7.

⁶⁸ Bergsen (2020).

Several scholars predict that far-right parties will flourish in the post-pandemic period, taking advantage of economic crisis and pandemic fatigue.⁶⁹ If countries end their support for the economy too early or repeat the mistakes of the 2008 financial crisis, it could lead to broader and deeper resentments, as austerity fuels anti-establishment attitudes and resentments could be channelled through exclusionary ideologies.⁷⁰ Further, ‘pandemic fatigue’ or the lack of motivation to follow recommended behaviours to reduce the spread of the virus,⁷¹ is already leading to further collective resentment and protests.⁷²

The pandemic will certainly have lasting effects on people’s lives economically, socially, and politically and this could manifest in any number of ways as processes are disrupted, and new assemblages are formed. The potentially long-term economic turmoil resulting from the pandemic could equally give rise to a populism of the left, underpinned by collective feelings of empathy, togetherness, and camaraderie. If such a project is inclusive and pluralistic, it could, in stark contrast to right-wing populism, be a benefit to democracy and social life. More research will certainly need to be undertaken to assess the ever-shifting developments of populist assemblages, particularly as the pandemic continues to shape the current terrain.

⁶⁹ Wondreys and Mudde, p. 98; Paolo Gerbaudo, ‘Coronavirus Embarrassed Trump and Bolsonaro. But the Global Right Will Fight Back’, *The Guardian*, 2020.

⁷⁰ Bergsen (2020).

⁷¹ Pandemic Fatigue: Reinvigorating the Public to Prevent COVID-19 (Denmark: World Health Organization, 2020), p 4.

⁷² Michael B. Peterson, Magnus Storm Rasmussen, Marie Fly Lindholt and Frederik Juhl Jørgensen, ‘Pandemic Fatigue and Populism: The Development of Pandemic Fatigue during the COVID-19 Pandemic and How It Fuels Political Discontent across Eight Western Democracies’, 2021, 1–30.

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