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RESEARCH ARTICLE

POPULISM, MUSIC AND THE MEDIA

The Sanremo Festival and the Circulation of Populist Discourses

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ABSTRACT: The article has the purpose of expanding the study of the relationship between music and populism in two directions. On a more theoretical level, the article aims at establishing further interconnections between political science, cultural sociology and media studies. On an empirical ground, a primary aim is that of presenting a distinctive case, able to offer an example of how populist discourses could emerge and circulate in relation with music phenomena; this empirical case is represented by the public controversy, anchored on populist references, emerged in Italy during the 2019 Sanremo festival, the most important musical event of the country. What emerges from the analysis is that the circulation of populist discourses in society requires a renewed theoretical sensibility, more able to intercept the role of aesthetic, cultural and symbolic phenomena, as well as a distinctive focus the role digital media technologies in reshaping the collective possibilities to articulate social and political identities.

KEYWORDS: populism, music, cultural sociology, media rituals, Sanremo

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1. Introduction: Exploring the Relationship between Populism, Culture and Music

Public and academic debates on populism resulting from transformations which affected political and social processes across different regions in the world have visibly increased in the last few years. As this special issue highlights, the renewed interest in the idea of “populism” triggered a distinctive exploration of how political transformations falling under the definition of “populism” intersect with, and are influenced by, processes that pertain to the realms of culture and aesthetics. In this article, I contribute to this emerging debate on the mutual influences between political populism and cultural processes by focussing specifically on how music and musical phenomena intersect with the emergence of populist discourses in society.

To begin, it is worth noting that both of the notions of “populism” and “culture” are quite multifaceted and both dependent by the disciplines and approaches put in place to explore them. As far as the notion of populism goes, political science scholars generally agree that this label lacks an accepted and universal definition (Caiani & Graziano, 2019; Fitzi, 2019; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). This puzzling situation is the result of several different factors: references related to populism have been used to address different phenomena across various historical times and in relation to different political systems; moreover, this notion gained traction in public debates only recently, being adopted quickly as a depreciatory judgement wielded against political opponents.

Still, populist scholars do agree on the presence of several recurring elements that characterise this notion: the insistence on the construction of a distinctive category of the “people,” opposed to that of the “elite”; an emphasis on the sovereignty of the “people”; the presence of a charismatic leadership with a direct relationship to the people and the devaluation of political institutions as well as of any kind of cultural and political form of intermediation. Consequently, in political science the notion of populism is addressed mostly as a flexible (or “thin”) political ideology, characterised by a set of features articulated differently in distinctive political and social contexts (Fitzi, 2019, p. 2).

In order to expand the understanding of the multifaceted forms of populism in today’s society, in this article I adopt a culturalist definition of populism, which is better able to encompass the wider cultural and symbolic processes going on in society. This approach understands populism primarily as a distinctive form of *discourse* about society and social relationships. Considering populism primarily as a discourse is in line with several current interpretations of this political phenomenon in political science, where populism is understood “as a *discourse* or what some scholars call a thin-centered ideology” consisting into “a coherent set of basic assumptions about the world and the language that

unwittingly expresses them” (Hawkins et al. 2012, p. 3). Thus, I will look at populism as a relatively distinctive kind of discourse that societal actors (including politician, journalists, institutions, media, etc.) perform publicly about society, essentially based on the separation “into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, *the pure people versus the corrupt elite*, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6).

Departing from these theoretical premises, I will empirically explore the ways in which a distinctive musical phenomenon, crucial for the Italian national identity, could become relevant for the articulation of populism discourses and how these discourses could then be enacted outside of the proper musical field. In order to explore the role of music in shaping contemporary populist discourses, further work regarding the integration of different theoretical perspectives is required. While populism has so far been addressed mainly by scholars interested in political processes or focussed on political communication, the theoretical standpoints often remain fragmentary and insufficient to recognise the “autonomy” of cultural processes over political ones (Alexander, 2003; Grinswold, 1994; Kane, 1991) as well as the ways in which aesthetic and symbolic processes function as co-generators of political understanding of reality. Moreover, it is also worth noting that the contemporary circulation of culture (and cultural products such as music) is undergoing profound changes as a consequence of the pervasiveness of digital means of communication. As Couldry and Hepp (2017) outlined, these changes are bringing us to a state of “*deep mediatization*, when the very elements and building-blocks from which a sense of the social is constructed become themselves based in technologically based processes of mediation” (p. 7). For the purposes of this work, Couldry and Hepp’s perspective also means that the production and reception of contemporary populist discourses are nested in, and are dependent on, a digital communication environment that is far more complex and multifaceted now than it was just a decade ago.

With this scenario in mind, this article has a double objective. On the one side, it shares the purpose of expanding the theoretical tools for the study of the relationship between music and populism, notably by establishing further interconnections between political science, cultural sociology and media studies. On the other side, the aim is also to present an analysis of an empirical case that is able to offer an example of how populist discourses could emerge and circulate in relation to music phenomena; this empirical case is related to the public controversy, anchored on populist discourses, that emerged during the 2019 Sanremo Festival, the most important musical event in Italy.

In order to address these objectives, in the next section 2 I will review some of the relevant, but rather fragmentary, literature on music and populism to then outline some other paths of inquiry to expand on. Then, in section 3 I will outline the autonomy of

music and music-related events and their ability to become stages for the generation and negotiation of collective identities and social values; moreover, I will also focus on the role of digital communication technologies in reconfiguring the collective environment in which music intersects with populist discourses.

In the sections that follow, I concentrate on an empirical case, represented by populist discourses that emerged in relation to the 2019 Sanremo Music Festival in Italy. More specifically, section 4 presents the methodology and the data collection strategy adopted for the analysis. Then, in section 5 I describe the historical role of Sanremo as a relevant symbolic space in which Italian values and identities have been represented and negotiated across time. In section 6 I focus more specifically on the musical controversy that emerged in relation to the winner of the 2019 competition, the Italian-Egyptian singer Mahmood. In section 7 I show how this musical controversy has been appropriated by leading Italian populist politicians and used by them to articulate their distinctive political populist agendas, especially through social media. Finally, in section 8 I reflect on the findings from the Sanremo case and connect them with the theoretical dimensions presented in section 2. Here, I highlight that the analysis of the circulation of populist discourses in society requires a renewed theoretical sensibility, more sympathetic for the role of aesthetic, cultural and symbolic collective phenomena, as well as for the role of digital media in shaping the contemporary communication environment where music and political discourses intersect one each other.

2. Music and Populism Beyond Political Communication

In order to explore the relationship between populism and music, I will start by outlining the literature related to the way music is directly appropriated by politicians and activists in order to articulate their populist agenda and feed their need for popular participation.

Up to now, the discussion of music in the analysis of political processes has focussed mainly on how music is appropriated more or less directly by politicians, social movements and other political actors as a tool to perform their political identity, to find support for their political agenda or to reinforce the mobilisation of their members or voters, especially during political events and campaigns (see Danhaer, 2010; Street, 2014). This perspective has been especially explored by scholars primarily interested in social movements (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Peddie, 2006,) and in political communication (Street, 2004; Street, 2004 2014; Way, 2019). However, this literature remains largely fragmented and underdeveloped, and only marginally addresses issues related to populism.

Amongst the major contributions in this area, the work of Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison (1998) was seminal, as it examined the mobilisation of cultural traditions and the formulation of new collective identities through music by several social movements. Adopting a theoretical focus rooted in social movement theory and focussing on historical-empirical studies of 19th-century populists and 20th-century social movements, the authors were amongst the first to more systematically explore the ways in which music has been instrumental for social movement mobilisation, including historical populist social movements. Amongst their explored musical objects are styles such as folk and country music, black music and music of 1960s activists, in relation to which the authors outlined how social movements adopted music for the forms of solidarity that music cultures bring to them.

More recently, the rise of populist politicians and movements in different regions of the world triggered more specific analyses of the populist use of music. Amongst these, Nolan and Brookes (2015) explored the role of Bruce Springsteen's music within American political communication. The authors focussed on the tensions that emerged between Springsteen's official engagement in Democratic politics and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie's attempts to appropriate the political meaning and populist appeal of the iconic American singer-songwriter. More specifically, in 2013 Christie attempted to use the Springsteen myth as a key element of his populist strategy to reinforce his connection to the working-class, blue-collar American identity. Being a Springsteen admirer, Christie has repeatedly reworded elements from the New Jersey-born musician. However, his efforts were directly criticised by Springsteen himself, notably at the beginning of 2014 in an appearance on a popular TV show, where the singer directly contested Christie's attempt to convince New Jersey's electorate to adhere to his political populism project through the use of his music.

Another interesting study in music and populism is Jordan (2013)'s work, which focussed on how Barack Obama used popular music during his two terms as US president as part of an explicit populist communication strategy. Jordan argued that Obama adopted the aesthetics of popular music to strategically articulate his political identity. The Obama-centred aesthetic populism of the 2008 campaign aimed to inspire people to identify with a leader through the shared enjoyment of music, but since that election, the White House has been increasingly unable to articulate such a unifying message (Jordan, 2013, p. 112)

Another notable reflection about US political campaigns was by Patch (2016), who analysed the role of music in the 2008 and 2012 US election campaign cycles, outlining the evolution in the use of music to articulate populist discourses up to the 2016 campaign. One distinctive utilisation of music by a politician was Bernie Sanders' use of

Simon and Garfunkel's song *America* in a television ad. The campaign-related usage of this popular song was an attempt to create affective links and to reinforce collective identities, hence also supporting a symbolic context in which to re-invent the category of "the people." At the same time, republican Mitt Romney visibly adopted country music as a key element to convince a disgruntled working class of his conservatism and patriotism.

This concise literature review outlines that existing work on populism and music has mostly concentrated on exploring the use of music in explicitly political contexts, lacking to address the more indirect ways through which music can become relevant for political processes and discourses; moreover, it also points out that the research in this field still remains sparse and fragmentary, missing for instance to address the geographical and cultural variations of populism in different countries.

3. Music as a Collective Ritual in a Deeply Mediatized Scenario

A further path to exploring the relationship between music and populism can be found in the ability of music and music-related functions to build distinctive symbolic events, during which the attention of a large audience can be channelled into a ritual form. This perspective addresses the degree of autonomy of cultural and aesthetic phenomena in shaping collective identities and meanings, including political ones. More specifically, music events and experiences could represent powerful forms of collective rituals, during which constructions of collective identities (including distinctions between "us" and "the others") are performed.

This perspective is rooted in cultural sociology and is connected with the work of sociologist Jeffrey Alexander (2003, 2004). The approach proposed by Alexander outlines that culture is made up of narrative and discursive structures that organise the understanding and intelligibility of social life. In this way, Alexander emphasises the performative nature of culture and the idea that collective discourses require the performance of symbolic events in order to unfold fully in society. In this regard, music festivals are particularly interesting collective events that are able to shape collective identities. Alexander's approach has also been adopted by Italian cultural sociologist Marco Santoro (2010) in order to demonstrate the power of a tragedy that occurred at the 1969 Sanremo Festival to reshape collective cultural classifications as well as to establish the legitimation some form of popular music as a respected artform. More generally, as outlined by Bennett and colleagues, contemporary festivals, and musical ones in particular, "are important ways to communicating something meaningful about identity,

community, locality and belonging” and “therefore become potential sites for representing, encountering, incorporating and researching aspects of cultural difference” (Bennet et al. 2014, p. 1).

In this vein, a useful notion is that of *media events*, elaborated on by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992). In their pioneering book, the authors brought attention to collective phenomena they called “media events.” Media events represent a form of ritual in a Durkheimian sense, playing an active role as a force of social integration and as a cultural space in which solidarity and collective values are reaffirmed and where tensions affecting an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) become symbolically manifest. These media events are interruptions of collective routines that monopolise media communication across different channels and are generally broadcasted live. They are staged as historic moments, possibly marked by ceremonial reverence and, above all, these events attract very large audiences.

Later on, Couldry and Hepp (2010) contributed to exploring this notion of media events, pointing out that in Dayan and Katz’s original formulation media events were approached with the implicit assumption that societies or communities are stable entities, characterised by a shared set of values. Moreover, they also pointed out that media’s ability to create collective events is not only based on collective values, but is also connected to the power of the media system to legitimise itself and increase its power and centrality within society. In any case, the ritual power of these media events lies in the fact that exceptional media phenomena serve to sustain and mobilise collective sentiments on the basis of the symbolisation of values and the legitimisation of distinctive narratives of social life (see also Cottle, 2006).

In summation, what these streams of research add to the analysis of the relationship between populism and music is that the power of music, especially in the form of live big events like festivals or TV-based competitions, also resides in its relatively autonomous ability to shape identities and create shared meanings through aesthetic and artistic content. Hence, this literature suggests a way to look at the ability of music-related phenomena be a stage to collectively perform and negotiate values and identities, well beyond the boundaries of musical aesthetics.

A further highly interesting dimension to be explored in the relationship between music and populism regards the role of emerging digital media technologies in music selection, circulation and consumption, as well as in enabling new forms of collective discussion about music. Music, as other forms of cultural production and consumption, is undergoing a process of “deep mediatization” (Couldry & Hepp, 2018); a more consistent focus on the changes produced by digitisation and the integration of social media in

music circulation could definitively add a novel perspective to the debate. This issue has two main dimensions.

The first dimension is related to the fact that music circulation has experimented a strong process of disintermediation, in terms of the decreasing of the roles of intermediaries and professionals in organising music industry and consumption patterns. Digital music circulation and online stores, for example, contributed to undermine the crucial symbolic role of local shops, as music can be now acquired directly in digital formats through platforms such as iTunes or Amazon. At the same time, automatic music selection offered by platforms such as Spotify, which suggests to listeners the music they might possibly like, is replacing intermediaries like journalists, experts or magazines that before were at the core of the process of collective taste shaping (Ericsson et al., 2019; Spilker, 2018). The automation of music selection, largely based on the idea that autonomous algorithms are able to organise people's collective tastes without any intermediation, can be seen as part of the same trend toward disintermediation favoured by contemporary digital media, that is also reflected in the disintermediation of the relationship between people and their political leaders. Indeed, it is not hard to trace here a parallelism between the apparent disintermediation of music tastes, thanks to the role of platforms and algorithms, and the disintermediation of political opinions, favoured – among other things – by the changes in political communication strategies triggered by the widespread adoption of social media and other forms of digital interaction (see Chadwick, 2013, p. 55 ff.).

A second dimension crucial to understanding the role of digital media is represented by the integration that occurs between music circulation and social media platforms, as well as other forms of people's direct involvement in music events though the mediation of online tools (Morris, 2015; Prey, 2018). Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have become crucial tools for musicians and their audiences to connect in less mediated and more direct ways. While in the pre-social-media era musicians were somewhat disconnected from their audiences outside the ritual of live concerts, today musicians and music artists are increasingly required to be present online via some sort of social media, as this is part of their promotional strategy and their careers depend on these activities. Through in-depth interviews with musicians, including well-established ones like Billy Bragg and Richie Hawtin, Baym (2018) revealed how online media transformed the connections between artists and their digital fanbase.

What these examples outline is that digital communication technologies are altering on different levels the role of musicians and their relationships with the audience, thus impacting on and multiplying the ways in which music contents and performers can

become meaningful in relation to different cultural spheres, including in the ways they contribute to the shaping of collective values and political identities.

4. Approach and methodology

The analysis presented in the following pages comes from a research based on a qualitative approach and focused on a specific case study. This approach reflects the established research related to the analysis of media events (Dayan and Katz, 1992; Couldry et al. 2010), that recognizes “the necessity of detailed, multi-level empirical research on outstanding phenomena”, rather than systematic or long-range inquiries (Hepp and Krotz, 2008, p. 268). As argued by media sociologist Andreas Hepp (2008), the choice of focussing on a distinctive case study is driven by the need to investigate the meaning structures and patterns of social narratives, making them accessible for further theorizing. Indeed, media events are reputed to reflect exemplarily how contemporary media culture is deeply characterized by exceptional happenings, that require not just to be described in detail, but to be interpreted with the aim of offering “meat to develop further a critical reflection on such kinds of cultural processes” (Hepp, 2008, p. 418).

For the present research, I decided to concentrate the attention on the 2019 edition of the Sanremo Festival, with the aim of understanding how the development of this music competition offered the opportunity to articulate explicitly populist political discourses in society. To this end, I adopted a qualitative methodology of data collection, influenced my media ethnographic and anthropological approaches (Postill and Pink, 2012; Hine 2017) and being driven by the theoretical need to build up a solid interpretation of the collective narratives circulating about the Sanremo Festival. Indeed, as it has been outlined by digital media anthropologist Gabriella Coleman (2010), ethnography of online communication is particularly important, because these forms of communication have indisputably arisen as crucial sites for the formation of the collective experience as well as for the emergence of socially shared narratives.

More specifically, I collected and analysed a heterogeneous set of documents and contents, which have been considered useful means to produce a solid interpretation of the circulation of populist discourses related to this music-based media event. More specifically, the main sources have been the following. First, I collected online articles from major newspapers related to the 2019 Sanremo festival published during the days of the event (Feb. 5 to 9, 2019) and in the following week, specifically looking to the adoption of populist references in the coverage of the music competition. In particular, this collection was focussed on mainstream national newspapers (“La Repubblica”, “Il Corriere

della Sera”, “La Stampa”, “Il Messaggero” and “Il Tempo”) and on other newspapers explicitly characterized by a distinctive coverage of populist stances (“Il Fatto”, “Il Giornale” and “Libero”). Moreover, data collection also encompassed a wide array of multimedia contents, especially including recorded videos of artists exhibitions from the music competition, but also press conferences and interviews, notably those involving the two singers at the centre of the controversy, Ultimo and Mahmood, about whom further documentation has been consulted in relation to their carriers and artistic development.

Furthermore, the research work also implied the analysis of the messages posted on social networks, notably Twitter, by the two main populist politicians involved in the controversy (Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini), who prominently used these media channels to convey their opinions, receiving a wide array of answers and comments from users. Finally, I also included the analysis of other documentation reputed useful to understand specific issues related to the Sanremo festival and its mechanisms, including historical accounts of the festival development (used in the section 5) and the technical procedures, not immediately transparent, by which the competition is organized and the final classification is elaborated (see, for instance, Eurofestivalnews, 2019).

The resulting research overall approach is thus characterized by the refusal of highly standardized methods, which are commonly considered to be insufficient for the task of capturing the specificity of media events (Hepp and Krotz, 2008, p. 268), which rather require tailored strategies of empirical data collection, common to ethnographic approaches. While this methodology also presents limits, notably represented by its emphasis on the subjective role of the researcher in constructing the field of inquiry, it nevertheless offers an original perspective to observe a research topic largely unexplored, like the relationship between music phenomena and political populism.

5. The Sanremo Festival as a Symbolic Arena

The Sanremo Festival, or simply Sanremo, is a music festival in Italy, held every year in the tourist city of Sanremo. Started in 1951, Sanremo is without question the best-known and most influential single musical event in the country, followed every year via radio and television by more than 11 million Italians. Since its origin in the fifties, many of the best-known names in Italian music have taken part in the event as competitors, guests or composers. The festival consists of a competition of original songs, selected by a special commission linked to record labels and other institutions belonging to the music industry. Historically, the Sanremo Festival has often been the most viewed TV event in Italy, reaching its peak of participation in the late ‘80s, drawing in an audience of more

than 15 million people (almost 70% of the national television audience). Even though in the last two decades the festival lost part of its fascination (also due to competition from other music-based TV shows, such as *The X-Factor*), the last years of the festival amassed an average viewership of about 11 million (almost 50% of the total of national TV audience).

These numbers offer a quantitative glimpse into how deeply the festival is embedded not just in Italian music scene, but more broadly in Italian culture, lifestyle and popular imagination. As outlined by several popular music scholars, Sanremo represents a central place in the national culture, playing the role of an important media event, able to express and contribute to the shaping of issues surrounding national identity as tensions related to social transformations spread across the Italian society (Facci & Soddu, 2011; Santoro, 2006; Tomatis, 2019). As summed up by Barra et al. (2019), since its inception the Sanremo Festival has represented “a ritual, a place of negotiation, confrontation, and sometimes clash, between tradition and innovation, inertia and change, not only in the field of songs or television entertainment, but in the intellectual and broad cultural sense” (p. 330).

There are several examples that help demonstrate the crucial symbolic role of the Sanremo Festival in the country’s historical moments and in relation to several social issues. For example, cultural sociologist Marco Santoro (2006, 2010), borrowing the theoretical framework from Alexander (2003), showed how the 1967 suicide of one of the most famous singers participating in the festival, Luigi Tenco, represented a collective “cultural trauma” that triggered a cultural dynamic which was able to reconfigure musical classifications within the Italian popular music field, thus leading to the legitimation of the new category of *cantautore* as a new form of poetry, as opposed to the category of pop music (*musica leggera*). Another example of Sanremo’s ability to stage broader social issues pertain to the ‘80s, when the festival became a space for representing the Italian industrial crisis of the time. Indeed, during the 1984 festival, presenter Pippo Baudo invited to speak live to the audience the workers of the important factory Finisider, who on the occasion of the opening night crowded in front of the theatre to demonstrate against a planned downsizing, asking for the festival to be blocked as a protest (Facci & Soddu, 2011, p. 220).

These are just a few examples of how, in recent Italian history, the Sanremo festival was able to play the role of a relevant symbolic arena where social and cultural issues related to Italian identity, values and politics have been presented and collectively negotiated, thus offering an interpretation of emerging social and dynamics. All this makes the festival not just the largest Italian singing event, but rather a very important cultural

institution, able to actively participate in the shaping of the deeply rooted symbols, values and identities of the country.

6. The 2019 Festival and the Populist Discourse about the Mahmood Victory

Considering the significant role Sanremo played in recent Italian social history, it is not surprising that the festival that followed the first populist government, formed in June 2018, became a stage for performing issues related to politics and populism. Indeed, in 2018 Italian politics went through a decisive modification due to the outcome of the elections held in March of that year, which didn't produce a clear leadership to form a government. As a consequence, two parties recurrently labelled (with different nuances) as "populist parties," the Five Star Movement and the League, agreed to form a coalition to support a new government, which took office in June 2018. This new government was the first one supported by what has been defined in the public debate as a "populist coalition"; at the same time, the leading politicians supporting the government spent much energy on building up distinctive political public identities, constantly flirting with populist references, especially by means of social media. The new political identities of the parties supporting the government, as well as the government itself (led by relatively unknown Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte), were presented not so much through conventional political communication strategies, but rather by means of the copious work of communication and symbolic appearances by the two main figures behind the government, Matteo Salvini (the League) and Luigi Di Maio (the Five Stars Movement). As the subsequent analysis of the discourses related to a distinctive music controversy during the music completion will argue, the 2019 festival offers an example of how populist discourses could be articulated in relation to a distinctive musical event, which played the role of a cultural space in which musical matters have been directly translated into broader narratives addressing wider social and political issues.

This major incident was the result of the competition in the 69th edition of the event. During the fifth and last night of the festival, the winner was proclaimed to be the song *Soldi* ("Money"), sung by the artist Mahmood, the pseudonym of Alessandro Mahmoud. Mahmood's unexpected victory at Sanremo gave rise to huge debates amongst experts, audiences and political figures. There are at least two interrelated reasons that triggered this controversy, which largely overcame the music context to expand forcefully into the realm of politics, in particular touching on populist issues.

The first reason was the identity of the winner, the singer Mahmood. Mahmood, a relatively unknown singer, was born in Milan in 1992 to a Sardinian mother and an

Egyptian father, growing up in the suburb of the post-industrial northern city. Despite having Italian citizenship, Mahmood's mixed origins made him the first winner of the Sanremo festival that can be considered to be the musical result of the waves of migration that characterised Italy, particularly in the last two decades. From this perspective, Mahmood was a winner whose national identity does not align undisputedly with the conventional definition of Italian identity. Even though Mahmood does not speak Arabic, his music and style are directly influenced by Arabic culture, including, for instance, references to Ramadan or the presence of Arabic sentences in the song that won at Sanremo. Consequently, the hybrid identity characterising Mahmood was at the centre of a controversy that was partially focussed on how he was or was not able to represent a negotiated form of "Italianness," as the winner of an event whose full title is "the Italian song festival of Sanremo." In short, Mahmood's victory was the first instance, in almost 70 years of the festival, in which the national identity of the winner was not taken for granted (see Barra et al., 2019), contributing to shedding light on the collective understanding of "otherness" and, consequently, on the differing political perspectives from which to address the cultural, demographic and political changes going on in Italian society.

The second relevant issue that even more directly prompted a wider public debate, well beyond issues of musical tastes and styles, was connected to the process of the selection of Mahmood as the final winner, and more specifically to the functioning of the voting mechanisms that accorded him this success. Mahmood overtook another young artist, Ultimo, only in the very last phase of the vote, during the last night of the event. During the course of the festival, Ultimo was believed by the majority of commentators to be the eventual probable winner. What caused an open conflict about the voting mechanisms was the fact that Ultimo was the favoured artist for the audience voting from home through an electronic voting system, winning almost half of the popular vote, while Mahmood was only in third place (after the popular trio *Il Volo*); however, this result was overturned by the experts and journalists, who largely gave their votes to Mahmood, assuring him the final victory.

The voting system of the 2019 Sanremo Festival was quite complicated, as it included a balanced system resulting from the combination of four methods: a) public televoting, carried out via phone and other online systems; b) a press jury made up of accredited journalists; c) a demoscopic poll, composed of a sample of 300 music fans voting from home and d) an expert jury, made up of personalities from the world of music and entertainment. In the final night, the vote was split 50-50% between public televoting from home and the press and expert juries (Eurofestivalnews, 2019). In the final vote, Ultimo was the most voted artist in the public televoting, with 46.5% of the votes, while

Mahmood was in third place with only 14.1%. The choice of the internal juries was therefore decisive in Mahmood's victory. However, the final outcome was perceived by many as a betrayal of the public's taste. This feeling was amplified by the reaction of the runner up, Ultimo, who refused to participate in the final appearance of the three top finishers. On top of this, he levied a public accusation of bias against journalists, and further insulted them during the final press conference.

Up to this point, the controversy was relevant, but it was still confined within the musical realm. However, the issues raised during the Sanremo competition about the winner and the voting mechanisms soon overcame the musical boundaries to enter the national political battlefield.

7. The Articulation of Populist Discourses after Sanremo

In the new Italian populist political landscape, Mahmood's victory was immediately presented by commentators and media as a metaphor of the clash between the elite and the people, claiming that the vote of the experts and journalists (the "elite") noticeably betrayed the "real" feelings and tastes expressed by the audience (the "people") voting from home. This interpretative frame was clearly exacerbated by the fact that the runner-up, the singer Ultimo, was at the top of the ranking after the "popular" vote and was the favourite since the beginning of the festival. Furthermore, the complexity of the voting system made the outcome of the competition relatively opaque and, on top of this, the angry statements from Ultimo against journalists and experts helped to support a contraposition between experts and the audience.

What made this controversy cross the musical boundaries to enter the realm of politics was that this narrative was immediately adopted and developed by two the major political figures belonging to the populist government in order to articulate their political discourses. A major comment occurred right at the end of the competition after the proclamation of the winner, when Matteo Salvini, Deputy Prime Minister of the populist government and leader of the League posted a tweet in which he questioned whether Mahmood's song was the best "Italian song," also affirming that he would have preferred the song by the runner-up Ultimo. Soon the post received a huge amount of reactions on Twitter: about 1,300 retweets, 9,000 likes and hundreds of direct replies (see <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1094394837468696578?lang=en>) and was widely reported on by the press on the following day.

The doubts expressed by Salvini regarding the Italian identity of Mahmood's song were interpreted by the majority as a clear reference to Mahmood's mixed identity and

to Salvini's well-known political stand against multiculturalism and any policies favouring migrants' integration (see for example Lana, 2019). Symbolically, Mahmood was clearly representing a different kind of Italian identity, especially when compared to the quite more traditional profile represented by Ultimo, a man from Rome, whose aesthetic features were more similar to "traditional" Italians than to the style and appearance of second-generation Italian immigrants. Furthermore, the differences between the two artists didn't extend only their biographical origins, but also to the aesthetics of their respective songs. Ultimo's song, *I tuoi particolari* (Your Details), was a tune well rooted in a solid tradition in Italian popular music, featuring elements of bel canto, highlighting the role of the voice over rhythm, and a traditional acoustic piano solo at the beginning of the song. The presence of a clear reference to a love story in the song, one of the traditional subjects of songs performed at the Sanremo Festival, was another element that contributed to reinforcing the song's traditional appeal, as well as socio-cultural identity, in front of a national audience.

On the contrary, the winning song by Mahmood presented a completely different musical identity. First of all, the song *Soldi* was much more influenced by the trap genre, a style directly derived from hip-hop, in which the use of the voice is not based on bel canto and puts less emphasis on the singer's virtuosity, while offering a rather hypnotic *cantilena*—something very removed from Italian popular music tradition. In addition, the trap style has also been directly associated with the behaviours of "deviant" youth, especially due to explicit references to drugs and sex prevalent in the music of several Italian trap artists (including, for instance, Sferaebbasta, Dark Polo Gang and Ketema¹²⁶). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Mahmood's song also contained explicit links to his multicultural identity, stressing plainly and simply the alternative cultural influences that characterised the song.

This contrast between Ultimo, who was perceived as a young, traditional Italian pop singer with a recognisable Italian musical aesthetic, and Mahmood, a singer representing a set of diverse "otherness" attributes on biographical, aesthetic and musical levels, was a perfect opportunity for Deputy Prime Minister Salvini to articulate his populist discourse and to support his anti-multiculturalist standpoint. Ultimately, Salvini's discourse about the winner was related to the danger of Italian identity being "contaminated" by foreign influences, and especially how this contamination was supported by the elites (journalists and experts) who explicitly rejected the feelings and the will expressed by the people through the voting system from home.

The articulation of a populist discourse in relation to the musical controversy at the Sanremo Festival was emphasised differently by the other Italian Deputy Prime Minister, Luigi Di Maio. In the aftermath of the musical competition, Di Maio, leader of the Five

Star Movement party, gave statements in which he explicitly made an accusation against journalists, labelling them *radical-chic*, a pejorative term for the élite made up of leftist intellectuals. In several interviews, he equated the betrayal of the popular vote at Sanremo with the betrayal of people's will at the political level, thanking the festival for having shown "to millions of Italians the abyssal distance between the people and elites" (Damiata, 2019). His declarations were widely reported on in Italian newspapers, for example by the daily newspaper *Il Tempo*:

More than on everyone's favourite songs, I see that there is a great debate about the winner of Sanremo, because the jury, composed of music critics, like Beppe Severgnini, and by the press room, have totally overturned the result of the televoting. The singer that the majority of voters wanted from home Didn't succeed, but the one the minority represented by a jury wanted, a jury mostly made up of journalists and radical-chic, did. And what's new? These people are those that are more and more distant from the popular feeling and have shown it also on the occasion of Sanremo (Luigi Di Maio quoted in "Il Tempo", 2019, *my translation*).

While the intervention by Salvini pointed directly to one of the major political issues his party has been raising during recent years (the danger represented for Italians by immigrants and their different cultures), the discourse by Di Maio was much more directly related to the populist rhetoric that characterises his political party, the Five Star Movement, addressing the gulf between the elite and the people, as well as the notion that the Italian system would be dominated by "strong powers" to be demolished through the implementation of a "techno-populism" (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018) based on online tools of direct democracy (such as the online platform Rousseau, through which this party periodically consults their electoral base).

The discussion about the Mahmood victory and the role of the voting system quickly triggered a wide public controversy, in which key political and cultural figures took part. Amongst those, for example, the President of the Italian public television broadcaster (nominated by the populism government) called for a reformation of the voting system at Sanremo to address the "clear imbalance between the popular vote and a jury composed of a few dozen people" (*La Repubblica*, 2019).

In sum, the events surrounding the music competition at the 2019 Sanremo Festival have been directly appropriated by leading populist politicians in order to articulate their interpretations about crucial social and political issues and to support distinctive collective narratives aligned with their wider political agendas. The controversy surrounding the winning song indeed has been made to resonate in a perfect way with some of the major political and cultural tensions across the country connected to issues like

multiculturalism, Italian traditions, the power of elites and the need to rewrite the county's democratic rules. These narratives articulated by the two aforementioned politicians offered slightly different versions of populist discourses, in tune with the respective political agendas of their populist parties: on the one hand, Salvini linked his narrative to Sanremo by stressing issues related to the "Italianness" of the winning artist, thus triggering a discussion about the defence of a "traditional" Italian identity; on the other hand, Di Maio and the Five Star Movement used the musical event to put the Italian democratic system itself under discussion, in order to support a distinctive vision about how a democracy based on the will of the people would alternatively work.

8. Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of the circulation of populist discourses during the 2019 Sanremo music festival highlights several interesting issues about the way music (and, more in general, culture and aesthetic contents) is today able to become politically relevant and part of wider chains of political communication. At a more general level, what this case shows is one of the possible ways in which political discourses can emerge and assume relevance in relation to contexts, topics and events that are quite far from what it conventionally considered a "political arena". If, as Chadwick (2013) suggested, political communication has turned into a "hybrid media system", characterised by a multiplicity of logics and actors, the populist discourses emerged during Sanremo enlarge even more this interpretation, displaying one more step through which politics and entertainment can be short-circuited by the recent political populist wave: the "fragmented ideology" (Engesser et al. 2017) conveyed by contemporary populist movements and politicians seems to flourish into a communication environment that has been deeply reconfigured by social media and other digital tools.

More specifically, on a political level the Sanremo case outlines that contemporary political communication, especially that coming from populist movements, is increasingly connected with extra-political issues, unfolding a sort the "colonization" of other cultural and symbolic spaces that allow to intercept a much wider audience. In this scenario, any event that can be easily translated into a political narrative becomes a potential stage for the circulation of populist discourses and symbols. In short, the Sanremo case has revealed some of the processes at the basis of the interaction between the political and the cultural/aesthetic spheres, characterised by the exploitation of tensions around issues such as collective identities, distinctions between "us" and the "others" and the rightfulness of democratic processes' rules.

The Sanremo case also tells us something about the active role of music in shaping the circulation of political, populist discourses. What happened during the festival outlines how music contents and cultures can become meaningful at multiple levels, especially for the distinctive ways in which music contribute to support symbolically-dense collective rituals. Indeed, the analysis has emphasised that music can be relevant not only for the meanings that songs convey, the visible political declarations that artists do or the explicit appropriation of music by politicians. Moreover, the differences existing between the styles, music and identities – embodied by the two singers Mahmood and Ultimo – also tell us that the realm of music has the power to generate relatively coherent arrays of identities and narratives, which are disconnected from political issues, but that can be easily stretched and converted, in order to be articulated on a proper political, populist ground. This means first and foremost that it is hardly possible for politicians to articulate any kind of music in any political direction: this is an occurrence of what has been addressed as the “autonomy of culture” (Alexander, 1990; Kane, 1991) in relation to other social realms like political processes.

Then, we have a further issue about the relationship between populism, culture and music, represented by how digital technology and online communication tools altered in-depth not just the logics of political communication, but more widely how people experience collective meanings in society (Coudry and Hepp, 2018). As we have already outlined, changes triggered by digital media are a crucial piece of the entire transformation of the communication environment, in which the populist narrativisation of the Sanremo winner could take place: what we defined following as a “deep mediatisation” of people’s ordinary experience in the age of digital media. On top of this, we can also consider some of the more indirect and less noticeable consequences of the changes in communication technology in relation to how music and populism can align each other in unprecedented ways. Among them, one crucial issue is the emergence and legitimisation of new systems for expressing judgements, votes, preferences that digital technologies propelled in many social realms, including both politics choices and cultural industries. The proliferation of these online voting systems (including social media’s tools such as the “like” function of Facebook) seems to have reinforced the idea that “the people” can directly express a unified will, without any kind of influence or intermediation, as a unique and coherent outcome. Even though this is a misleading idea, as we know that digital platform or infrastructure always embody some kind of interests, politics or values (Van Dijck et al. 2018; Gillespie, 2018), nonetheless this very same logic is what feeds the possibility to construct the category of “people” and to articulate populist narratives in relation to different realms of social life, like music.

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