

Full Length Article

# Conceptualising the emancipatory potential of populism: A typology and analysis

Alexander Beresford<sup>a,\*</sup>, Nicole Beardsworth<sup>b</sup>, Kyle Findlay<sup>1</sup>, Simon Alger<sup>1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Leeds, UK and University of Johannesburg, South Africa

<sup>b</sup> University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa



## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Populism  
South Africa  
Democracy  
Polarisation  
Twitter data  
Radical economic transformation  
White monopoly capital  
Vanguardist populism  
Devolutionary populism  
ANC

## ABSTRACT

A central claim common to all populist movements is that they are committed to giving voice and power to those who have been forgotten, maligned, or marginalised by the status quo. However, consensus holds that they rarely – if ever – fulfil this commitment. And yet, there is a gap in our understanding of why. This article provides an original conceptual distinction between vanguardist and devolutionary populism. While the former is concerned with accessing and wielding power within the existing spaces of politics, the latter is concerned with provoking and enabling popular reimaginings of the very spaces in which politics is constituted. Using the case of South Africa, we demonstrate how our novel method can help determine where a movement might sit on the continuum between vanguardist and devolutionary populism. We make a populist campaign legible by combining detailed archival work to understand the movement's background with cutting edge cartographic techniques to map its spread and reception in digital spaces. Our conceptual distinction and methods create space to consider whether, and in what circumstances, populists might reinvigorate politics or, alternatively, compound the cynicism, divisions and tensions manifest within contemporary global politics.

## 1. Introduction

For all their diversity, what populist movements across the world hold in common is their claim that they are committed to giving voice and power to those who have been forgotten, maligned, or marginalised by the status quo. They do so by “simplifying” the political space (Laclau, 2005a): constructing politics as a struggle between a virtuous “people” and “the other/elite” who have “deprived or attempted to deprive the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice” (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2007, p. 3).

Taken at face value, populism's ostensible preoccupation with giving voice to the voiceless may offer a corrective to the epistemic injustice that pervades global society. Miranda Fricker (2007) argues that epistemic injustice is “a potent yet largely silent dimension of discrimination” in which the marginalisation that groups and individuals experience as a result of social inequalities (class, race, gender, for example) is magnified by the way in which their knowledges and expressions of demands are excluded or silenced by the powerful. Theory from and about the Global South has long since identified such injustice as the central hallmark of colonial legacies in which the knowledge of

the oppressed is systematically stigmatized, maligned and marginalised from both the practice and contestation of public administration (Biko, 2002; Fanon, 2001; Freire, 1996).

Some scholars argue that at the very least populism bears the potential to challenge the status quo by bringing new voices into politics (Laclau, 2005a; Panizza, 2005a) and that certain manifestations of populism have evinced such commitments over time, albeit ultimately falling short of genuinely transferring power to “the people” (Kioupkiolis, 2016). In other cases populist movements are argued to offer little more than cynical rhetoric instrumentally deployed to cultivate support for duplicitous elites (Mouffe, 2016; Müller, 2017; Worth, 2019).

This article examines how we might conceptualise and empirically evaluate the emancipatory potential of populist movements. In this sense the paper seeks to draw some attention away from debates that predominate the populism studies literature about what are ultimately populism's secondary relationships with things like authoritarianism, liberal democracy, and left- or right-wing ideologies. Instead, it prioritises a focus on what makes populism a “distinct mode of politics” (Dean & Maignushca, 2020, p. 20): the shared foundational commitment of populist movements - whether sincere or otherwise - to give voice and

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [a.beresford@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:a.beresford@leeds.ac.uk) (A. Beresford).

<sup>1</sup> Independent Researcher.

power to "the people". We provide an original conceptual typology and empirical method to consider whether, and in what circumstances, populists might offer emancipatory challenges to the status quo or, alternatively, compound the cynicism, divisions and tensions manifest within contemporary global politics.<sup>2</sup>

First, we make a conceptual distinction between what we define as vanguardist and devolutionary forms of populism. In short, vanguardist populism is a pointed, short-term strategy of re-centring sovereign power so that it can be wielded by a custodian (a leader, party, or movement) on behalf of "the people". Whether through elections, referenda, or coup d'état, this is about accessing and wielding power within the existing spaces of politics. Devolutionary populism, on the other hand, is concerned with a longer-term strategy of tackling epistemic injustice through the devolution of sovereign power to "the people". In short, it is concerned with provoking and enabling popular reimaginings of the spaces in which politics is constituted.

These are understood as two poles at opposite ends of a wider continuum, rather than mutually exclusive categories. Individual populist movements can exhibit both vanguardist and devolutionary commitments and be identified at different waypoints along the spectrum at any given time, such is the "contingent" nature of populist politics (Roch, 2022). We contend that the conceptual distinction nonetheless enriches scholarship on populism by allowing us to better comprehend how and why so many populist movements deviate from their (ostensibly) shared foundational commitment.

Second, we offer an original method of identifying where a populist movement might be located on this continuum between vanguardist and devolutionary populism. A detailed investigation of the political spaces from which populist movements emerge and try to expand their appeal is vital for understanding their underlying character and their propensity to challenge epistemic injustice in wider society. This includes the networks that forge the movement and the spaces (both physical and digital) within which they operate and attempt to gain support. It also necessitates focus on the reception and engagement these receive from publics as part of a wider social interaction (De La Torre & Mazzoleni, 2019; Lizotte, 2019; Roch, 2022).

This article responds to a call in *Political Geography* by Lizotte (2019) to expand a "geographies of populism literature". It does so both by contributing a case study from the Global South, and by using cutting edge cartographic techniques to map a populist campaign and its engagement with a nascent digital public. Given the growing importance of social media for populist discourse dispersion and direct, largely unmediated engagement with "the people" (Engesser et al., 2017), this article takes this digital space seriously. It is the first article of its kind to make a populist campaign legible using maps of social media interactions. It brings the people back into populism studies (Lizotte, 2019), by outlining how a populist campaign was engineered and – more importantly – received, by tracking and mapping popular engagement with its ideas and promises.

We focus on South Africa, a country where large sections of the black majority continue to experience enduring epistemic injustice rooted in the country's long history of intersecting racial, class, and gender inequalities. We trace the initiation and map the emergence of a populist movement that sought to exploit this context by uniting black South Africans against an extremely divisive signifier of racial and class

<sup>2</sup> We would like to thank Gabrielle Lynch, Dan Paget, Sara Rich Dorman, and Michael Aebly for providing us with platforms to present early versions of this work at the BIEA@60 Workshops, ESRC Festival of Social Sciences, and the African Politics Research Group, as well as all the attendees. We are also very grateful to Jonathan Dean and Emma-Louise Anderson for their comments on the paper.

injustice: white business elites [aka "White Monopoly Capital" (WMC)].<sup>3</sup> Through archival work covering 10,000 media articles and negotiated access to over 100,000 leaked emails, we develop a detailed genealogy of this movement and its discourses, identifying the ideological foundations of the WMC campaign in the obscure literature of the anti-apartheid struggle. We analyse how and why this discursive framing of WMC as the enemy of the liberation struggle was appropriated and re-packaged by a seemingly contradictory elite network of international capitalists, leading figures within the ruling party, radical leftist social movements, and a notoriously right-wing, London-based PR firm, Bell Pottinger. Our genealogy and Twitter data mapping analysis of a new database of 32,000 Tweets reveal a highly centralised, orchestrated campaign that was symptomatic of a vanguardist populism which, while claiming to challenge epistemic injustice, was actually conceived and operationalised within an exclusive elite space as a reputation-laundering exercise that sought to both distract attention away from corruption scandals and galvanise elite struggles for power.

Despite the historical specificities of this case study, we conclude that our conceptual distinction between vanguardist and devolutionary populism, coupled with forensic analysis of the digital spaces within which populist movements emerge, offers a way forward for scholarship on populism that moves beyond concerns for populism's divergent relationships with established ideologies or with liberal democracy. It instead recentres our attention on evaluating the core of what makes populist appeals unique, and the question of why so many contemporary populist movements may offer little prospect for the devolution of power to "the people" who they purport to serve.

## 2. What is populism?

Conceptual confusion abounds in the study of populism in which it is defined "among others, as an ideology, a movement, and a syndrome" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 2). And yet:

*Beyond the lack of scholarly agreement on the defining attributes of populism, agreement is general that all forms of populism include some kind of appeal to "the people" and a denunciation of "the elite." Accordingly, it is not overly contentious to state that populism always involves a critique of the establishment and an adulation of the common people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 5).*

In this sense, populism is not an ideology to be added to a broader political typology alongside liberalism, socialism, fascism, and so on. Nor is it exemplified by one particular set of policies or another. Instead, as Ernesto Laclau argues, it is a "performative act" which "simplifies the political space" (Laclau, 2005a, p. 18) through the construction of a new political "frontier" in which politics is framed as an antagonistic relationship between "the people" and "the other". This radical reconstitution of the political space is what Laclau refers to as a "populist rupture".

A populist rupture emerges when an institutional system is either unable or unwilling to meet the demands placed on it by the population (Panizza, 2005a). As people begin to look for a common source of fault and blame, Laclau argues, new popular subjectivities begin to crystallise around two antagonistic poles that come to signify a new political "frontier" (Laclau, 2005b, p. 39). The first of these, "the people", congeals as a section of the population begins to share an impression that they have all been, in some form or another, wronged by the political status quo. As Hugh Seton-Watson (1968, p. 156) has argued, "one element without which there could be no populism was idolization and worship of the people. The people were the repository of certain basic virtues which had become lost or perverted." Such virtues are contrasted with the perceived vices of "the other" to whom blame for the failure of

<sup>3</sup> Here we are using the loose definition of WMC used in the campaign. Academics have recently revived a debate about the definition of WMC and its utility - see Aboobaker in bibliography.

the institutional system to meet social demands is ascribed. As Panizza notes, in such scenarios

*The "other", in opposition to "the people", can be presented in political or economic terms or as a combination of both, signifying "the oligarchy", "the politicians", a dominant ethnic or religious group, "Washington insiders", "the plutocracy" or any other group that prevents the people from achieving plenitude (Panizza, 2005b, p. 4 original emphasis).*

While "the other" may or may not be powerful elites in reality (e.g. migrants or other minorities), they are nonetheless constructed as possessing the capacity and desire to deprive "the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice" (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2007, p. 3). A popular subjectivity of "the people" forged in opposition to "the other" thus emerges whose demands are expressed in terms of deliverance in the form of righteous reclamation, rebalance, redress, or reparation. Populist politics therefore entails a zero-sum, gladiatorial dynamic at its core: for "the people" to triumph, "the other" in its position of power must be identified and vanquished.

### 3. Vanguardist and devolutionary populism

Debates within populism studies are diverse but there are two predominant ones that we will focus on before setting out how our analytical distinction between vanguardist and devolutionary populism can contribute to expanding the literature on populism.

The first of these debates concerns populism's relationship with established ideologies. Populism is often argued to constitute little more than a "thin centred ideology ... which can offer neither complex nor comprehensive answers to the political questions that modern societies generate" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6). This has generated a long-standing concern that populism offers a "fund of rhetorical devices" which "make it a kind of common currency into which the concerns of most brands of politics can be converted" and used by opportunistic politicians (Canovan, 1981, p. 314). This raises questions about whether populism's emancipatory potential might be best understood in terms of the established ideologies that populist movements "piggy back" onto. For example, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) highlight a geographical divergence in terms of how an "inclusionary" left-wing populism that "predominates" in Latin America and a more "exclusionary," right-wing populism proliferating in Europe. The former are often argued to bear some form of progressive potential, despite their limitations (Kioupiolis, 2016; Roch, 2022). The latter are widely argued to exploit an environment "ripe for talented demagogues to articulate popular frustration" generated by the uneven impacts of neoliberal globalisation (Mouffe, 2016, p. 55) and insecurities about white status in a period of rapid change (Anderson & Secor, 2022, p. 102608; Lizotte, 2019). This provokes concerns that populism could sow division and cynicism, rather than create the space for emancipatory politics (Worth, 2019).

In other contexts, however, the character of populist movements cannot be easily captured in terms of left/right ideological divides. In post-colonial Africa populism is most often deployed to mobilise the urban poor and disenfranchised, less concerned with global dynamics and more often with the failings of the post-colonial state which has not lived up to the promises of political independence (Cheeseman & Larmer, 2015; Resnick, 2013). While African populism has largely had an ambiguous relationship to ideology, it has at times taken on an ethnic bent, trying to mobilise popular majorities from amongst a diverse population (Cheeseman & Larmer, 2015; Kagwanja, 2009; Paget, 2021; Resnick, 2017; Sishuwa, 2021). However, in South Africa, where the largest ethnic group constitutes just 20% of the population, populist

mobilisation has more frequently converged along racial lines, such as the entrenched histories of racial repression and contemporary inequalities that manifest most visibly along racial lines (Mbete, 2015; Nkrumah, 2021). Here, the distinction between left-wing "inclusionary" populism and right-wing "exclusionary" populism has less purchase: demands for economic redress for centuries of colonialism and apartheid often, by their very nature, entail (and, according to their proponents, necessitate) an exclusionary, racialized framing of the popular subjectivity of "the people" upon which demands for greater economic inclusion can be based. This highlights how the left/right ideological distinction might not be the most obvious way to understand a movement's emancipatory potential and may, in any event, distract us from a focus on what makes populism – and the promises populists make – a "distinct mode of politics" (Dean & Maignushca, 2020).

A second predominant debate regards the relationship between populism and liberal democracy. For some, populism threatens the pluralistic qualities of liberal democracy as well as the very democratic institutions and the rule of law that protect citizen's rights and their opportunities to influence public debate (Müller, 2017). Others, however, take a slightly more agnostic view, arguing that "the repoliticization of society that is fostered by all types of populist forces has an ambivalent impact on democracy" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013, p. 169; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2019). As such, "portraying populism as a stable 'black box'" with prefixed effects on liberal democracy is unhelpful (Roch, 2022, p. 15). Taking this further, scholars have criticised what they identify as a "liberal angst" among politicians and some academics driving a reactionary denigration of populist politics that ignores the shortcomings of liberal democracy itself as a catalyst of populism while also downplaying or ignoring entirely a (potentially) emancipatory dimension to populism (Dean & Maignushca, 2020; Laclau, 2005a, p. 19). As Panizza (2005b, p. 11) notes, populism potentially allows "those who have never been represented because of their class, religion, ethnicity or geographical location, to be acknowledged as political actors" and "brings into the political realm both individual and collective desires that previously had no place in public life" (ibid, p. 24).

It is to this potential highlighted by Panizza that we turn our attention to here. Populist politics has historically manifested in a broad range of political environments, whether colonial, authoritarian, democratic, or ideologically left or right wing. Various ideological commitments to liberal democracy, the state, capitalism, the nation etc. may find expression along the way, but these are all highly contingent. In this respect we should not ignore a significant, long-standing concern in literature focused on the Global South with the efficacy of populist politics as part of wider emancipatory political struggles against colonialism and other forms of oppression (Arrighi & Saul, 1969; Saul, 1973, pp. 152–179). In brief, evaluating the integrity of a populist movement's foundational commitments to tackling epistemic injustice returns us to a critical debate about the emancipatory potential of populism germane to all political contexts.

This requires an understanding of populist politics as a "dynamic social relationship that is generated and sustained between political leaders and 'the people' that are inspired to 'follow' them" (Dean & Maignushca, 2020, p. 20). A defining feature of this relationship that distinguishes it as populist is the attempt to create "affect" between the leaders and led, in terms of a "capacity to articulate a shared epistemic narrative capable of speaking to and from the experiences, needs, wants and feelings of a 'voiceless' cohort of people" (p.21). This "affective" relationship occurs on two planes: vertical (where the people are affected by leaders), and horizontal (between "the people" as they affect

each other) (Gunnarsson Payne, 2023). If successful, these affective relationships can begin to galvanise the collective identities of “the people” (horizontally) and blur (or even fuse) the identities of the leaders and “the people” (vertically), such that the political struggles of the leader are indistinguishable from those of “the people.” As Dean and Maignashca (2020, p. 21) note, “any aspiring leader(s)” will therefore “need to construct a political language that gives expression to ... epistemic injustice”.

What we turn our attention to is how and why actors might differ in the methods they employ to construct affective relationships and the goals they have if this is achieved. We draw a distinction between vanguardist and devolutionary populism to understand how and why, despite their common discursive commitments to restoring power and voice to the people, populist movements might vary quite considerably in terms of the extent to which they hold firm to these commitments. Following the example of previous work on populism drawing up conceptual dichotomies (e.g. inclusionary vs. exclusionary) (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013), we set up our distinction in line with the general understanding of “good concept building” forwarded by Goertz (2006, pp. 27–35) which “is characterized not only by presenting a definition based on necessary and sufficient conditions, but also by identifying its negative pole.” There might be a “radical asymmetry” between these poles, Goertz argues, in that the negative pole (devolutionary populism) might necessarily be presented as a relatively vague ideal type as a means to bring conceptual coherence to the positive pole (vanguardist populism) (p. 31). Our typology is used to identify certain traits that a populist movement might adhere to most at a particular moment in its evolution, rather than a fixed essence of the movement.

Vanguardist populism, we contend, is concerned with a pointed, short-term strategy of commandeering existing institutions of power so that they can be wielded by a custodian (a leader, party, movement, state or institution) on behalf of “the people”. For example, wresting power away from “the other” in a plebiscite, election, or a factional struggle and claiming to do so as part of an effort to reclaim or renew the people’s power. It derives its potency from the capacity of a leader or movement to articulate, amplify and, potentially, personify the forgotten or maligned “voice” and demands of the people. However, “the people” only assume an ancillary role in co-constructing a wider political frontier between themselves and the “other”. First, they may have little or no influence over the articulation of who they (“the people”) are and who their enemy “other” might be. Their disaffection with the status quo is treated as a reservoir of anger from which a political vanguard can draw legitimacy and favour to forward their own political project. Second, “the people’s” involvement in the realisation of this project might be quite passive in character, for example as pliant voters or “rent a mob” protesters.

For vanguardist forms of populism, the embrace of popular subjectivities need only be temporary, enabling the formation of a transient political frontier in which lasting popular mobilisation is auxiliary to the job in hand (e.g. winning an election), rather than reflecting the lasting commitment of the movement. Energy is thus channelled into commandeering existing institutions of power, rather than devolving voice and self-determination to “the people” where such devolution can produce unpredictable outcomes, including challenges to the status quo and the structural inequalities upon which it is premised. Symptomatic of such vanguardist populism are the “vertical logics” of “hierarchical, formal and representative structures of party formations” (Kioupkiolis, 2016). It can ultimately manifest in the distinction De la Torre (2018) observes between populist leaders seeking power and those who achieve it, the latter often centralising power and giving short shrift to their

previous claim to champion constituent power over constituted power. Therefore, while vanguardist populists offer a disruptive challenge to the status quo and those individuals and institutions that hold power, their end “offer” is not one of devolved power but of commandeering political power on their behalf, so that the status quo might work better for the populist and, potentially, “the people” they purport to represent. Contemporary movements evidencing such traits might include Donald Trump’s “MAGA” movement and the Brexit referendum campaign to “Take Back Control”.

The end goals and methods of devolutionary populism, on the other hand, are more diffuse. Its project of dissolving “business as usual” politics exceeds the ambition to simply ensure “the people” are better heard and represented within existing political institutions through the medium of a vanguard who might speak on their behalf. Devolutionary populism is concerned with a longer-term strategy of tackling epistemic injustice through the devolution of power to “the people”. Movements that might appear toward this end of the spectrum include Podemos, whose “horizontal” organizational structures included spaces for “extensive political participation, self-organization and collective production of party policies and campaigns” by networked social movements and local communities (Kioupkiolis, 2016, p. 105). Similarly, the encouragement of ordinary Venezuelans to engage in local governance initiated through Hugo Chavez’s “communes” reflects an effort to devolve decision making. These movements might be thought of as being towards the devolutionary end of the spectrum but, as Kioupkiolis notes, their experimental “horizontal” organisational forms ultimately clashed with the prerogatives of the party leadership “whose discourse taps a reservoir of social indignation articulated and popularized by social movements” (Kioupkiolis, 2016, p. 104 Emphasis added).

As an ideal type, devolutionary populism holds greater ambition: not to ultimately “tap” and amplify a carefully curated version of the people’s voice but to challenge and overcome the deep roots of epistemic injustice through the conscientisation of “the people” so that they themselves have the freedom and confidence to re-imagine the political frontier, including who “the people” are and who their enemies might be. This takes its inspiration from activist scholars from the Global South who have long-since asked us to reconsider and reimagine whose voices and knowledges should “count” in political life and what intuitional forms might be desirable to enable this (Freire, 1996). In fighting for liberation against colonialism, they identified that beyond commandeering existing (colonial) institutions of power, a key challenge for the liberation movement was the conscientisation of “the people” to overcome the “germs of rot” that colonialism left behind in the minds of the oppressed (Fanon, 2001). Activist-scholars like Steve Biko (2002), for example, reflected on the need for a self-assertive “black consciousness” to be fermented in the struggle against apartheid which would guard against co-optation and distortion by liberal political elites whose pre-scripted notions of who “the people” are and what form liberation should take robbed black communities of the self-expression that could genuinely root out the deep psychological wounds of racism, colonialism and apartheid. A central concern of devolutionary populism might thus be less to do with the immediate outcome of an election, plebiscite or factional struggle, but instead with an effort to evoke conscientisation and learning (Freire, 1996) among “the people”: an “activist” ideal of politics described by Seton-Watson (1968, p. 157) which “seriously attempted to involve people in running their own lives. This marked it off from purely authoritarian types of social control ... as well as from authoritarian styles of mobilization for development.”



Table 1: A typology of vanguardist and devolutionary populism.

|               | Understanding of 'the people'  | Aims   | Methods   | Commitment to popular mobilisation   |
|---------------|--|--|---|--|
| Vanguardist   | Assumes 'the people' to be an already-existing constituency ready to be mobilised through the 'right' discourse.                                       | Seizing power on behalf of 'the people' and wielding it on their behalf  | Centrally orchestrated diffusion of discourses, often relying heavily on existing hierarchical institutions (e.g. party structures)                           | Instrumental. The active participation and mobilisation of 'the people' is potentially important but ultimately ancillary to the movement's aims.  |
| Devolutionary | Assumes 'the people' are only constituted as a popular subject through conscientization and continuous co-construction between them and their leaders. | Mobilising and conscientising 'the people' and continuously devolving power to them by expanding the epistemic spaces and networks that influence politics | Diffuse forms of engagement between leaders and 'the people', deepening the democratic nature of existing institutions (e.g. parties) and/or forming new ones | Ideological. The ultimate aim is the mobilisation and conscientization of the people so that they actively assume control over the movement and ultimately their political future, creating the potential for a radical reimagining of the status quo ante |

These are not mutually exclusive, absolute categories, and might be better understood as two poles at opposite ends of a continuum. The kinds of struggles engaged in by the vanguard populist are not antithetical to a devolutionary populism: they may, for example, provide the spark to ignite activism in the first place and/or secure important concessions or transfers of power within existing institutional systems. Individual populist movements can exhibit both vanguardist and devolutionary commitments and be identified at waypoints along the continuum at any given time as their methods and aims evolve. As [Kioupiolis \(2016, p. 99\)](#) observes in his study of PODEMOS, tensions between "vertical" and "horizontal" methods of organising are inherent to populist movements, and it is how these tensions are resolved that we argue determines their place on the continuum between vanguardist and devolutionary populism.

#### 4. Method

To ascertain where a movement sits on the continuum between vanguardist and devolutionary populism requires a detailed empirical insight into the spaces within which the movement emerges and evolves. This requires four points of focus: 1) the origins of the network of activists that formed a populist movement, including the power dynamics between leaders and activists within the spaces it operates; 2) the epistemic heritage of the network, in terms of how its actors begin to articulate shared framings of politics as well as the discourses that could create horizontal and vertical affect between activists, leaders and, potentially, the wider public; 3) the methods and mediums used to try and generate affect between the movement and the general public; 4) how the movement's framings of politics and its discourses are received and engaged with by the public.

This approach avoids the pitfalls of some contemporary populism studies scholarship that often researches "only one side of the conversation" in terms of "excessive analysis of party manifestos and speeches" ([Roch, 2022, p. 7](#)). Instead, we treat populism as a "dynamic social relation" between leaders and activists, notably "what a range of actors actually do and when, where and how they do it" ([Dean & Maignashca, 2020, p. 20](#)), taking seriously "the relationship between populist politics and the spaces in which it operates" ([Lizotte, 2019](#)). This focus on populism as a "collective action process whereby collective identity is created and transformed" ([Roch, 2022, p. 6](#)) allows us to explore how "affect" is generated both "horizontally" (between activists in the movement) and "vertically" (between the movement's leaders, its activists and, ultimately, the wider public).

##### 4.1. Epistemic heritage

We trace the initiation and map the expansion of a populist movement in South Africa advocating "Radical Economic Transformation" (RET) which attempted to unite black South Africans against an extremely divisive signifier of racial and class injustice: white business elites [aka "White Monopoly Capital" (WMC)]. First, we trace the epistemic origins of this signifier, tracing through archival research its beginnings in the liberation struggle against apartheid, dating back to

the 1960s, through to the post-apartheid era. We then develop a detailed genealogy of the RET movement, in terms of the networks that initiated it and how they began to arrive at a shared set of discourses aimed at creating the glue of horizontal affect among activists and, in time, vertical affect between the movement and the wider public. We generated a LexisNexis archive of over 10,000 media articles discussing "White Monopoly Capital" to trace when and where this discursive signifier entered into the political lexicon and how its meaning changed over time. Through negotiated access to hundreds of thousands of leaked emails<sup>4</sup> we demonstrate how the discourse of WMC as the enemy of South Africa's liberation was appropriated and re-packaged within a seemingly contradictory elite networking space of international capitalists, leading figures within the ruling party, radical leftist social movements, and a notoriously right-wing, London-based PR firm, Bell Pottinger. We illuminate how the campaign was conceived within this elite space as a reputation-laundering exercise to aid elite power struggles with nothing beyond rhetorical commitment to giving voice to the voiceless.

##### 4.2. Mapping digital spaces

As [Harris \(2020, p. 102124\)](#) notes, politics and public discourse is increasingly digitally mediated and as the politics of the internet looms larger in the politics of nations, it is ever more urgent to take seriously this digital space. In service of this aim, we use a unique map-like method to map an online populist campaign ([Hogräfer et al., 2020](#)), to 1) identify how the RET movement's primary framing of politics of the WMC as the enemy of the people was injected into the public domain through Twitter networks and 2) track the extent to which this then triggered an organic form of "affect" with its target audiences, galvanising the dichotomisation of political space between "the people" and WMC. We do so by visualising and quantifying the shape of the Twitter networks involved, using spatialized data to highlight the relationship between different nodes in the campaign and the recipients of the message. These maps use space, distance and frequency of interaction to make legible the uptake (or lack thereof) of a populist campaign and its capacity to engender a populist frontier. The interaction network methodology used in this paper creates network maps that are akin to real-world cartographic maps in so far as they simplify complex data into two-dimensional representations of the real world where position has meaning and we can generate landscapes of engagement ([Fabrikant et al., 2010](#)). Using these map-like visualisations capitalises on the cognitive benefits of cartographic information, including people's ability to read and quickly make sense of spatial data in the relationships between various actors or events ([Hogräfer et al., 2020, p. 647](#)).

<sup>4</sup> The authors are grateful to South Africa's brave and dedicated whistle-blowers and journalists, without whom this research would not have been possible. Specifically, we would like to express our appreciation to the amaBhungane Centre for Investigative Journalism and the consortium with whom they worked to shed light on the inner workings of public sector collusion and corruption in South Africa. For all of their reporting, please see [www.gupta-leaks.com](http://www.gupta-leaks.com).

Although a range of platforms were used, including personal websites, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, the orchestration of a Twitter campaign was the main focal point of an attempt to generate affect within activist communities and to spark wider public debates. Twitter offers activists the capacity to engage in "unmediated" dialogue with "publics" (Engesser et al., 2017). In contrast, "dark social media" platforms such as WhatsApp allow primarily for intra-movement exchanges and this data is not only difficult to access, it also does not evidence the broader reach or "affect" outside of a closed network.

The Twitter data analysed in this paper was collected using the Twitter Public REST API. We collected Tweets relating to specific topics identifying keywords (e.g. "white monopoly capital" OR "WMC" OR #WMC OR #WhiteMonopolyCapital). Second, the Twitter datasets are mapped and visualised as "interaction networks" (See Findlay & Janse van Rensburg, 2018) where Twitter users are connected to each other when they interact with each other by retweeting (a way of sharing another author's content with your own followers) or @mentioning (a way of addressing a specific author) each other. The result is a social network map that enables us to map a kind of digital public square where users interact with each other, and thus tend to cluster together. These clusters are identified using the Louvain modularity community detection algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008). We then also track changes over time using multiple datasets (2018–2020) to visualise how the movement has moved through the South African digital space over time.

Our Twitter data visualisations allow us to depict the shapes of the networks involved, and to demonstrate the level of affect achieved through a populist campaign. The topological pattern, or "shape", of Twitter interaction networks fall into a handful of morphologically distinct classes, and that these classes appear to sit on a spectrum. Research on product branding (Findlay, 2018) finds that highly crafted, manufactured and controlled conversations that fail to connect organically with an audience and create affect, tend to result in a centralised conversation shape, or what Himelboim et al. (2017) refer to as a "hub-and-spoke" pattern of interaction – exemplified by pattern "a" in Fig. 1. Such a pattern emerges where a message/campaign is orchestrated and dispersed from a central source, but where the interaction between its audiences remains limited. Conversely, patterns "b" and "c" in Fig. 1 provide a visualisation of campaigns that engender engagements among their audiences, whether these remain "anchored" to a central source of the campaign (b) or take on a more decentralized, organic form of engagement beyond the central control of the instigator (c). Visualisation "d" denotes uncontrolled, dispersed conversations around a topic.

We use these network maps to demonstrate how, in the case of South Africa's RET movement, the digital network of the movement evolved over time from being an orchestrated, centralised campaign (hub and spoke) to one that gradually began to evoke greater interaction and affect among its audiences.

To add another layer of rigour to the inferences we can make from visualisations, we devised a novel single metric, the Network Shape

Score, for categorising the topological shape of Twitter interaction networks in order to quantify the level of organic engagement – or affect – engendered within conversations around specific topics. In order to quantify the shape of a network to allow for comparison between networks, we created the Network Shape Score using the following process. The authors sourced 62 Twitter datasets relating to a variety of topics, including brands, commerce, politics and social issues. We then identified the seed nodes for each dataset – those that started the conversation or pushed a specific message (Fig. 2). We then introduced two novel Seed Node Distance (SND) metrics:

$SND(1)$  = fraction of nodes for which the minimum distance to any of the seed nodes is 1

$SND(2,3)$  = fraction of nodes for which the minimum distance to any of the seed nodes is 2 or 3

We plotted these two metrics on a 2D plane for all 62 datasets and grouped them into four clusters which neatly corresponded to the qualitatively different classes of network shape (Fig. 3).

By constructing a parametric curve through the cluster centroids, their distribution was projected onto a 1D spectrum, resulting in a score between 0 and 1 that summarises the extent to which a conversation is highly centralised in a hub-and-spoke pattern (close to 0), a mixture of centralisation and organic conversations (around 0.5) or diffuse and disconnected (close to 1).

We use this Network Shape Score to quantify the extent to which, in this case, populist discourses were either "forced" or pushed in a one-directional manner (resulting in hub-and-spoke-like shapes) or, alternatively, generated a more organic, affective pattern of engagement as "the people" embrace the populist discourse of WMC as the enemy. In terms of the Network Shape Score, the former would create a "low" score roughly between 0 and 0.3 while the latter would create a score between 0.3 and 0.7 (with any higher value denoting an increasingly disconnected conversation).

Taken together, our multi-methods approach enables us to construct a detailed genealogy of the movement, including its epistemic heritage, the power dynamics of the network involved, and what their intended aims were when inciting South Africans against WMC. We are then able to map and quantify the extent to which this generated an affective relationship with its audiences through the digital spaces in which it primarily operated.

## 5. Findings: Vanguardist populism in South Africa

### 5.1. The genealogy of a populist discourse

The African National Congress (ANC) has governed South Africa on the back of six successive election victories since the nation's first democratic elections in 1994. However, despite making progress in some areas of government, the party's support is gradually eroding

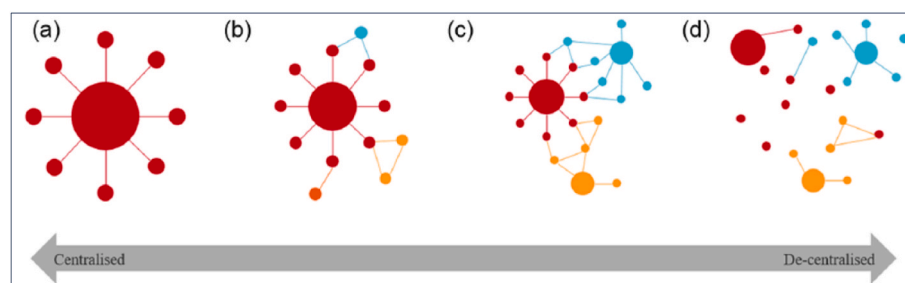


Fig. 1. " Four broad brand conversation shapes tend to emerge as the conversation moves from being highly centralized around a specific account to a more decentralized ecosystem around multiple anchor accounts: (a) hub-and-spoke conversations, (b) anchored spin-off conversations, (c) organic ecosystem conversations, and (d) uncontrolled conversations."

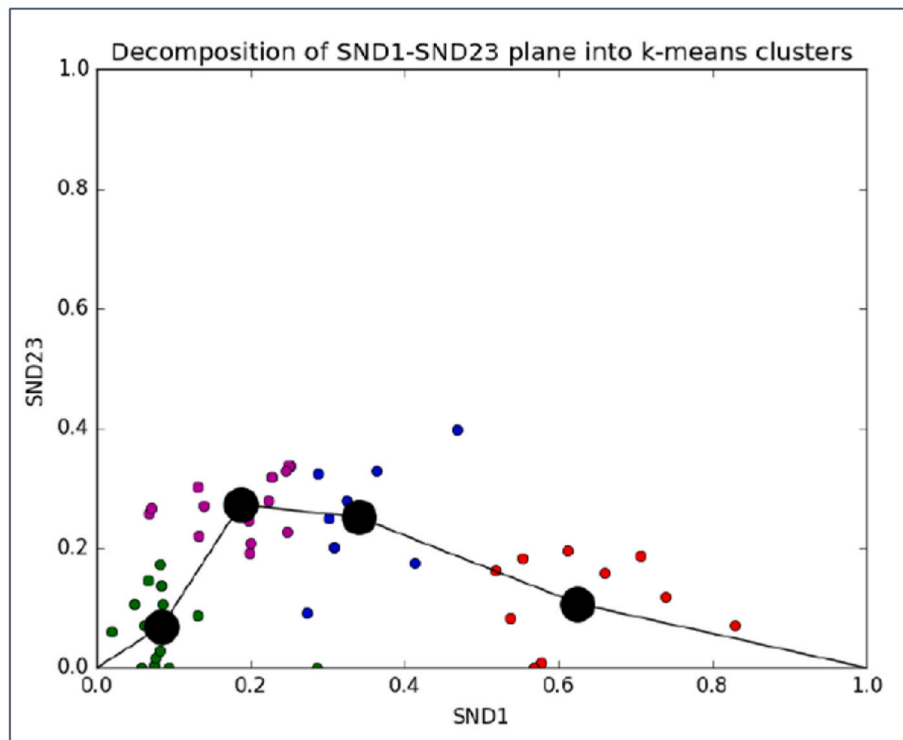


Fig. 2. In the above figure, each point represents one of 62 conversation networks.

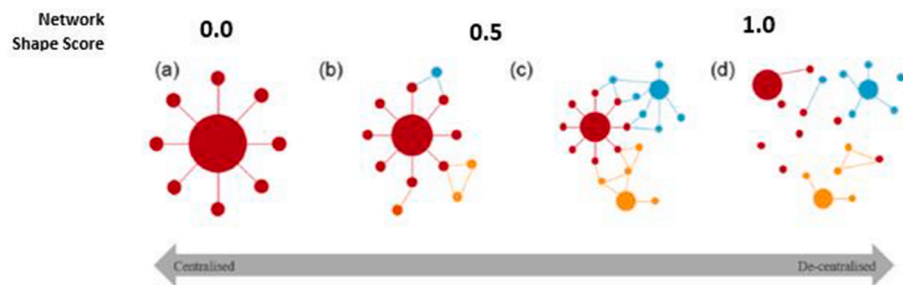


Fig. 3. Network shape spectrum with Network Shape Scores overlaid.

because of widespread frustrations with the slow pace of socioeconomic change, growing inequalities, and corruption (Booyesen, 2015; Everatt, 2016; Gumede, 2017; Marais, 2011). This has fuelled sustained high levels of protest (Runciman, 2016) and industrial action (Sinwell & Mbatha, 2016), while in some cases anger has found expression in violence towards foreign migrants (Matsinhe, 2011). Against this backdrop, some commentators have argued that South Africa is ripe for a populist rupture (Hurt & Kuisma, 2016, p. 17; Mathekga, 2008, p. 131; Mbete, 2015; Vincent, 2011).

Indeed, in 2016 when the discourse of white business elites (aka White Monopoly Capital) being the enemy of the people erupted into popular conversations, many commentators feared that it had thrown “a match at the tinderbox of inequality and frustration that has persisted since 1994” (Malala, 2017). But where did this potentially incendiary signifier come from?

Concerns with racialized and economic monopolies can be found in the earliest documents formulated by the broad struggle against apartheid inequality, exemplified by the inclusion of the words “monopoly industry” in the 1955 Freedom Charter (Aboobaker, 2019, p. 517). The full phrase “white monopoly capital” first features in the influential 1962

policy document of the South African Communist Party (SACP), a part of the liberation movement (South African Communist Party, 1962). The twin themes of “monopoly capital” and “white monopolies of power” appear repeatedly in SACP documents from the 1960s, but the concept of “white monopoly capital” is most fully articulated in a document called “The Path to Power” during the transition period in which the party articulated concerns about a post-apartheid dispensation that transferred political rights to the majority, but left them marginalised by a continued monopoly of economic power by the white minority (South African Communist Party (SACP), 1989).

As frustrations grew with the slow pace of economic transformation after the ANC took power in 1994, the party’s internal politics and its alliance with the SACP and the unions became more fractious and “white monopoly capital” began to slowly and sporadically re-enter the political lexicon. In some instances, WMC was identified as slowing or blocking the pace of black economic empowerment (BEE) programmes designed to create and nurture the growth of a black capitalist class (Benjamin, 2006). On the left, the powerful trade union movement evoked discourse of WMC as an enemy of the people to bemoan how government – at the behest of WMC – had pursued neoliberal policies at

the expense of the black working class (Pretoria News, 2007). The SACP (Shoba & Brown, 2008) complained that there were some in the liberation movement trying to make the ANC government an “instrument” of WMC by “stealing” the party from workers and giving control over the country to a “dependent and compradorial” elite. In 2011, as leader of the ANC’s Youth League, the radical Julius Malema led a march against “White Monopoly Capital” to the seat of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE), which was supported by some of the country’s labour formations (Ngobese, 2011).

Following a public falling out with the ANC leadership, Malema was expelled from the party and he and other ANCYL members formed the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party in 2013, which put the fight against WMC at the centre of their agenda and their new party manifesto (EFF Founding Manifesto, 2013). References to WMC as the enemy of radical transformation would become a staple in the EFF’s rhetorical arsenal, appearing in speeches, party documents and the parliamentary Hansard<sup>5</sup> as the party sought both to portray the ANC as morally bankrupt, and the EFF as the only political party capable of advancing the interests of South Africa’s poor black majority (Mbete, 2015; Robinson, 2015).

## 5.2. Populist network formation

While this framing of WMC as the enemies of transformation – and black people in particular – by a growing left-wing opposition was sporadically attracting publicity, it was catapulted into the centre of political debate (and controversy) when it was deployed by a network connected to the centre of power in the ANC itself in 2016. This was driven by an unlikely alliance of international capitalists, a faction of the ruling party, a notoriously right-wing London-based PR company, and a collective of left-wing activists calling for radical land reform. The Gupta family immigrated from India to South Africa in 1993 and formed close relationships with members of South Africa’s soon-to-be black ruling class (Onishi & Gebrekidan, 2018), particularly the then-aspiring politician (and future president) Jacob Zuma. In the mid-2000s the Guptas began procuring state contracts and building a domestic media empire – particularly after Zuma’s ascent to the presidency in 2009 – which pushed a pro-government and pro-Zuma line (Marrrian, 2019). From 2013, as corruption scandals began to plague the Zuma presidency and the ANC became increasingly divided into those who continued to stand by Zuma and those who called for his accountability, the Gupta brothers’ infamy increased. News appeared in the country’s press about the contracts that the family had been linked to in diverse areas such as media and broadcasting, mining, telecommunications, power generation and transport, as did consternation surrounding the political influence of the Guptas over the Zuma administration.<sup>6</sup>

In December 2015, in response to the mounting media and public scrutiny of their South African operations, the Gupta family reached out to London-based public relations firm Bell Pottinger to request their assistance (Neille & Poplak, 2020). Lord Tim Bell – who had previously worked for Margaret Thatcher, Augusto Pinochet and Asma al-Assad – flew out to Johannesburg and met with the Gupta family and President Jacob Zuma’s son, Duduzane Zuma, in January 2016 to work out a £100,000-a-month contract signed with the Gupta-owned Oakbay Investments (Cave, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> According to a search of the Parliamentary Monitoring Group’s website, the phrase ‘White Monopoly Capital’ made at least 140 appearances in parliamentary Hansards between 2013 and 2020, with most of those mentions by members of the EFF in 2015 and 2017.

<sup>6</sup> The extent of involvement of this family in political decision-making and their access to state contracts was investigated by a public commission over a three-year period (2018–2022). Details can be found on the website of the Commission of Inquiry into State Capture, 2018, <https://www.statecapture.org.za/site/transcripts>.

In emails exchanged between Victoria Geoghegan (the main partner who was to oversee the account) and Duduzane Zuma, they discussed the plan for a campaign with a “narrative that grabs the attention of the grassroots population who must identify with it, connect with it and feel united by it” (Leaked emails, January 19, 2016). They didn’t settle on their key campaign phrase until at least February 2016 when Geoghegan emailed the media team with an article in the Financial Times quoting EFF leader Julius Malema saying: “It is not white people who are the enemies...the enemy is *white monopoly capital* that wants to produce cheap labour.” (Leaked emails, February 6, 2016). This appears to be the moment when the campaign started to consider using WMC as a signifier. The following day, the leader of the ANC Youth League – in a speech partly drafted by Bell Pottinger staff (Scorpio & amaBhungane, 2017) – made a statement which was summarised by a staffer as noting that “White monopoly capital continues its stranglehold on [the] economy. White monopoly capital decides what is printed in [the] media”.

To broaden and legitimate the campaign, leaked emails reveal that the campaign reached out to aligned sections of the ruling party and activist groups and, in particular, Black First Land First (BLF). The BLF was founded in 2015 and became known for calling for radical land reform and rallying against continued white domination of the economy and politics. According to leaked emails, the links to this activist group were first devised in January 2016 between Bell Pottinger staff and Duduzane Zuma (“Campaign to Name and Shame Bell Pottinger Executives Grows,” 2017) and emails from the Gupta’s holding company, Oakbay, implied BLF leader Mngxitama had requested money in exchange for his support for the campaign (Cowan & Macanda, 2017; Reddy, 2017). The emails suggest that Mngxitama was subsequently “commissioned” to write opinion pieces for the campaign (K. Anderson, 2017) and his movement, the BLF, became high profile supporters of the Guptas, mobilising pro-Gupta (Nyoka, 2017) and pro-Zuma protests as well as targeting rival protests (ENCA, 2017), disrupting meetings, and intimidating and harassing journalists critical of the Zuma-Gupta networks (The Citizen, 2017a, 2017b).

Working through Bell Pottinger, the campaign successfully cobbled together a network of prominent activists in the BLF as well as those within the liberation movement itself, including the ANC, ANC Youth League, and the Umkhonto We Sizwe Military Veterans Association (MKMVA). In some cases, it is alleged that these individuals and the organisations that they represented were drawn into the network through the patronage of Zuma and the Gupta family through donations, loans and debt relief (AmaBhungane, 2016; amaBhungane and Scorpio, 2017; News24, 2017; “Veterans with Influence,” 2011). They would be the key public drivers of the campaign, using their status and access to media platforms to create and amplify the discourse of WMC as the great enemy of the people and the Zuma-Gupta axis as the victims of hostility from white business elites and allied politicians.

By the time Bell Pottinger cancelled its Gupta account in April 2017 following a substantial public backlash (Ismail, 2017), the infrastructure was in place for the Gupta’s media machine to run their in-house version of the campaign. It appears that at this stage WMC became the focal point of an increasingly aggressive populist discourse that sought to simplify South Africa’s political space through the construction of an antagonistic political frontier between “the people” and WMC. As BLF leader Andile Mngxitama put it “the primary contradiction in South Africa is WMC, if you want to change and you are a black person necessarily you must destroy white monopoly capital” (Mngxitama, 2018). The elite network behind the campaign sought to cast WMC as a nefarious and subversive influence that had entrenched inequality in the economic system through the exercise of class power and “captured” the ANC as a political way to sustain it. Carl Niehaus, then Spokesperson for MKMVA, for example, argues emphatically that:

*One simply cannot address the effect of black poverty without getting rid of the main systemic cause of it, which is the continuing exploitative control of our economy by white monopoly capital. Once this is*



understood our situation is no longer murky and unclear: white monopoly capital is the enemy and it has to go (Niehaus, 2017)

Critically, the framing of “the people” here adheres to an “exclusionary” populist logic (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013), in which “the people” were defined in racially exclusive terms as the black majority against the “foreign” white business community (Mngxitama, 2018); a discourse that appeared regularly in our Twitter dataset.

This sparked concerns within and outside of South Africa about the dangerous potential of the campaign aimed at “deliberately prodding powder keg racial tensions” (Armitage, 2017). These fears galvanised an international backlash against Bell Pottinger in particular, which escalated to such a degree that the ensuing international scandal forced the firm into liquidation.

But did the campaign provoke the division of political space between “the people” and WMC as its protagonists had hoped for (and its detractors feared)? Fig. 4 illustrates the broad timeline of the campaign, in terms of the presence of WMC references in the South African Twitter space. Below, we track the formation of this campaign and its dissemination on Twitter, scrutinising how and why it peaked at critical moments in the public scrutiny of the Gupta-Zuma relationship (see Fig. 4). Ultimately we argue that this reflects its vanguardist character, focused on elite power struggles and devoid of genuine commitment to devolve power to ordinary South Africans.<sup>7</sup>

## 6. Searching for affect in a digital space

The campaign can be traced through three stages illustrated in Fig. 5, which are 1) creation, 2) amplification and injection, and finally 3) legitimisation and affect.<sup>8</sup>

### 6.1. Stage 1: Creation

The first stage can be thought of as “Creation”. The network of allied political interests was patched together, with Bell Pottinger employed in the initial stages to help hone their strategy and positioning. The White Monopoly Capital term was injected into the South African discourse as part of a bouquet of topics and talking points meant to distract from the criticisms of the Gupta brothers and Jacob Zuma’s faction of the ANC. Alongside the introduction of WMC as a strawman figure to redirect public anger towards, journalists, civil society and official institutions focused on corruption were also targeted (see Fig. 6).

This media content was created and disseminated through a range of media platforms (see Fig. 7), including the Gupta-owned ANN7 news channel and *The New Age* newspaper – which it later was confirmed that Jacob Zuma had a hand in creating and setting the agenda (Marrian, 2019). In addition to these news media platforms, alternative news websites appear to have been created in 2016 for allied interests such as journalist Pinky Khoabane’s *Uncensored Opinion* (*Uncensored Opinion*, n.d.), and BLF leader Andile Mngxitama’s *Black Opinion* which would lead the initial WMC-as-the people’s enemy narrative (*Black Opinion*, n.d.). Two further classes of website were also created: “PR websites” which espoused the virtues of the Gupta brothers and “attack websites”, which anonymously attacked the critics of the Gupta brothers and their political allies (*Manufacturing Divides*, 2017).

The information provided by these websites thus provided a mix of “news”, analysis and reputation management information alongside clearly false and misleading information. This created a pro-Zuma/Gupta information eco-system which could then be distributed and amplified by the Twitter campaign.

<sup>7</sup> For a timeline of the Gupta scandals, see [A Timeline of Zuma-Gupta Issues from Nenegate to the Firing of Pravin Gordhan 2017](#)

<sup>8</sup> This is the author’s original visualisation, but it draws from, and develops further, the ANCIIR report.

### 6.2. Stage 2: amplification & injection

The media content and pre-designed hashtags were shared on social media, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Initially, the media were picked up and shared among a carefully constructed “sockpuppet” and “bot” network of Twitter accounts in order to perform the popularity of content through the amplification of its sharing. Sockpuppet accounts are anonymously managed Twitter profiles – often with incomplete or false profile details – pretending to be authentic accounts, often associated with automated “bot” Twitter accounts (Maity et al., 2017; Yamak et al., 2018). Bot accounts use automated programmes which control fake accounts that automatically retweet the main account’s tweets (*Daily Maverick Team*, 2016; Findlay, 2016; Roux, 2017). These accounts are identifiable by their automated Tweet activity, which happens immediately following the release of content from the primary profile. Researchers identified at least 800 sockpuppet accounts on Twitter seemingly controlled from India (*Manufacturing Divides*, 2017). Key sockpuppet accounts which were linked to the campaign were used to disseminate the content from the media platforms while other bot accounts “Liked”, shared and retweeted posts by these key accounts, giving them social legitimacy in the eyes of real social media users. As noted by Bellingcat (Wild & Godart, 2020), “by working together in large numbers, amplifier bots seem more legitimate and therefore help shape the online public opinion landscape.” Data analysts in South Africa identified over 100 bot accounts who had churned out 18,000 tweets in just 7 days in late 2016 as part of a “fake Twitter army” operating on behalf of the Guptas and Zuma (*Daily Maverick Team*, 2016; Henderson & Jordaan, 2016). We isolate these accounts and their networks in the map represented in Fig. 8.

These accounts were identified as being part of this inauthentic network following established investigative methods used by the Bellingcat investigative journalism outfit (*Manufacturing Divides*, 2017; Wild & Godart, 2020). Ultimately, these accounts 1) were mostly created in tranches on the same days, 2) that the number of posts from each account was very similar and 3) their Twitter activity was dramatically out of step with the number of Tweets and retweets that authentic accounts generate – thus indicating automated, co-ordinated behaviour.

With this falsely “amplified” social legitimacy, sympathetic content was then injected into real-life activist spaces by genuine activist accounts – such as those of Pinky Khoabane and Andile Mngxitama. Pro-Gupta/Zuma WMC attack content arrived fully formed and their “popularity” was amplified in the feeds of real users. These bot accounts fool both genuine social media users and the platform’s algorithm into thinking that a particular narrative is more popular – and thus has greater social legitimacy – than it actually does. This was the intent of the bot army created to spread the pro-Gupta and anti-WMC narrative.

To summarise, content from the pro-Gupta online ecosystem was initially seeded using the fake personas of the sockpuppet accounts as part of the “amplification and injection” phase of the campaign. Their amplification patterns, in the form of retweets of the seed nodes’ content, followed a clear orchestrated hub-and-spoke pattern (best seen in Fig. 8) while appearing to give the content an amplified social legitimacy. To add further weight to the visualisation, the Twitter network at this stage of the campaign had a Network Shape Score of 0,0 which represents a perfect hub-and-spoke pattern, with sockpuppet accounts retweeting seed nodes but not interacting with each other at all. This content was then injected into a real network of activist influencers. The resultant network (see Fig. 9) had a Network Shape Score of 0,12 implying that it was still highly centralised around a small group of sockpuppet and real-world influencer accounts of activists.

### 6.3. Stage 3. Legitimation and affect

With the content now created, amplified, injected, partially legitimated and a sense of outrage attached, the goal was to further embed the

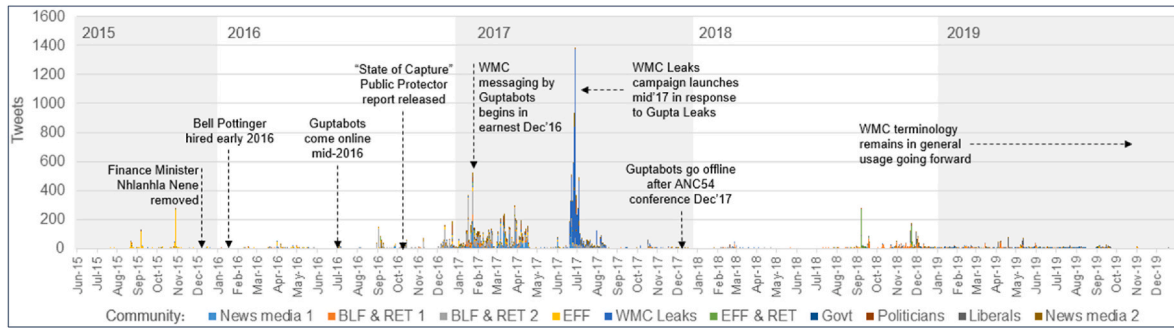


Fig. 4. Daily volumes of tweets containing white monopoly capital-related terms. Colours highlight the communities that these tweets emanated from. Also shown are key political events.

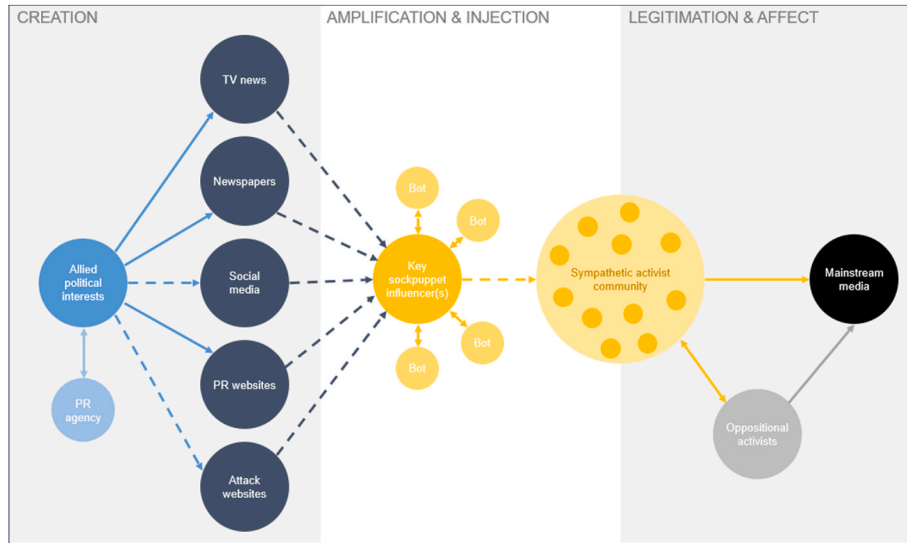


Fig. 5. How to orchestrate a populist campaign.



Fig. 6. Examples of memes shared by the network.

anti-WMC discourse in South Africa’s on- and offline political space. This was achieved when mainstream news media picked up on the talking points and covered them in good faith, further legitimising them in the process and popularising terms such as WMC across South Africa. Similarly, oppositional activists engaged with the talking points, taking them at face value and further popularising and legitimising them.

Figs. 10 and 11 visualise this staged process from the creation of content through to its amplification, its injection into the activist networks, and its consumption across other Twitter communities.

As the campaign garnered attention, the media and wider public engaged with the campaign, further establishing its legitimacy. Our visualisations of the campaign (summarised in Fig. 11 above) allow us to



Fig. 7. The key media platforms used to spread misleading and false information, as reported by ANCIR.

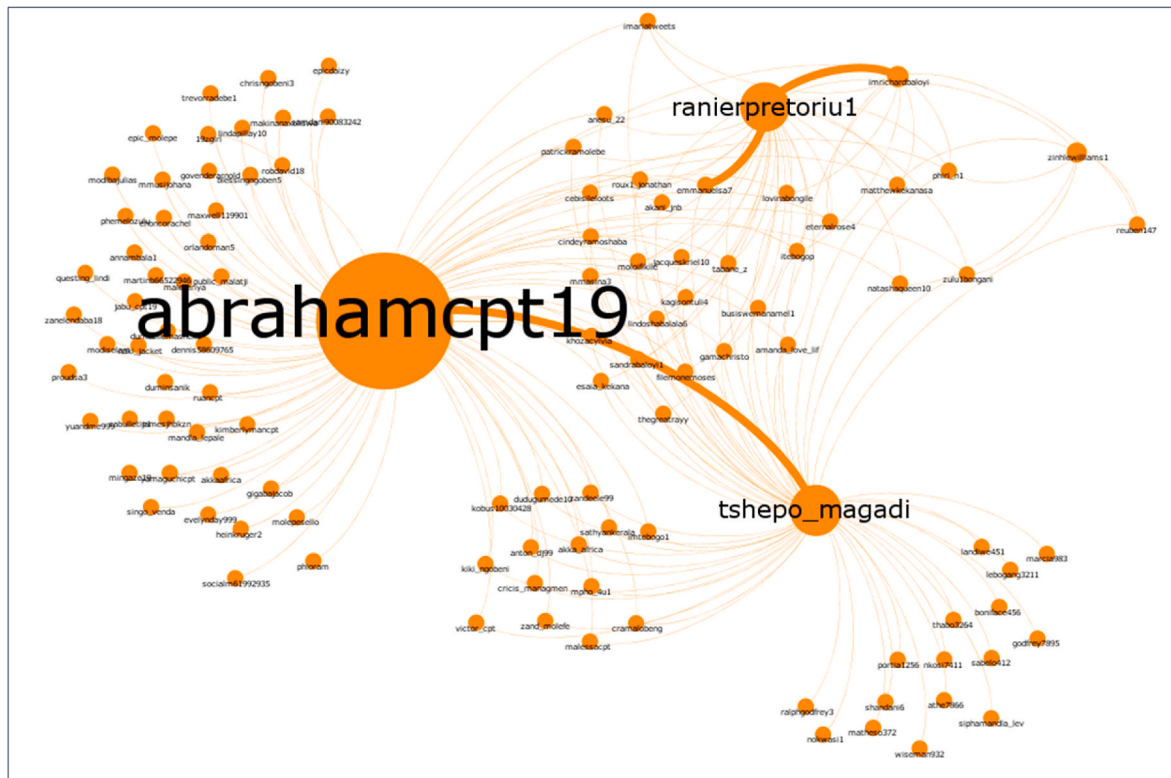


Fig. 8. An interaction network map showing how Guptabot sockpuppet accounts amplified each other’s content. Key ‘seed’ nodes (such as @abrahamcpt19) content was amplified by other sockpuppet accounts retweeting them.

show how a centralised, instrumental campaign (with Network Shape Score 0.0) gradually sparked a wider conversation and the growth of a clearly identifiable activist community who bought into the WMC narrative and advocacy of radical economic transformation. This could be thought of as evidence of horizontal affect being generated among activists, evident in both the visualisation of a conversation existing around core influencers but also dispersed in a “hairball” pattern among multiple users, generating a Network Shape Score of 0.31.

In short, this WMC campaign laid the groundwork to create an elite alliance which later cohered as the RET movement. While in the beginning the RET movement’s conversations were stilted and hackneyed, the community has persisted over time to gather a real network around its narrative. The three maps of South Africa’s online discourse in Fig. 12 shows how we isolated and visualised the RET community

(highlighted green) within the wider South African Twitter community, showing how it started off quite dispersed on the periphery of these conversations before slowly moving into the centre of political debates within and outside of the ruling party.<sup>9</sup> Our data visualisations thus illustrate how a section of South Africa’s radical nationalist-“left” was drawn together and given temporary coherence by the WMC campaign, providing common ground from which to develop new signifiers and enabled dividing lines to be drawn within the ruling party and, more widely, between the WMC campaigners and other factions within South Africa’s political space.

However, while the campaign galvanised a vanguard, it failed to generate a significant vertical affect between the campaign leaders and the wider South African public. Indeed, the network behind the WMC campaign that would eventually galvanise the RET movement was beset

<sup>9</sup> Notably this network had eventually merged with that of the radical Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party by the end of 2020.



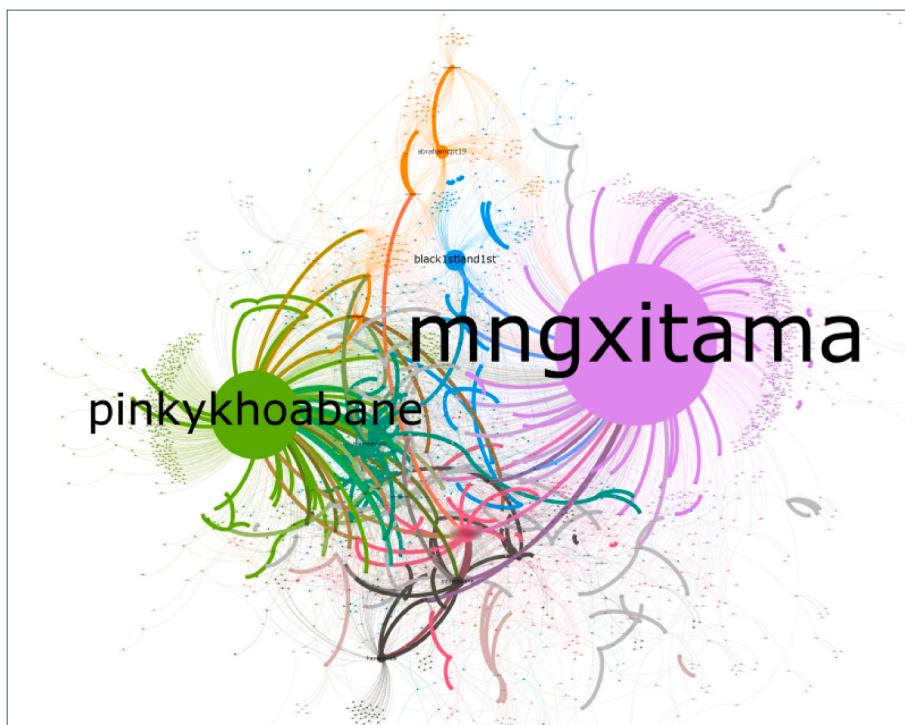


Fig. 9. Interaction network map based on 6,514 tweets showing how the sockpuppet network (orange community) was embedded within a larger activist network consisting of 2,496 users who used specific hashtags popularized by the fake accounts, #PravinMustGo, #JonasIsALiar and #RealStateCapture, or mentioned influencers Mngxitama and Khoabane over the period of 2–10 November 2016.

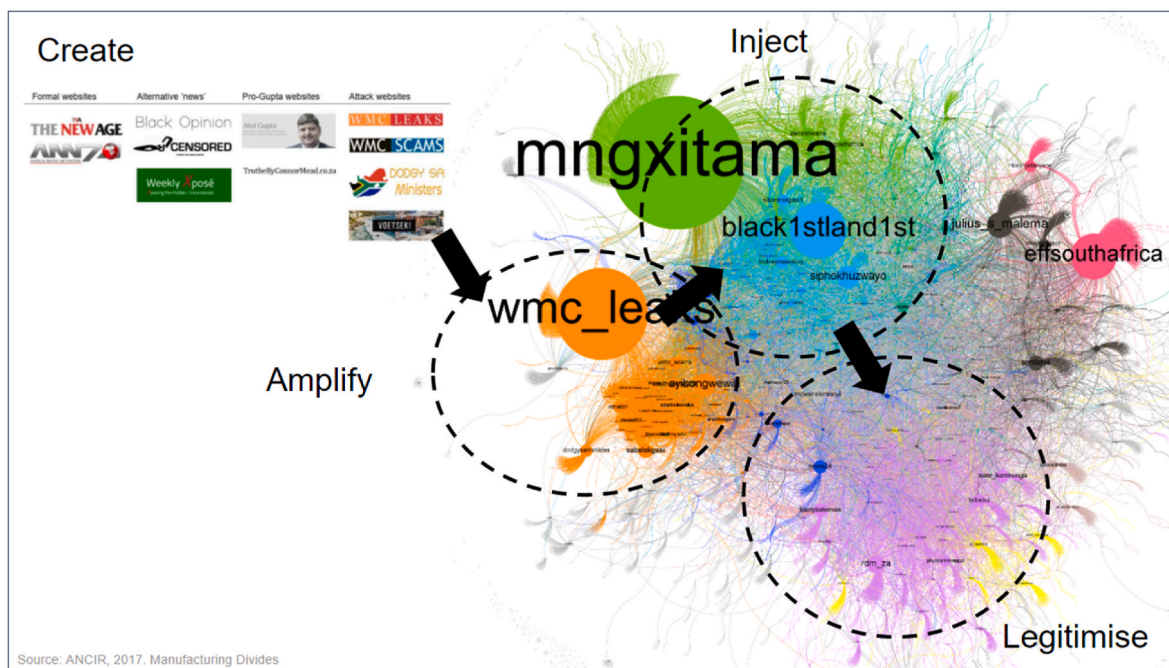


Fig. 10. The four stages of the campaign.

with contradictions from the outset. On the one hand, some of the social movement activists attached to the campaign, such as the BLF, proclaim their goal to be one of inspiring black South Africans to resist racial capitalism. On the other hand, prominent activists involved in the campaign – including those from the BLF – were severely compromised by their association with the Gupta family, Zuma, and Bell Pottinger, as well as a myriad of personal scandals engulfing the individual activists

themselves (News24, 2017; Shapshak, 2017). This alliance’s primary fixation was with maintaining access and control over power within existing political structures, in this case the positions of seats of power within the ruling ANC party: positions that grant “gatekeeper” power in terms of control over resources and opportunities through the ANC-controlled state (Beresford, 2015). The WMC campaign’s activity peaked around inter-elite power struggles (see Fig. 4), notably the ANC’s



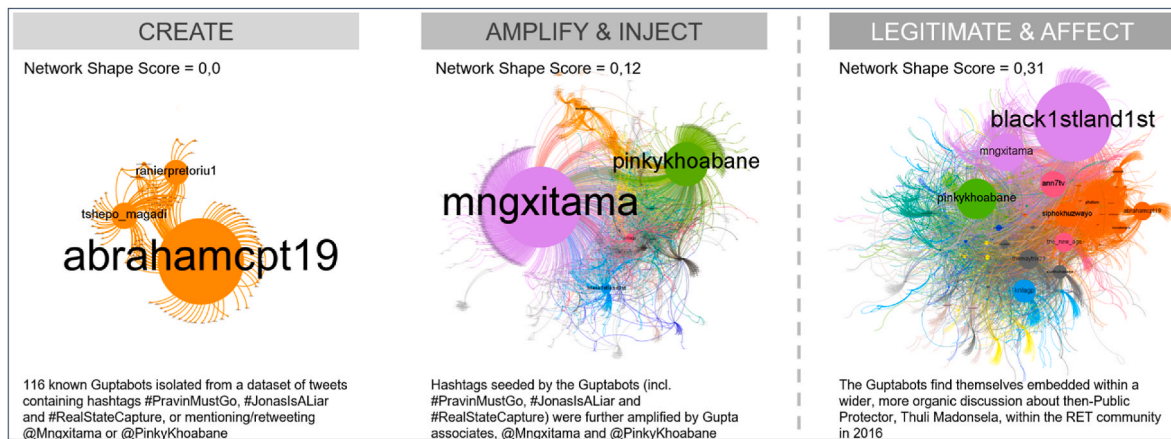


Fig. 11. Illustrative examples of the increasing Network Shape Score values as conversations become more organic in nature.

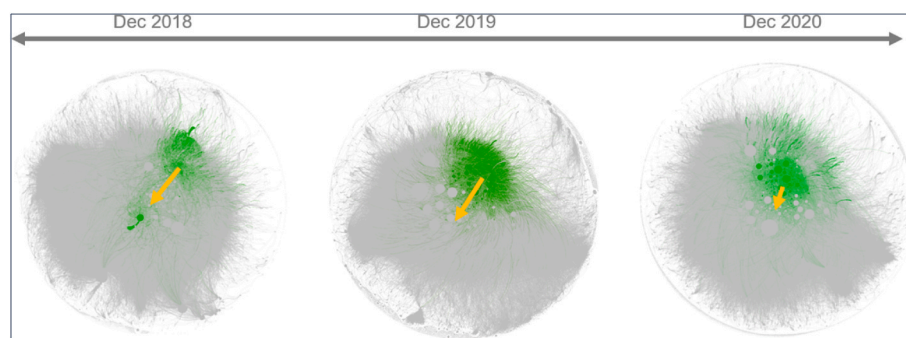


Fig. 12. Where we are now – The above network maps were generated by combining dozens of datasets relating to political and social issues on South African Twitter in each year. The RET community (in green) started off on the periphery of these collective conversations but has moved to the centre over time, representing a prominent competing voice in South Africa socio-political discussions.

leadership contest at its NASREC conference in December 2017, as it tried to mobilise support for Jacob Zuma’s re-election as ANC president. Conspicuously, straight after the Zuma-aligned faction was defeated in the ANC’s elective congress in December the bot network and attack websites were taken offline entirely and social media activity went largely dormant. The movement would not generate similar levels of activity until 2021, when support was being mobilised to free Jacob Zuma from jail.

This vanguardist fixation on contesting power within the existing spaces of politics, rather than trying to facilitate popular reimaginings of how politics is enacted was evident not only in the movement’s aims but also its methods of mobilisation. As we have seen above, from the outset, the WMC campaign was steeped in the arcane language of the liberation struggle and the ideological tensions that ran among its elites for decades. Despite attempts by intellectuals to breathe new life into the WMC signifier, the intentions of those immediately behind the campaign to popularise this populist discourse in 2016 were extremely instrumental: to tap into a reservoir of public anger and indignation through orchestrated Twitter campaigns aimed at advancing elite interests in the ruling party. There was no commitment to devolving the intellectual influence of the movement: “the people” were assumed to exist as an entity needing only the right PR formula to draw from the well of their collective grievances and harness their support for elite struggles.

7. Conclusion

A great deal of attention in studies of populism has centred around how populism, as a “thin-centred ideology” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017) relates to established ideologies of the left and right, including a growing body of scholarship concerned with the “exclusionary” populism of the

far right in Western states (Worth, 2019). Another rich seam of discussion interrogates populism’s relationship with liberal democratic norms and practice. However, while important, in this article we have added to an emerging body of literature calling for a reset of populism studies, trying to move beyond the limitations and impasses of debates about its ideological commitments and/or its relationship to liberal democracy.

The ostensible foundational commitment of any populist movement is to give voice and power to the people. Our article provides an original conceptual distinction between vanguardist and devolutionary populism and a methodological toolkit to evaluate whether, and in what circumstances, we could take these foundational commitments of populist movements seriously.

To identify which traits from our typology a movement may predominantly adhere to requires a detailed empirical investigation of the spaces within which a movement operates. This includes the power dynamics of the networks that galvanised its inception, the manner in which it begins to arrive at a shared discourse of politics to create horizontal “affect” among activists, and the spaces (both physical and digital) through which it tries to diffuse its message and generate vertical “affect” with a wider target population. It then requires an examination of the extent to which these messages are received and engaged with by the wider public. Using innovative cartographic methods, our study takes seriously both the emerging online spaces in which populism is performed and tries to locate “the people” in populism by demonstrating how a populist campaign was both articulated and received (Lizotte, 2019).

Our study of South Africa highlights the frailties of vanguardist populism but the lessons of this bear significance for how we understand why so many contemporary populist movements fall far short of tackling epistemic injustice and to interrogate whether this was, indeed, their

aim in the first place. Whether we think about the vanguardism of WMC in South Africa, or that of MAGA, Brexit or Bolsonaro, we highlight how the manipulation of popular grievances rooted in entrenched inequalities by vanguardist populists may potentially further entrench epistemic injustice by inducing cynicism, division, violence, and/or attacks on what few democratic institutions exist for the most marginalised voices in society.

Where there is no attempt to devolve control over the direction of a campaign to “the people” in whose name it is purporting to speak, empowering the people will remain ancillary to the primary goal of winning elite power struggles. The vanguards behind such movements offer little in the way of a structural challenge to the status quo and epitomise De La Torre’s (2018) characterisation of populist elites who give short shrift to any real commitment to constituent power over constituted power.

Our delineation of vanguardist populism thus highlights the limitations of highly-centralised populist movements whose vague commitments to radical transformation, taking back control, making their communities “great” again etc., are primarily geared toward facilitating elite power struggles that can at best disrupt the status quo and make it work better for the elites themselves and their supporters. Vanguardist populism, in short, offers little prospect of inspiring a devolved, popular reimaging of a country’s political possibilities.

However, we should not deride any and all manifestations of populism as inherently devoid of emancipatory potential (Dean & Maignushca, 2020; Laclau, 2005a; Panizza, 2005b). Our provocation to consider the potential for an alternative devolutionary form of populism forces us to unpack the particular character, aims and methods of populist movements to try and decipher whether and in what circumstances populism might play a role in reinvigorating our politics and our capacities to confront the growing manifold challenges of capitalist globalisation. Where populism holds true to its foundational commitments of overcoming epistemic injustice, a devolutionary populism could open up and democratise the epistemic spaces of politics, injecting pluralism into debates about how to confront global inequalities and injustice, as well as guarding against political elites who all too often speak for the people rather than from them.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102808>.

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