



Sport in a Populist Age

An Introduction

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Sport, like all popular cultural forms, is a contested terrain. However, and largely due to its peculiar emotive resonance, sport is perhaps more susceptible to appropriation by political entities, of whatever inflection. During the last twenty years, and in various national settings, populist forms of leadership and governance have come to the fore, most notably among parties and people on the right of the political spectrum. Sport has thus become a vehicle through which such right-leaning populist rhetorics, discourses, and performances have served explicit political ends. Our current populist age, synonymous with—but not singularly reducible to—the inflammatory Trump presidency, is marked by distinctive articulations of political populism within, and through, the realm of sport. This special issue explores the socio-historic forces responsible for the contemporaneous generative relations linking sport, physical culture, and populist politics. This introductory essay offers a conceptual grounding of populism, explicates the important distinction between left and right iterations of populism, and provides a brief overview of the articles in this issue. The articles explore issues of ethnonationalism, race and racism, homonationalism, Trump and football, fascism and sport, and regional iterations of sport and populism (e.g., Europe and Latin America). As a collection, the special issue provides a touchstone for the contemporary and historical study of sport and populism.

KEYWORDS: sport, popular culture, politics, populism, nationalism, ethnonationalism

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During Donald Trump's ascendancy as the president of the United States (2017–2021), the United States began to grapple with iterations of right-wing populist politics seriously and widely, something which many nations previously have and presently are negotiating—including India, Hungary, England, France, Denmark, and Brazil, to name a few. Trump, though, represents less of an epochal break and more an extension of a divisive period in American, national, and international politics. As witnessed within the broader international and global context, one central association of populist politics is societal division sown within different iterations of a perceived and projected “unity.” As noted by the prominent populism scholar Cas Mudde in an interview with *The Atlantic*, “Populists are dividers, not uniters.”¹ Similarly, in varied contexts, sport has also been trumpeted as both a divider (e.g., the Black Lives Matter movement or the Old Firm derby) and unifier (e.g., national/home team victory celebrations or human interest stories at the Olympics). Clearly, sport is a unique form of popular culture due to its ability to stimulate both positive and negative emotive responses and resonances. For this reason, and given the popularity of sport, it is clear why populist political leaders have repeatedly looked to the sporting realm as a means of augmenting their popular appeal. Hence, the recent rise of populism within various national and international political settings has frequently been accompanied by an instrumentalization of sport as a pawn in advancing the populist politics of nation, ethnicity, gender, and identity.² As such, the time is ripe for critically engaging and analyzing the sport-populism nexus across varied national-political settings both historically and contemporaneously.

Given the significance of sport to the contemporary zeitgeist, it is surprising that the dynamic and generative interplay between sport and populism has, up to this juncture, received limited scholarly attention in sport history and sport studies. As a site of struggle, sport and the playing field is a “contested terrain,” often used as a metaphor to articulate societal unity or division. In this regard, sport is an ideal site for the manifestation of the key populist trope: the pure people versus the corrupt elite.³ Two dominant interpretations of populist expressions are demagoguery and opportunism.⁴ Demagoguery has been described as the “politics of the pub,” wherein the populist leader promotes himself as “a man of the people” who drinks beer, talks sports, and belittles women (i.e., the populist self-consciously unreconstructed strongman). Opportunism, on the other hand, refers to populists pleasing the people or “pandering to the crowd” by giving them what they want. Like an opiate of the masses, sport can be exactly what the people want, especially winning sports teams, whether local, national, international, or professional. For both these reasons, sport teams, athletes, or sporting issues have been frequently mobilized by politicians looking to substantiate their populist sensibilities through the realm of sporting *common sense*. The media hype alone yields popular support for political actors who associate with sporting heroes. Be it White House or state visits, victory parades, national days of celebration, or everyday encounters, there is value in the affiliation of politics to sportive excellence that populist politicians *can* utilize for demagoguery and opportunism.

This special issue brings together an interdisciplinary group of scholars to discuss the histories, meanings, significance, and contexts of sport-articulated populism. In addressing an understudied but relevant topic within sport history, one aim is to bridge the fields of sport history, cultural studies, sociology, and political science, and, in doing so, provide

an interdisciplinary approach to the study of populism in relation to sport as a form of physical culture. As a way to encourage further engagement with populism in sport history and contemporary sport, this introduction first offers a conceptual grounding for populism within the special issue—and more broadly for those interested in sport, politics, and populism, contemporarily or historically. Following a brief conceptual overview, we delineate left and right articulations of populism and elaborate upon the latter in relation to sport and physical culture. We also provide an overview and dialogue among the articles within this special issue before offering concluding thoughts on the past and future of sport and populism.

CONCEPTUALIZING POPULISM

Conceptual clarity on populism has been an historical challenge for the academic community since the escalation of populism in the 1980s, and indeed through the more recent populist resurgence since the turn of the millennium. Here, we detail three conceptualizations of populism relevant to scholars of sport: Cas Mudde's ideational approach; Chantal Mouffe's and Ernesto Laclau's discursive orientation; and Benjamin Moffitt's understanding of populism as a political style. While these are by no means the only conceptualizations, they are three prominent and commonly utilized theoretical frameworks.

Arguably the most prominent definition of and theoretical orientation toward populism is Mudde's ideational approach.⁵ Prior definitions of populism held in common two features, a relationship between "the elite" and "the people," or in John Judis's and Ruy Teixeira's terms, the people versus the powerful.⁶ Mudde sought to reconcile the conceptualizations as a thin-centered ideology: he defined populism as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, '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."⁷ In his conceptualization, populism sets up contrasting views of how politics should be expressed by those in power. The elitist supposition privileges the views of the more-moral elite against the amoral and broader populace, the people. In contrast, the pluralist notion sees society as individually and collectively heterogeneous, with different views, beliefs, norms, or desires that should be represented politically. Thus, as a starting point, populism posits a cleavage between societal groups; this Manichean orientation can be (and often is) taken with a moral basis, as in good versus evil, to the extent that compromise is impossible because doing so may corrupt purity.

Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser emphasize that this/their conceptualization is a "thin-centered" ideological formation rather than an ideology in and of itself.⁸ They argue that populism as an idea provides neither complex nor comprehensive responses to political questions in contemporary societies but rather is part of, or incorporated into, other ideologies. Populism is secondary to the host ideology (e.g., nativism first, populism second) and therefore spans the political spectrum. By defending the sovereignty of an imagined homogeneous people against the "oppressive" political establishment, populism can thus be considered both a democratizing force as well as a legitimator of illiberal authoritarianism.⁹ This definition, arguably the most widespread, has been essential for the examination of populism in political science and has contributed substantively to considerations of populism in other disciplines.

Related but distinct from Mudde's ideational approach, Mouffe and Laclau, individually and collaboratively, put forward a discursive orientation to populism. For Laclau and Mouffe, populism is a political logic, as opposed to an ideology or thin ideology, that can be and has been mobilized across the political spectrum. Populism is a form of political discourse not confined to specifics of class or ideology. It emerges as an assemblage of floating signifiers: a compendium of discursive resources that can coalesce and be put to very different uses within a given historical and political context.¹⁰ In Stuart Hall's terms, and in sharing the Gramscian roots of contested terrain, populism sets up a conflict between those in more powerful positions and not according to specific demands; between those groups exists a political frontier.¹¹ Important here is that there is no predetermined formation for the difference or equivalence between groups. Political figures can, in such instances where a coalition of discursive resources and people represent a significant, substantive, and large set of demands, become unifying points for those demands. Consider Trump's consistent use of crisis discourse: America in his terms is under threat internally (e.g., jobs and unemployment, healthcare, border crossings, economic deterioration, infrastructure, crime and violence, or corrupt politicians and a weak establishment) and internationally (e.g., terrorism, foreign policy, trade, or immigration and foreigners). These real and constructed threats and crises in American society are used as resources by Trump to instill an ontological insecurity among the American public. Trump, in turn, transforms that anxiety into his own and sole capacity to reconstruct and secure the United States at home and abroad, to Make America Great Again.¹² Such leaders may or may not endorse any and every demand, and they may or may not represent all people through which those demands are cast, but they do facilitate and hold together, however temporarily, the heterogeneity of people and their associated real and/or constructed demands.

These two theoretical orientations to populism share a few overlapping features. For one, they both regard populism as a form of politics that revolves around differences and conflicts between "the people" and "the elite" where political actors stake a claim in speaking and acting on behalf of "the people" against that elite group who are often framed as corrupt, illegitimate, and non-representative of "the people." Second, as Benjamin DeCleen and Jason Glynos, like Mudde, have argued, these two constructs should be regarded as "modest" or "minimal" by design.¹³ Their modesty is beneficial for making them relevant across the political spectrum and national-cultural settings, delineating them from other concepts like nationalism or authoritarianism. Importantly, DeCleen and Glynos further reinforce, as have others, that populism's minimalist construction renders it "only ever a particular dimension of otherwise widely varying politics, and that the populist dimensions of such politics need to be considered in relation to other aspects, in analytical as well as normative terms."¹⁴ Despite these commonalities, their roots in political science, and particular view on politics, does not render them immediately germane to sport and popular culture. Yet several inside and out of political science have encouraged populism's engagement with other disciplines and their conceptual tools.¹⁵ Of the more recent theoretical approaches in populism scholarship, Benjamin Moffitt's work pushes the analysis away from a rigid adherence to studies of political governance, and toward the cultural or everyday.¹⁶ Hence, Moffitt's work proves beneficial for those cultural studies and sports scholars interested in the populist turn.

Moffitt's understanding of populism as a particular political style makes the case that recent iterations of populism have changed substantively from their initial constructions and understandings. The last twenty years, he suggests, have seen new media technologies, shifting modes of political identification and representation, and an increasing presence of populism in a variety of political and cultural contexts. By incorporating these changes, he sees populism as a political style that is performed, embodied, and enacted. He defines political style as "the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life."¹⁷

Populism as a political style stresses its performative dimensions—that is, it brings together the communicative and rhetorical with its aesthetics, relationality, and performances that include performers (leaders), "the people" (audience), and stages (crises and media). This performative understanding of populism neither displaces nor seeks to undermine the ideological or discursive orientations. It shares affinity with both. Rather, a performative orientation to populism—as a distinctive political style—is more a matter of emphasis than a radical departure.

Having outlined three major theoretical approaches to populism, and illustrated commonalities among them, we would be remiss in not acknowledging what populism is not. In outlining several advantages of what populism can bring, De Cleen, Glynos, and Aurelien Mondon also detail "a long list of things commonly associated with populism that populism is *not*."¹⁸ To paraphrase, populism is not a synonym for, nor necessarily linked to, authoritarianism, nationalism, demagoguery, opportunism, political outsiders, nor the radical Right. In certain instances, these feature in populist politics, but not always. They also suggest there is no singular style of performing populism. While certain kinds of performative elements can be part of a strategy, there exists no style, popular or otherwise, that is innately populist. A further suggestive consideration is that populism is not tied exclusively to formal political and governing acts. It stretches into the milieu of everyday life. Indeed, as this special issue attests, the everyday participatory and spectating spheres of sport render it a salient cultural practice for populist politics globally.

POPULISM, THE RIGHT WING, AND SPORT

Like Hall and Mouffe, economist Prachi Mishra advances that the populist politics of the last twenty to thirty years have risen across Europe, Australasia, and indeed the US in response to the failures of globalization and neoliberalism.¹⁹ She concludes that the promises of modern liberal democracies—equality, social mobility, educational opportunity, and economic advancement—have failed to manifest, especially for the most "disadvantaged." Concomitantly, dissatisfaction, disgruntlement, and resentment toward political actors has become globally endemic.²⁰ In its virtuous guises, populism can provide voice to the grievances or demands of those who have been excluded or silenced in political processes.²¹ This is true all along the political spectrum, albeit these find expression in distinctive ways. Leftist populist iterations adopt a progressivism that aims to recover, deepen, and unify democracy, as perhaps best exemplified in Latin America with political figures like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil. In contrast, right-wing populist formations tend to arouse an anger

and resentment in response to political establishments and a lack of effective democratic debate and perceived representation.²² Right-wing populists often seek to undermine democratic institutions and encourage an authoritarian ethos, relying upon real and perceived threats, insecurities, or fears with an ethnocentric dimension that fosters valorized historically associated ethnicities, nationalities, religions, and/or languages within a specific geopolitical boundary.²³

In the contemporary American context, the two recognized populist formations are evident in the left iteration associated with Senator Bernie Sanders and the right iteration associated with former President Donald Trump. As is the focus of this special issue, this article turns to that right iteration. The Right, however, is no unified political body, nor does a unified descriptor accurately define it. Terms like *right wing*, *populist Right*, *authoritarian populist*, *Far Right*, *radical Right*, or *extreme Right*, utilized profusely by scholars and news outlets, create a terminological quagmire. The populist radical Right is a challenge to define because, unlike other political formations/clusters/amalgams (e.g., Greens, socialists), “populist radical right parties do not self-identify as populist or (even) radical right.”²⁴ Here, as a starting point, we understand the radical Right as involving at least three core ideological features: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism.²⁵

Despite populism’s presence within national politics on the left and right since at least the 1950s, Americans seem to only have seriously reconciled with the populist political right, and at times the radical or extreme right, in the wake of Trump’s election and time in office (2017–2021). Yet, for all the attention that Trump has received, and the recognition of his galvanizing the radical Right, Trumpism did not create an America rooted in its particular ethnonationalist project. As legal scholar Neil Seigel argues, “Trump is more of an effect (and a symptom) than a cause of larger racial (and religious and cultural) changes in American society that are causing Republican voters and politicians to perceive an existential threat to their continued political and cultural power—and, relatedly, to deny the basic legitimacy of their political opponents.”²⁶ Rather, in occupying old and new media spotlights, Trump congealed the Right and extreme Right through expressions of nativism, racism and xenophobia, and economic populism.²⁷ Sport, in the case of Trump, is a cultural site in which the features of the populist radical Right are identifiable.

As part of Trump’s appeals to “the people,” his use of sport has facilitated a translation between cultural and political boundaries. A few scholars have seized upon Trump’s invective rhetoric in relation to sport and, to varying degrees, populism. Contextualizing sport within the Trumpian ascendancy, David L. Andrews considers the integrated political, social, and economic forces that shape the *uber-sport* assemblage, which, he argues, enables Trump’s authoritarian populism and reinscribes a neoliberal ethos.²⁸ During the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, Mark Falcous, Matthew Hawzen, and Joshua Newman examined the hyperpartisanship of sports media evident within Breitbart Sports, which, they argue, promoted hard-right agendas in the form of race reclamation, immigration, social criticism, sexual politics, and party politics.²⁹ Within the Trump ascendancy, Kyle Kusz and Matthew Hodler demonstrate how the racial politics of Barstool Sports create and normalize racially exclusive and White male-dominant social worlds in alignment with Trump’s operative White nationalist postracialism.³⁰ In response to Trump’s election and the veritable populist swelling, Bryan C. Clift and Alan Tomlinson’s edited volume, *Populism in Sport, Leisure,*

and *Popular Culture*, includes several chapters examining Trump.³¹ A central feature of their anthology is Trump's nurturing of a white voter base by (re)centering and valorizing white athletes like Tom Brady as American Patriots, while castigating Black athletes like Colin Kaepernick as un-American and enemies of and within the state.³² Such vituperative attacks on Black athletes, Jules Bokyoff argues, service an us-versus-them mentality endemic to the populist playbook, by positioning Trump as the voice of "the people" and those against him as enemies.³³ Likewise, a 2018 special issue in *Leisure Studies* illustrates the imbrications of leisure and cultural practices, race, and nationalism across several geopolitical contexts. Locating power and resistance within the layers of racism, racialization, and the pathologization of Black bodies and cultures as antithetical to the successful workings of the nation, they highlight Trump's response to Colin Kaepernick's activism in professional American football. The moment was framed by Trump and his acolytes as "unpatriotic and disloyal to the military and uniformed services [in order] to amass public, especially conservative, white supremacist support."³⁴ Boykoff and Ben Carrington relatedly explicate the Kaepernick moment as Trump's most high-profile sporting engagement, an opportunity for public confrontation of civic rights and the Black Lives Matter movement that sowed public and political division.³⁵ Shortly after the intense 2016 American presidential election, media scholar Dafna Kaufman posed questions about political expression among celebrities, illustrating how Lady Gaga's performance at the 2017 Super Bowl straddled theatrical representation and political expression such that it could be read as neither clearly political nor apolitical.³⁶ Addressing the sport and immigration nexus, sport sociologists Adam Beissel and David L. Andrews examined Trump's politicization of the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup—a joint venture among the US, Mexico, and Canada—and identified how Trump used the bid as an opportunity.³⁷ Supporting the bid enabled Trump to construct real and imagined racial threats (i.e., immigrants from Mexico) while advancing his anti-democratic and anti-establishment authoritarianism as a way of destabilizing global multilateralism. Trump has been particularly effective at winning the ideological battle to define "the people," which in liberal capitalist democracies involves the exclusion of several groups, most notably the (formerly) enslaved, Indigenous groups, women, ethnic and racial groups, or sexual minorities, to name a few.³⁸ Within the American imaginary, Trump certainly did not invent these discourses, but he has mobilized these ideological tropes and their emotive effects.

OVERVIEW OF ARTICLES

The links between sport and populism have spanned history, from the ancient Romans to Trumpism. Although Roman poet Juvenal's famous phrase "bread and circuses" was aimed at the ignorance of the populace, it could equally be understood as the means by which the emperors subdued their people by giving them what they wanted. Alan Tomlinson's article in this special issue investigates the strongman politics of the Colosseum in comparison to the fin-de-siècle international sports movement, thereby bridging two thousand years of sporting history with populist bookends. He helps conceptualize the notion of sportive populism within sport history by highlighting the blatant populist tendencies of two of the most prominent SINGOs (sporting international non-governmental organizations), the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Fédération de Football Association

(FIFA). The formalization of this international sporting system coincided with the rise of fascism in the wake of the First World War. Exemplars of the sport-populism nexus during this period are Mussolini's use of Italy's footballing triumphs and the Nazi Olympics of 1936.³⁹ This period of what John Hoberman refers to as "political athleticism" shares affinities with the framing of populism, in terms of political style, by contemporary political strongmen.⁴⁰ The populist tradition in Latin America followed a similar trajectory, as exemplified in Pablo Alabarces's article. He chronicles how both leftist leaders, such as Brazil's Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945; 1951–1954) or Argentina's Juan Perón (1946–1955; 1973–1974), and more recent right-wing populists, such as Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) and Argentina's Mauricio Macri (2015–2019), have used football populism throughout their tenures. The contemporary populist moment, associated with the rise of Trumpism, is also marked by an appropriation of the sporting amphitheater. In his article, Kyle Kusz details the use of sport by the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement. He draws on notions of white masculinity, neo-Fascist nationalism, and racial identity politics to illustrate the ways in which specifically right-wing populism has instrumentalized the realm of physical culture and sports in contemporary politics.

Paul Taggart's concept of the "heartland" is critical to our understanding of right-wing populism. The heartland is a place "in which, in the populist imagination, a virtuous and unified population resides."⁴¹ It delineates "the people" by a specific gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality in populist rhetoric, issues highlighted by many of the articles in this special issue. Douglas Hartmann discusses the ethnonationalist undercurrents of activism—specifically Black athlete activism—and political mobilization in American sports in the context of the MAGA movement. He argues for a historically informed analysis of ethnonational populist engagements in sport. Similarly, Adam Berg contextualizes the use of American football in Trump's populist appeal by linking it to the Republican Party's Long Southern Strategy. Berg eloquently weaves together football history, identity politics, and Trumpism to explain the race-based underpinnings of the sport-populism nexus in America. Sticking with American football, Dafna Kaufman shows how the homonationalist media campaign of the National Football League falls into common populist rhetoric. Her analysis is timely and relevant for the study of sport, populism, and the LGBTQ+ community.

Sportive populism in the United States has influenced other parts of the world, as highlighted by the last two articles in this special issue. Mike Cronin points to the similar trajectories of fascism studies and sport studies with case studies of Viktor Orbán's (Hungary) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's (Turkey) usage of football (soccer). Both are regarded as some of the longest standing populist leaders and share several features, including a vision of a return to prior national standing, a consistent institutional mistrust in the European Union's liberal and multicultural ethos, resentment toward immigration, and ethnonationalist rhetoric. Finally, Tom Fabian chronicles the use of folk (or popular) games as populist tools throughout European history. These "games of the people" are instrumental in *Völk* identity and cater well to the hallmark characteristics of populism. Throughout the varied contributions to this special issue, the common populist tropes of "the people," "the elite," and the "heartland" demonstrate that sport is a flexible political tool used by populists throughout history and around the world.

POPULISMS PAST AND FUTURE

To date, while sport and sport history scholarship have focused on political issues taken up by, or expressed through, conservatism or the Far Right, populism as a concept (which is not isolated to the right of the political spectrum), area of scholarship, and sociopolitical practice has seen limited engagement within the many and varied sport and sport history fields. The broader critical academic response to populism's increased presence stems primarily from scholars located in political science, with further engagement across several disciplines, including gender and women's studies, media and communications, cultural studies, and sociology. In addition to populism as a concept, we also suggest that populism is rooted in historically constituted discourses whose effects are of critical import—although we warn against using populism as a proxy or substitute for these areas—including the mainstreaming of far-right groups or populist hype, the right wing's regressive and nostalgic views of the past, promotion of ethnonationalism, and authoritarian and fascist links.⁴² This collective base of scholarship can be generative for scholars of sport, adding to research agendas on sport, sport history, politics, and power. To assist with bringing populism more substantively into the study of sport, we have in this article outlined three major theoretical contributions to the examination of populism—by no means the only—and examined core features of the populist political Right in relation to sport, historically and contemporarily.

The articles in this special issue further illustrate populism at work in sport from a diversity of perspectives (e.g., historical, sociological, anthropological, political, cultural, etc.) that use different stylistic elements and various theoretical tools to deploy diverse conceptualizations and articulations of populism. They bring together sport, history, right-wing populism, and identity politics to illustrate populism's expressions and usefulness in understanding the contemporary socio-political formation, and sport's co-constitutive relation to it. Importantly, and in heeding populism as a “modest” or “minimal” concept, these articles place populism in dialogue with wider social, political, cultural, and economic forces, including issues of race and racism, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, nationalism and the nation-state, fascism, governance, and political parties and leadership.⁴³ Sport in relation to politics, populism, popular politics, and populist political leaders must be located within specific contexts. That is, sport is not guaranteed to carry a universally understood meaning or expression from one sociopolitical environment to another, populist related or otherwise. We hope that this special issue serves as a touchstone for including populism within social and historical work on sport and related movement practices.



NOTES

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