New populism and education

From target to response

Charlotte Haines Lyon

Abstract

New populism, characterised by cultural grievance, conspiratorial thinking and hostility to expertise, poses a distinct threat to education. This article examines how education has become a target of populist delegitimisation, with educators framed as woke elites 'poisoning' children. However, it also argues that education offers a crucial site of response. Drawing on Zembylas, the article contends that critical thinking alone is insufficient to counter populism's affective appeal. Instead, education must develop students' capacity to examine their own emotional responses to political rhetoric. Through 'pedagogies of discomfort' and the cultivation of love as political practice, education can resist populism's inward-looking binaries and nurture the relational capacities that democratic life requires.

Keywords: new populism; education; affect; pedagogy of discomfort; delegitimisation; democracy

Introduction

You've probably noticed politics feels different lately. Discussions about flags have become tricksy, and about gender almost impossible. Around 110,000 people marched with Steven Yaxley Lennon to 'Unite the Kingdom' in London, on 13 September 2025 and were met by an array of speakers including Nigel Farage, leader of Reform UK, which is currently leading the polls, Katie Hopkins and Elon Musk.[1] For many it was a positive, party atmosphere, and for others it was seen as a dark day of foreboding. In the United States, we have groups such as 'Moms for Liberty' who are challenging school boards for being too 'woke', and the president threatening universities.[2] Appeals are made to common sense, and simple answers provided to the many unhappy citizens, often disenfranchised by politics. What was once easy to dismiss as a right-wing extremism on the margins is now becoming mainstream.

This phenomenon of 'new populism' is not party political (despite what is said by and about the Reform UK party). Rather, it is affecting all aspects of public life, including education.[3] It is time to consider what we face in terms of 'new populism'. I will be exploring the growth of new populism and the distinct threat that it poses to education, which has become a target of delegitimisation. However, I will also argue that education is a crucial site for responding to the new populism.

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What is new populism?

The very term 'new populism' implies an 'old populism', which includes various agrarian movements in Eastern Europe and the United States in the earlier 20th century and late 19th century, and the Latin American populism of the mid-20th century led by Juan Perón in Argentina.[4] Hitler and the Nazi party are often considered to be part of such a movement, as I partially argued in a previous *FORUM* article, *Demonic Education*, as they used populist rhetoric and strategies to gain power.[5] Although, of course, Nazism went far beyond populism and into totalitarianism, fascism and genocide. Old populism tended to be more focused on economic class conflict, and often arose from agrarian economies clashing or being taken over by industrial economies. For example, the American populists of the late 1800s argued against the land being owned by large industrialists and their labour being profoundly undervalued.[6] They saw the fruits of their labour lining the pockets of magnates elsewhere, and railed against the land being sold to these same magnates, and consequently were fearful of losing power in their regions and localities.

Krastev, in his seminal article *The Age of Populism*, charted the change in populism. In the UK, at the time when this article was published (2011), opinion polls started to reflect support for UKIP, which was an anti-immigration, nationalist party and was seen by many as just on the right side of acceptability; it was not fascist.[7] At the same time, France saw Marine Le Pen win the first round of the presidential elections, thus seeing the far right make headway politically. Hostility to immigration was becoming central to Western and northern European politics at this point, and anti-Roma and anti-elite rhetoric drove populist uprisings in central and Eastern Europe. Whilst arguments about anti-elitism still abound, there is an added dimension: conspiratorial thought. Now, the prevailing narrative transcends mere assumptions of capital accumulation through labour exploitation; importantly, the narrative incorporates suspicions of deliberate collusion among economic and other elites to undermine the welfare of the broader population. This can be seen both on the left and on the right.

As well as being in an era of new populism, Muirhead and Rosenblum argue that we are now in an era of 'new conspiracism'.[8] This is different to the past where there were conspiracies about the JFK shooting, the moon landings, and indeed the Sandy Hook shooting. Now we are in an era of what they call a 'partisan penumbra' in which the conspiracy theories, extremist rhetoric and delegitimising narratives are not quite mainstream but also not completely marginalised. There is tacit acceptance; arguably Trump has helped make conspiracy thinking more mainstream. Liz Truss's willingness to blame the 'deep state' for her short reign as prime minister of the United Kingdom is another example.[9] Conspiratorial thinking is no longer on the fringes. It is part of

the political ecosystem.

Whereas the old populism was largely economically focused, the new populism tends to focus on more cultural phenomena and can be more grievance based, characterised by a notion of loss. Often, there is a nostalgia underlying such grievances: a loss of simpler days, whether it be our approach to education, race, gender or indeed health. Populism and conspiracy theories both trade in simplification, substituting complex causation for facile, tidy stories of powerful wrongdoers and innocent victims. The worldviews share a common structure: a pure 'people' versus a corrupt 'elite' who are secretly working against them, a distinct binary approach – 'us v them'. Arguably the yearn for simplicity and what Laclau and Mouffe call 'fantasmatic logic' is because of communities being alienated by centralised decision-making that often ignores, or is unaware of, everyday realities.[10] At a time when we are under threat of war, a growing climate crisis and a cost of living crisis, a societal fear grows and can be fuelled by exaggerations of phenomena. For example, some may say we are a country rife with stabbings, yet stabbings went down by 18 per cent in the last year.[11] When such fear is incubated, Sterenberg argues that reason is eschewed for more simplistic populist rhetoric.[12] The simple promise that everything will be ok if we do 'x' is far more attractive than the reality. This lack of trust, and the growth of grievance, extend beyond politicians to institutions large and small: the judiciary, healthcare providers, educators. The anti-vax movement insists the elite are trying to control or kill us through vaccines. Some parents' groups claim teachers are poisoning children's minds. Notably, new populism is not just anti the economic elite, but anti-expertise and anti-institutions.

To successfully develop the anti-elite discourse, this new conspiracism produces what Muirhead and Rosenberg argue is a delegitimation, as we see the erosion of trust in traditional spheres of the state such as the judiciary, health care professionals and educators.[13] This new conspiracism leads not just to the delegitimisation of a political party or event but of all politics and ultimately the delegitimising of democracy. The idea being 'we can trust no politician apart from maybe the one leader of the populist party'. Again, there is a simplification of the political field. Nuance and complexity are bad, and simple answers are good.

This form of populism 'can be defined as a pathology of oversight and vigilance' in which the government and other authorities come under scrutiny.[14] Whilst one might think such scrutiny is good for democracy, it becomes twisted as the criticism 'becomes compulsive and permanent stigmatisation of the ruling authorities, to the point where these authorities are seen as radically alien enemy powers'.[15] Over the last 15 years, we have seen increasing suspicion of the civil service, mainstream media (they have been corrupted by the government) or by … (insert favourite minority), the EU, judiciary ('the enemies of the people') and by Trump.[16] The only relationship to be trusted is that

between the populist leader and the 'people' (the imagined community).

The social media response to the Southport stabbings in 2024, in which a man stabbed three young girls, is instructive. Nigel Farage, leader of the populist party Reform, argued immediately that identities and names should be provided, even before anyone was charged.[17] He and others argued the police were covering something up, and this led to riots and attacks on the local mosque. When a similar incident occurred in Huntingdon in November 2025, there was similarly a call for names before charges were made.[18] Two black men were initially mentioned, and when one was released and the other, who was charged, was found to have a British name, many commentators on social media argued there was a cover up. There is a fundamental assumption that all authorities are concealing misdeeds and, crucially, no evidence can dislodge this assumption. Conspiracy theories are notoriously hard to undermine, 'they have a self-sealing quality, rendering them particularly immune to challenge'.[19] The conspiratorial mindset is unfalsifiable.

Education as a target

This essay does not argue that the government or other authorities are always right. They are clearly not. However, the assumption that all authorities are deliberately misleading is problematic. It is not about the people, citizens, scrutinising the government and holding them to account as we try to improve the country, i.e. an outward-looking process, but as Rosanvallon argues, this form of populism has become increasingly inward looking.[20] Populists only trust each other. They do not want to look at evidence from their supposed enemies. The focus becomes tighter and tighter on an ever-diminishing community of 'us', rather than engaging with a more complex, pluralistic reality.

Another mode of inward-looking populist politics is fixating on what is lost or has been removed or stolen from the nation (e.g. sovereignty, cultural identity or economic security) rather than on forward-looking, progressive projects.[21] This can be seen in education as Michael Gove, then secretary for education, looked somewhat romantically at an apparently glorious educational past and decided that we must return to that rather than explore more innovative approaches to education. Woe betide anyone who resisted his vision. Gove warned 'I refuse to surrender to The Blob – Marxist teachers hell bent on destroying our schools'. Gove then moved on to delegitimating academics: 'the network of educational gurus in and around our universities who praised each other's research, sat on committees that drafted politically correct curricula, drew gifted young teachers away from their vocation and instead directed them towards ideologically driven theory'.[22]

He led the charge against academics, and it is now commonplace for academia to be

seen as biased and untrustworthy. Indeed, the ante has been upped as Vance and Trump have set about delegitimising universities in the US, with the vice president stating 'I think if any of us want to do the things that we want to do for our country and for the people who live in it we have to honestly and aggressively attack the universities'.[23]

More recently, Farage has pushed the narrative that the educational elite 'are poisoning our kids. They are telling them to be ashamed of their country', when talking to a private college in the United States about teachers in the UK.[24] In the United States a movement, 'Moms for Liberty', are challenging school boards to remove swathes of books from school libraries, including classics by Black authors, feminist books and anything to do with the LGBTQ+ community.[25] Their aggressive pursuit of school librarians is something to make us sit up and take notice. They are not just removing books; they are positioning librarians and teachers as threats to children.

The new populism has at least two impacts on education. One, education is under attack and we need to defend ourselves against charges from Farage and others that we are 'poisoning our children'. And two, in a world of conspiratorial thought, it is more essential than ever to be able to discern truth and develop critical thinking.

Education as a response

It would seem that the obvious answer to the new populism is to develop strong critical and media literacies in schools and universities, where fact-checking and evaluation skills are prized. However, critical thinking is no panacea. Populists often position themselves as the critical thinkers whilst criticising those educators and other apparent elite as the brainwashers. It is time to think our way out of this bind. Zembylas might be able to help, as he argues that a cognitive response to populism is not enough. We must attend to affect, emotion and the cultivation of different ways of relating to others.[26] As discussed above, new populism is based on emotional responses to grievances, such as loss, humiliation and not being heard. Purely rationalist responses do not address such feelings. This is why Zembylas's affective approach matters. Zembylas argues that education must engage with emotion, not simply bypass it. In order to understand populist movements, he argues that we need to analyse the 'affective modes' of populism and understand how feelings like fear, anger, nostalgia, resentment and belonging are mobilised and attached to political ideologies.

At a time when learning facts has been central to the school curriculum, it is suggested that emotions should be given a significant place within education.[27] Emotions are essential to our existence, to the way we interact with each other and also to our democratic and political spheres. If populists are able to manipulate such emotions with ease, we need to be able to engage with how we feel and how we think about our

feelings, and develop 'critical emotional reflexivity'.[28] This might not be popular due to a common belief held by E.D. Hirsch and his adherents that knowledge, rationalism and reason should always take precedence over emotion in the classroom.[29] There is a tension for some, such as Michael Young, that affect-focused education might replace rigorous knowledge development.[30] Such a tension is one that we educators need to address head-on. We need to be comfortable and able to argue for developing such emotional reflexivity in the classroom.

It is essential for children and young people to develop the capacity to think about and examine their own emotional responses, rather than simply dismissing them or pretending they don't exist. Understanding what triggers different emotions such as fear and resentment affords students the capacity to recognise and interrogate them: to ask 'what has happened or been said that makes me feel this way?'. The next step is to help develop the criticality to question further – who wants me to feel this way and who is benefiting from me feeling like this? Zembylas is not simply asking us to embrace emotion in the curriculum, but to apply the same criticality to it as we might demand of other parts of the curriculum. Sitting with uncomfortable feelings and reflecting on them is not easy or comfortable. Moreover, examining one's beliefs and assumptions is hard reflexive work. This is why Zembylas calls for a 'pedagogy of discomfort', which if handled well can be generative and opens a space for new understanding.[31] For example, if a student were to comment that we are overrun by 'people coming over on small boats', instead of dismissing the comment, or rebuking them, a teacher might respond with a story from a refugee and ask the class to sit with what they have heard and what they are now encountering. Why does this feel uncomfortable? What assumptions are being challenged? There will be discomfort for all but, handled carefully, it opens the possibility for empathy and understanding.

However, it is not just about grappling with emotions. At a time where as Rosanvallon argues we are turning inwards rather than looking outwards, thanks to the new populism, it is essential to start looking outwards.[32] Zembylas argues that we need to cultivate love in education, not from a sentimental point of view but as a political orientation of care and solidarity, one in which we are open to other ideas, and importantly to other people.[33] Love is not about feelings, it is about practice. Looking outwards, making connections with others, is a good and healthy counter to the inward-facing, simplistic logic of new populism. Such an approach contradicts that of Moms for Liberty, as the books they want to ban are precisely those which humanise the 'other': stories that centre Black experiences, that depict LGBTQ+ families, that complicate simple national narratives. If we can start to humanise each other and expand the circle of those we recognise and relate to, we can build community rather than diminish it. This does involve difficult questions. Who have we excluded from our concern? Whose humanity have we failed, or refused to recognise? Cultivating love

requires us to consider difference, whether through the books we read or the people we meet. We need classrooms that expand horizons rather than police boundaries.

Earlier, I noted that educators face a bind: defending our professional expertise and arguing for critical thinking only confirms the populist caricature of us as a detached elite who attempt to brainwash 'the people'. Zembylas points toward a way out which is not a head-on self-defence but rather lies in our practice. Education's answer to populism lies in what it distinctively does: its nurturing of the affective and relational capacities on which democratic life depends.[34] This requires refusing the false binary between knowledge and emotion. It is not a binary choice between students deserving access to powerful disciplinary knowledge, as Michael Young argues, *or* cultivating emotional resources to navigate complexity, uncertainty and difference, as Zembylas calls for.[35] We must resist the binary choice. Educators must hold both together precisely when populists demand we abandon one for the other.

Education cannot solve populism. Populism is compelling due to the conditions in society and the world that make it easy for people to nurture fear and discontent. These conditions, and indeed populism, need a political response. However, education forms part of the populist narrative, as we have seen with Gove and Trump. Where populism seeds distrust and division there is a place for education to develop trust, connection and love. Importantly, we must not dismiss the grievances that populism feeds on. It is essential to provide a vital space in which people can grapple with their emotions and develop the capacities that democratic life requires. Our young people will inherit the world that the new populism is shaping. If populism is successful in delegitimising education completely, it removes a key space of complexity in which people can learn to feel, think and relate differently. Losing such a space is a loss that we cannot afford.

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Notes

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