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Sovereignty, Identity and Populism: Critiques of Brexit and Trump in *My Country* and *Building the Wall*

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Abstract This article examines the impact of populist narratives on post-Brexit UK society and how they shape the political climate in the Trump era in the United States through the plays *My Country-A Work in Progress* and *Building the Wall*. *My Country* explores how individuals in the UK, a multicultural and economically dynamic society, confront identity, economic conditions and nationalism in the post-Brexit era and how they redefine these concepts in a changing socio-political context. *Building the Wall* reflects the stage explorations of populist discourses through the radicalised border policies of the Trump administration. These plays reveal how people who feel excluded by the traditional political landscape and policy elites mobilise around populist narratives. In this study, the tensions between economic crisis, nationalism and xenophobia that shape contemporary political movements are discussed through dramatic texts.

Keywords Populism · Brexit · Trump · American Theatre · British Theatre

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Introduction

Following World War II, the global political landscape evolved into a different dimension, and especially after the 1970s, the economic difficulties and the dissatisfaction caused by neoliberal policies paved the way for transformations across various domains. One of these transformations is that populism has become an effective discourse in modern democracies, both nationally and internationally. Mudde and Kaltwasser define the modern version of populism in their work, *Populism: A very Short Introduction*, as "*a folkloric style of politics, which leaders and parties employ to mobilise the masses*".[1] Within this framework, populism has become a political style that appeals to the emotions of the people in order to achieve political advantage. Historically, populist discourses, as seen in examples such as Hitler's Germany or Saddam Hussein's Baath regime, have become a tool frequently used not only by marginal movements but also by mainstream political actors since the 2000s.

Following the 2008 global financial crisis, the inequalities and economic problems created by neoliberal policies triggered a new populist era. While Donald Trump's campaign with the slogan 'America First' highlighted the themes of national sovereignty and economic independence based on the anti-globalisation movement and a nationalist doctrine, the slogan 'Take Back Control' during the Brexit process "*shows how constitutionalising policy choices, and accepting case law rather than political preferences to shape policy decisions, carries a danger of shifting political contestation to another level*".[2] According to Eatwell and Goodwin, these developments on both sides of the Atlantic provide striking examples in terms of understanding the effects of populism on modern democracies. Trump's statements on the Paris Agreement, which he accused of weakening the US economy and threatening its sovereignty,[3] and the effects of populism across Europe, such as Marine Le Pen's 33% of the vote in the 2017 French presidential election and the widespread anti-immigration policies in Italy, can be argued as examples of the reflections of this trend in Europe.[4] Finally, Donald Trump's second election victory in the 2024 elections was the peak of the rise of populism.

This study examines *My Country-A Work in Progress* by Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris and *Building the Wall* by Robert Schenkkan. This study, therefore, explores Trump's presidential campaigns and the Brexit process within their historical contexts, providing a detailed evaluation of the populist discourses employed in these events. In addition, the similarities and differences between populist movements in the United States and the United Kingdom are argued through a comparative approach. In this way, this study aims to explore modern nationalism and the rise of populist discourses in the post-neoliberal era as reflected in the selected texts.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of Populism and Its Ideological Connections

In contemporary political discourse, right-wing rhetoric and populism emerge as mutually supportive and overlapping political strategies. Cas Mudde defines populism as an opportunistic approach used by policy makers to please the public and gain political support, and he underlines that "*most definitions of populism have at least two points of reference in common: 'the elite' and 'the people'*".[5] Mudde continues his definition by stating that populism is evaluated on its own, separate from other ideologies, but since it is accepted

[1] Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7-8.
[2] Susanne K. Schmidt, "An Institutional Mismatch: Why 'Taking Back Control'Proved So Appealing," *LSE Brexit*, (2020): 3.
[3] "Trump White House Archive," accessed May 15, 2025, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/.
[4] Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (London: Penguin UK, 2018), 48.
[5] Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 542.

as a "thin-centred ideology",[6] its significance emerges when combined with other ideological frameworks. This characteristic also demonstrates its capacity to seamlessly align with various ideologies. Additionally, Mudde emphasises that populist discourse revolves around the concept of "the people", portrayed as essentially pure and virtuous, as opposed to elites, portrayed as corrupt and morally compromised enemies. These hostile distinctions form the basic tenets of how populism operates.[7]

According to Laclau, populism is a political strategy based on charismatic leadership, direct appeals to the masses, and overcoming institutional constraints. Populism in the post-neoliberal era reflects the efforts of leaders to imagine a more egalitarian and independent future in their political discourses. However, their success depends on their ability to cope with internal tensions and contradictions in the economic, political and cultural spheres. Today, the situation is increasingly complicated by the rise of radical populist policies.[8] For example, "*Perón closed newspapers; Fujimori shuttered Peru's Congress and Supreme Court; Chávez fired scores of judges and dissolved the Venezuelan Supreme Court; Orbán forced the Central European University to leave Hungary*".[9] All of these developments have taken place over the past two decades. These actions have not only concentrated power in the executive branch but also weakened the capacity of opposition parties and civil society to hold the government accountable. Strange systems have emerged, such as "*what Orbán proudly calls an 'illiberal democracy'*".[10] As a result, democratic processes have been reduced to elections and other institutions of democracy have been damaged.

Populism often challenges the procedural aspects of democracy by using majoritarian principles. Populist leaders often claim the authority to circumvent established norms and institutions based on their electoral victories. Authoritarian democracies often exclude minority voices and undermine deliberative processes, as in Orbán's "*illiberal democracy*".[11] For example, in the United States, President Donald Trump's administration has frequently disregarded established norms, including the peaceful transfer of power to his rival and the elected president Joe Biden, culminating in the Capitol riots on January 6.[12]

Fukuyama highlights another significant impact of populism on modern democracies; its role in deepening political polarisation. Populist discourse frequently thrives on narratives that depict society as fundamentally divided between us and them. This polarisation can hinder constructive political dialogue and lead to gridlock in legislative processes.[13] Furthermore, the rise of social media has amplified populist messages, allowing leaders to bypass traditional partnerships such as journalists and appeal directly to their supporters. While this approach has increased the visibility of populist movements, it has also fostered echo chambers that have intensified social divisions. According to Clarke et al., populism tends to oversimplify complex political issues. Such oversimplifications can distort the public's understanding of policy challenges and undermine the quality of democratic decision-making. By framing themselves as anti-establishment, populist leaders often dismiss criticism as attacks from elites, thereby escaping potential scrutiny.[14] This expands the reach of populism and diminishes the role of opposition parties, the media, and other accountability mechanisms in holding the government accountable. Therefore, the main effect

[6] Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," 542.
[7] Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," 544.
[8] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Beccles: Verso Books, 2005), 34.
[9] Takis S. Pappas, "Populists in Power," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 2 (2019): 73.
[10] Pappas, "Populists in Power," 79.
[11] Pappas, "Populists in Power," 77.
[12] BBC News Service, "Capitol riots timeline: What happened on 6 January 2021?," *bbc.com*, August 2, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56004916.
[13] Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 43.
[14] Harold D. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin, and Paul Whiteley, *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 64.

of populism political polarisation, disrupting democratic decision-making processes and weaken accountability mechanisms. The main purpose of this study is to discuss the theatrical reflections of this effect.

From TV Studios to the White House: Trump's Populism in *Building the Wall*

Building the Wall is a play written by Pulitzer- and Tony-Award-winning author Robert Schenkkan just before Donald Trump won the 2016 US presidential election. The play presents a dystopian fiction of the then Republican candidate's provocative and racist rhetoric, populist policies, and possible effects on American immigration policy. The story revolves around only two characters: Rick and Gloria. Gloria is an African-American historian, and Risk is the former director of a private detention centre for illegal immigrants in West Texas. The audience immediately recognises the background of Rick, whose "*thwarted ambition to study architecture, a respect for order that led him to take a job in the military police and, eventually, to oversee a vast, new private prison outside El Paso.*" *But all this is a prelude to the revelation that, after a bomb attack in Times Square, Trump imposed martial law, leading to the roundup of hundreds of thousands of supposedly illegal immigrants*".[15] Arrested and convicted for serious but unspecified crimes, Rick agrees to interview Gloria for the first time while awaiting sentencing.

Between 2015 and 2025, the United States experienced a significant increase in populist movements, with the political rise of Donald Trump and the rise of 'the America First' policy. This period heralded a radical transformation in American political discourse, characterised by a definitive rejection of globalisation, a renewed emphasis on nationalist rhetoric, and an increased emphasis on economic independence and national sovereignty. Rick's words about Trump in the play reflect the spirit of this period:

> ***Rick*** *Working people. middle class We used to be something but Now, I had friends losing their houses, their jobs. Furthermore, And neither party seemed to care. My dad had some health problems, and and it turns out his insurance didn't cover much of anything, and and it ate up his retirement, and and within a year, he was suddenly working suddenly he was working as a greeter at Walmart! Seventy-something years old, standing on his feet eight hours a day working for less than minimum. Meanwhile, all all our jobs were going to Mexico and China and places like that and then the illegals here were taking what jobs were are left and gave nobody a damn. For a long time I wasn't paying attention but then I woke up pretty fast because it was clear the country was going into the toilet.*[16]

Rick's frustration with job losses and outsourcing directly aligns with Trump's promise to bring jobs back from Mexico and China. Rick's anger at both the Republican and Democratic parties reflects Trump's positioning of himself as an outsider fighting against a corrupt system. The phrase 'We used to be something', like Trump's slogan 'Make America Great Again', represents longing for the past and nostalgic nationalism. Rick's direct linking of job losses to undocumented immigrants reveals how Trump's rhetoric of economic nationalism resonates with society and is embraced by the working class.

Donald Trump's 2016 presidential election was a turning point in American politics, reflecting the discontent of a broad swath of voters. Donald Trump, who started his adventure as a businessman operating in the real estate sector and later crowned it with TV shows such as *The Apprentice*, has now become the President of the United States. As Inglehart and Norris asserted, Trump's campaign mobilised support by exploiting economic concerns, cultural grievances, and widespread distrust of the political establishment. His rhetoric targeted job losses, often linked to outsourcing, and the decline of American manufacturing,

[15] Michael Billington, "Building the Wall Review–Trump Imposes Martial Law and the Roundups Begin," *the Guardian,* March 7, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/may/07/building-the-wall-review-park-theatre-london-trump.
[16] Robert Schenkkan, *Building the Wall*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 18-19.

framing these issues as the betrayal of the elite class. Thus, Trump positioned himself as the defender of the "*forgotten*" American worker[17]. Inglehart and Norris also stated that the America First policy, which became the cornerstone of the Trump administration, embodied his populist agenda. This slogan, which is based on divisive sentiments from the early 20th century, has been reshaped by contemporary concerns. Trump's 'The America First' discourse aims to reduce dependence on foreign countries, renegotiate trade agreements, and prioritise local industries. This approach is clearly seen in the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the replacement of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA).[18]

Rick's ideological perception of the outer world is quite sceptical. He thinks that they are at war with Islam, and even he declares that he "*understood that but you (his fellow citizens) tie yourself in knots trying to explain things away when usually the simplest explanation is the truth*".[19] Rick accepts the war against Islam without question. His statement that 'the simplest explanation is usually the truth' demonstrates his tendency to simplify complex global issues and his adoption of an 'us and them' divide that aligns with Trump's populist rhetoric. This approach parallels Trump's policies, such as the Muslim travel ban, and reveals how national security rhetoric is intertwined with a culturally and religiously based threat perception.

Borders are Rick's red lines. The country's borders are like fortresses to be defended against immigrants and any other group that Rick perceives as an external threat: "*A country has a right to protect its borders! If we don't have borders, then we don't have a country. What's very hard about understanding that?*".[20] In this scene, Rick directly links borders to national identity and security. In addition to economic policies, Trump's populism was also deeply intertwined with nationalist rhetoric. His administration's stance on immigration emphasised national security and cultural homogeneity, as exemplified by the construction of a border wall with Mexico and a travel ban on predominantly Muslim countries.[21]

These policies reflected a broader trend of 'us and them politics' aimed at uniting an internal group against perceived external threats, whether economic, cultural or security-related. As Smith reports, Donald Trump continued to use the same rhetoric during his new election campaign and after his election. Trump's desire to make Canada the 51st state of the United States and to purchase Greenland and the Panama Canal illustrate how populist leaders often prioritise the goal of expanding or strengthening national interests. With such rhetoric, Trump aimed to mobilise his own supporters and increase his influence in foreign policy. The idea of buying Greenland in particular had a wide repercussion internationally in 2019 and was met harsh reactions from Denmark.[22] While the rhetoric about Canada becoming a part of America expressed the desire of the US to further expand its economic and political influence over neighbouring countries, such statements were also evaluated by critics as a populist move that pushed the boundaries of democracy, sovereignty and international law. This rhetoric reveals that Trump's political strategy is shaped by a populist style not only in domestic politics but also in the international arena.

[17] Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-nots and Cultural Backlash," *Harvard Kennedy School Working Paper Series*, (2016): 45.

[18] Inglehart and Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-nots and Cultural Backlash," 83.

[19] Schenkkan, *Building the Wall*, 23.

[20] Schenkkan, *Building the Wall*, 15.

[21] Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, 6.

[22] David Norman Smith, "The Agitator Supplies What the Base Demands: Trumpism Before and After Donald Trump," *Critical Sociology* 50, no. 4-5 (2024): 823.

For Rick, supporting Trump is more than just a party affiliation or ideological stance:

> ***Rick**: Yeah, so I went to the rally and it was amazing. I felt—I felt—comfortable there.*
>
> ***Gloria** Comfortable?*
>
> ***Rick** I looked around and I saw a lotta people who looked like me, just ordinary people, people with families.*
>
> ***Gloria** White. White people.*
>
> ***Rick** Yeah. I assume. Mostly. Sure.*
>
> ***Gloria** Christian.*
>
> ***Rick** What's wrong with that?*
>
> ***Gloria** Nothing.*[23]

Chadwick states that Trump has solidified his image as a leader who understands and prioritises their concerns by developing a sense of direct connection with his supporters. The rise of populism in the United States under Trump cannot be fully understood without considering the broader socioeconomic context.[24] In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, many Americans remained sceptical of the economic elites and institutions. Rising income inequality and wage stagnation have further fuelled disillusionment with the political establishment. These dynamics have created fertile ground for Trump's populist message, which promises to "*drain the swamp*"[25] and return power to the people. Trump's presidency has also exposed deep divisions in American society, particularly along the lines of race, class, and geography. His rhetoric has often amplified these divisions, casting urban elites, immigrants, and international institutions as scapegoats for the country's challenges.

As Kazin states, this polarisation was both a symptom and a driver of the populist wave, as it reinforced the sense of a troubled in-group struggling to reclaim its rightful place. While his defeat in the 2020 presidential election signaled a shift in political leadership, the populist forces he unleashed have continued to shape American politics.[26] The persistence of the America First narrative and the rise of populist figures within the Republican Party have underscored the enduring appeal of this policy approach.

Brexit and Populism in *My Country-A Work in Progress*

My Country-A Work in Progress is a verbatim play and "*was first staged in the Dorfman auditorium of the National Theatre, London, on 28 February 2017, before a national tour*".[27] As *the Guardian* informs, "*Norris and Carol Ann Duffy have edited interviews with people from Scotland, Wales, Ireland and all corners of England to get a picture of Britain on the verge of leaving Europe – and perhaps of Scottish independence*".[28] In the immediate aftermath of the Brexit referendum, Norris and Duffy conducted one-on-one interviews with people from all over the country, across a range of ages. During this process, they listened to people's thoughts about the country they call home, in a candid and direct manner. During the interviews,

[23] Schenkkan, *Building the Wall*, 23.

[24] Andrew Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 282.

[25] Matthew J. Goodwin and Oliver Heath, "The 2016 Referendum, Brexit and the Left Behind: An Aggregate-Level Analysis of the Result," *The Political Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2016): 450.

[26] Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Itacha: Cornell University Press, 2014), 36.

[27] Carol Duffy and Rufus Norris, *My Country-A Work in Progress* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), 20-21.

[28] Susannah Clapp, "My Country: A Work in Progress Review–A Laudable but Limp Look at Brexit Britain," *The Guardian*, March 19, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/mar/19/my-country-work-in-progress-dorfman-observer-review.

they encountered humorous, emotional and sometimes quite harsh statements. These real-life narratives became the main elements that formed the spirit of the play.

In the play, Brexit is told in all its aspects, with verbatim statements from different people. The most interesting narrative about Brexit is, of course, the economic reasons that produced Brexit. Goodwin and Heath point out that austerity policies implemented in the United Kingdom after the global crisis deepened economic inequalities, especially in deindustrialised regions, paving the way for the populist campaigns seen during the Brexit campaign.[29] The play clearly addresses how the austerity policies implemented after the global crisis deepened economic inequalities in deindustrialised regions and how this situation fed the populist discourse in the Brexit campaign. The play contains direct statements about how economic inequality is deepening and people's living standards are falling:

> ***Britannia (Farage)*** *We are unashamedly the patriotic party. It's about priorities, isn't it? My priority would be to put our own people first. There's an issue called the quality of life. The gap between rich and poor is getting bigger and bigger. We've been through a decade now where for people earning average salaries they're ten per cent worse off than they were back in 2007. That simply can't be right.*[30]

This quote shows how economic hardships and income inequality were used in the Brexit campaign. It highlights the impact of austerity on the working class and how workers are unable to cope with financial hardship. On the other hand, Julie from East Midlands says "*never think as a worker you can still struggle.' So sometimes I had to decide if I'm paying ten pounds to put in my car for oil or buying food*."[31] This line clearly illustrates the economic difficulties mentioned by Goodwin and Heath. The fact that workers can no longer afford their basic needs has contributed to the strengthening of the pro-Brexit populist rhetoric. These scenes directly support his analysis of the effects of austerity on the working class and the rise of populist rhetoric. The anger felt by the working class in the play over economic injustice provides an important context for understanding how Brexit became a backlash.

The play, *My Country-A Work in Progress*, includes scenes that show the sense of economic and political exclusion felt by areas in long-term economic decline, such as the Midlands and Northern England, which strongly supported Brexit. The deindustrialisation and economic decline experienced particularly in the North of England and the Midlands are clearly felt in the speeches of the characters in the play. For instance, the character named Caledonia (William) states that they have "*got six million people up here. And you go round — you go through Fife where the whole industry used to employ the whole village*."[32] Another character, Jude from North-East, declares that the government treats random citizens "*who maybe have worked all their lives and for no, no fault of their own have been made redundant or, you know, something's closed down or they've been finished and they're tret like second-class citizens when they've paid tax all their lives*".[33]

According to Clarke et al., in the United Kingdom, areas experiencing long-term economic decline, such as the Midlands and the North of England, provided strong support for Brexit, reflecting a sense of economic and political marginalisation.[34] These scenes directly support these findings. The play clearly expresses the economic concerns and political exclusion of people in economically marginalised areas where Brexit has

[29] Matthew J. Goodwin and Oliver Heath, "The 2016 Referendum, Brexit and the Left Behind: An Aggregate-level Analysis of the Result," *The Political Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2016): 335.

[30] Duffy and Norris, 2017, *My Country-A Work in Progress*, 21.

[31] Duffy and Norris, 2017, *My Country-A Work in Progress*, 22.

[32] Duffy and Norris, 2017, *My Country-A Work in Progress*, 21.

[33] Duffy and Norris, 2017, *My Country-A Work in Progress*, 22.

[34] Harold D. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin, and Paul Whiteley, *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Cambrigde: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 82.

received strong support. Factors such as job loss, increasing economic inequality and the lack of a future for young generations are cited as the main reasons for support for Brexit.

Politically, Brexit has also changed the dynamics within the constituent nations of the United Kingdom. In Scotland, where 62% voted to remain in the EU, Brexit has reignited calls for independence. Keating states that the Scottish National Party (SNP) argues that Brexit represents a significant change in circumstances since the 2014 independence referendum and justifies a second vote on Scotland's future within the United Kingdom because "*the SNP doubled down on independence and remaining in Europe*".[35] Similarly, in Northern Ireland, Brexit has increased tensions between the unionist and nationalist communities. Hayward and Phinnemore asserted that the protocol's requirement for customs checks in the Irish Sea has been a bone of contention, with unionists seeing it as a threat to Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom.[36] Internationally, Brexit has forced the United Kingdom to redefine its role in the world.

Brexit in the United Kingdom is a process filled with significant populist rhetoric that played a critical role in the decision to leave the European Union (EU). Populist narratives often appealed to emotions, national identity and scepticism towards established political elites, and resonated with a significant portion of the British population. The slogans and messages of the campaign, particularly 'Take Back Control', were some of the most prominent discourses of this populist approach. The play clearly demonstrates the Brexit campaign's strategy of appealing to voters through populist narratives, with its emphasis on national identity and sovereignty. The following sections show how the characters in the play speak about national pride, autonomy and distrust of the European Union.

Britannia (Cameron) underlines the fact that the British have had "*the character of an island nation — independent, forthright, passionate in defence of our sovereignty*".[37] One of the key arguments of the Brexit campaign was the idea that the United Kingdom should regain its sovereignty as an independent state. The phrase 'island nation' reinforces the perception of a country that has historically stood apart from Europe and made its own decisions. This rhetoric is a populist approach that supports the idea that the European Union is restricting the United Kingdom's right to self-determination. The Brexit campaign's most iconic slogan, 'Take Back Control,' is featured directly in the play: "*Britannia (Boris): Let's take back control*".[38] One of the strongest arguments of the Brexit campaign was that it was unfair for elites in Brussels to make decisions on behalf of the people of the UK. East Midlands (Panit) complains that "*every day there's an idiot from Brussels, you can't do this, you must do this, you must do this, you can't — guys, it's very easy if you're sitting in Brussels creating these policies*".[39] The phrase 'Idiot from Brussels' reinforces the perception of how bureaucrats in Brussels interfere with the daily lives of the British.

Kenny and Sheldon stated that populism in the United Kingdom has focused more on collective national identity and sovereignty. The Brexit campaign, led by figures such as Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson, appealed to voters' sense of national pride and autonomy, emphasising the need to 'take back control' from the European Union. The slogan 'Take Back Control' was central to the Leave campaign. This slogan, which was the driving force behind the Leave campaign in Brexit, permeated various forms of public discourse in the UK, including social media campaigns, vehicle wraps, television programs, t-shirts and consumer

[35] Michael Keating, "Taking Back Control?" Brexit and the Territorial Constitution of the United Kingdom." *Journal of European Public Policy* 29, no. 4 (2022): 498.

[36] David Phinnemore and Katy Hayward, "Brexit and the Future of Northern Ireland," *Institute Montaigne*, May 12, 2021, 56, https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/brexit-and-future-northern-ireland.

[37] Duffy and Norris, *My Country-A Work in Progress*, 35.

[38] Duffy and Norris, *My Country-A Work in Progress*, 32.

[39] Duffy and Norris, *My Country-A Work in Progress*, 17.

products.[40] Its widespread appeal gave hope to the British, who had been the main element of an empire that had been declining for years, that a glorious past could be revived.

A key element of the populist rhetoric of the Brexit campaign has been its emphasis on national identity. The Leave campaign has often highlighted EU membership as a threat to British cultural and historical uniqueness. Campaigners have argued that EU regulations and policies undermine traditional British values and norms. According to Ford and Goodwin, this appeal to historical memory has helped to mobilise voters who strongly identify with the notions of British exceptionalism and sovereignty. The campaign's focus on immigration and its alleged negative consequences is closely tied to national identity.[41]

Ford and Goodwin report that Farage's infamous 'Breaking Point' poster, depicting a queue of migrants alongside the message that 'we must get rid of the EU and take back control of our borders', has been seen in the media as evidence of this narrative. Such messages appealed to voters who perceived immigration as a direct threat to their economic security and cultural homogeneity. While many of these claims have been contested or refuted, they have nevertheless had a strong emotional impact, shaping public perceptions and fuelling anti-immigration sentiment.[42] The play features immigrants and their relations with the state extensively:

> ***Cymru (Jonathan)*** *Last couple of years gone crazy like people coming over here to claim benefits —*
> ***Northern Ireland (Desmond)*** *All the foreigners that are coming from all the countries*
> ***Cymru (Jonathan)*** *India, Pakistan -*
> ***Northern Ireland (Desmond)*** *Romania, Bulgaria*
> ***Cymru (Jonathan)*** *Portuguese, Polish, like I get on with a lot of the Polish I don't mind them —*
> ***Caledonia (Mary)*** *Romanians, Slovakians, Bulgarians —*
> ***Cymru (Jonathan)*** *All'em poor countries, cos they can get benefits, cos we're seen as a soft target.*[43]

The anti-immigration stance of the Brexit campaign also triggered broader Eurosceptic views. EU institutions were portrayed as distant, unaccountable and overly bureaucratic entities imposing unwanted policies on Britain. According to Clarke et al., the Leave campaign cleverly exploited this Euroscepticism by framing the EU as an elitist project that ignored the will of ordinary people. Stories criticising EU regulations and highlighting everyday situations such as restrictions on vacuum cleaner power or fishing quotas were amplified by the media.[44] Hobolt stated that the general populist discourse during the Brexit campaign drew heavily on economic arguments. While the anti-Brexit Remain campaign focused on the potential economic risks of leaving the EU, the Leave campaigners responded with promises of economic renewal and prosperity outside the union. For example, the claim that leaving the EU would free up £350 million a week to be spent on the National Health Service (NHS) became one of the most controversial aspects of the campaign. While this figure has been widely criticised as misleading, it has effectively reinforced the broader narrative of taking back control over national resources and redirecting them towards local priorities.[45]

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[40] Michael Kenny and Jack Sheldon, "When Planets Collide: The British Conservative Party and the Discordant Goals of Delivering Brexit and Preserving the Domestic Union, 2016–2019," *Political Studies* 69, no. 4 (2021): 970.

[41] Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain* (London: Routledge), 2014, 122.

[42] Ford and Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain*, 123.

[43] Duffy and Norris, *My Country-A Work in Progress*, 24.

[44] Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley, *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union*, 87.

[45] Sara B. Hobolt, "The Brexit Vote: a Divided Nation, a Divided Continent," *Journal of European Public Policy* 23, no.9 (2016), 1269.

The populist dimensions of the Brexit campaign were further strengthened by its critique of political elites. Leave campaigners positioned themselves as representatives of the people against a distant and disconnected establishment. This discourse targeted pro-EU politicians, business leaders and academics, who were often accused of prioritising their own interests over those of ordinary citizens.

Distrust of the elites and the perception that the will of the people was being ignored played a significant role in the Brexit process. The criticisms of politicians by the characters in the play support the foundations of the populist discourse. Britannia (Gove) says, "*the people in this country have had enough of experts. I'm not asking the people to trust us. I'm asking them to trust themselves.*"[46] This statement, which was actually made by Michael Gove, the UK Education Secretary at the time, during the Brexit campaign, shows how populist movements have adopted anti-intellectual rhetoric.[47] Gove openly voiced his distrust of experts. He emphasises that people should make their own decisions, while implying that elites and academics are the ones acting against the will of the people.

By framing the referendum as a battle between the 'people' and the 'elite', the Leave campaign successfully mobilised voters disillusioned with mainstream politics and seeking to challenge the status quo. The combination of these populist themes—sovereignty, national identity, immigration, euroscepticism, economic renewal and anti-elitism—created a powerful narrative that resonated with a diverse range of voters. According to Curtice, the Leave campaign's ability to combine these themes into a coherent and emotionally engaging message was a key factor in its success in the referendum. In contrast, Curtice states that the Remain campaign struggled to match this emotional appeal and instead relied on more technocratic arguments about economic stability and the benefits of EU membership.[48] The consequences of the populist rhetoric used during the Brexit campaign have also extended beyond the referendum. The referendum has reshaped British politics and has contributed to further polarisation and the rise of new political forces. The success of the campaign demonstrated the power of populist messaging to challenge established norms and mobilise voters around issues of identity and sovereignty. However, it has also raised concerns about the divisive effects of such rhetoric, particularly in terms of its impact on social cohesion and trust in political institutions.

Conclusion

Populism is a type of political stance that has dominated the global political universe in recent times. Trump's 'America First' agenda and the Brexit campaign's emphasis on 'taking back control' highlight the populist tendency to exploit public discontent with globalisation and perceived elite failures.[49] *My Country-A Work in Progress* and *Building the Wall* are powerful narratives that reveal how elements such as economic insecurity, national identity concerns, immigration and anti-elite sentiment are used in the rise of populist movements. *My Country - A Work in Progress* shows how voters were mobilised by economic uncertainty, deindustrialisation and distrust of political elites during the Brexit process, while *Building the Wall* examines the echoes of the Trump administration's populist policies and anti-immigrant rhetoric in American society. Both play stand as examples of how the citizens of the United Kingdom and the United States can be seriously influenced by populist rhetoric on complex political issues. The central rhetoric of Brexit, 'Take Back Control', and Trump's 2016 election slogan, 'America First', have found a response in society by referencing nostalgic political positions.

[46] Duffy and Norris, *My Country-A Work in Progress*, 31.

[47] Henry Mance, "Britain Has Had Enough of Experts, says Gove," *Financial Times*, June 6, 2016, https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c.

[48] John Curtice, "Why leave won the UK's EU referendum." *Journal of Common Market Studies* 55, (2017): 19.

[49] Inglehart and Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-nots and Cultural Backlash," 212.

Building the Wall, like *My Country - A Work in Progress*, dramatically demonstrates how anti-immigrant policies create an 'us and them' divide and how this divide is used by populist movements. Rick's views on border security and immigration policies, parallel to Trump's statements, define immigrants not only as an economic threat but also as a national security problem. His line, "*A country has a right to protect its borders! "If we don't have borders, then we don't have a country*"[50] shows how anti-immigration discourses are intertwined with the concepts of national identity and sovereignty. Similarly, the claim that immigrants are a burden on the economic and social system during the Brexit process is also seen in the statements of the characters in the play *My Country-A Work in Progress*.

Both play dramatically reveal how individuals are drawn into political polarisation and how populist movements gain legitimacy through individual experiences. In *Building the Wall*, Rick defends anti-immigrant policies while defining himself as an ordinary American and explains how the economic collapse, job losses, and social change have affected him. Lines such as 'Every day there's an idiot from Brussels, you can't do this, you must do this' are based on the perception that the EU does not hear the voices of ordinary citizens and is a technocratic structure. In this context, both plays reveal not only political processes but also the impact of populist discourses on the lives of ordinary people. Rick's individual journey stands as a powerful example of how populist movements can influence large audiences by manipulating economic and social concerns, just as they do by whipping up anti-EU sentiment among Brexit supporters.

The main argument of the article is that populist discourses cannot be explained only as reactions to political elites; they are also directly related to the economic uncertainty, identity crisis and feelings of exclusion experienced by individuals. The texts examined reveal how this emotional and experiential ground is represented on stage, thus revealing that theatre can make a critical contribution to contemporary political debates. Both Rick's internal conflicts and the economic disappointment of the My Country characters show that populism is experienced not only as an abstract political strategy but also as a concrete life practice. This study opens up the political layers of contemporary theatre to discussion through its analysis of the dramatic representation of populist rhetoric; it confronts the audience not only with the narrative on stage but also with the socio-political reality behind that narrative. Thus, this study draws attention to the potential of contemporary theatre as both an aesthetic and political tool in interpreting current social fractures.

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[50] Schenkkan, *Building the Wall*, 23.

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