Populism on young people's non-conforming behaviour as othering

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses populism as it applies to making sense of young people's deviant behaviour in public spaces and schools in Finland. It analyses the populist utterances as tightly intertwined with the hegemony struggles between the economic elites supporting neoliberal ideals and the social democratic welfare state vision. In this context, the mechanism of 'othering' is commonly used to establish and express a moral boundary between those who deserve moral and solidary treatment and those who do not. By othering, essentially complex societal problems such those related to immigration or school discipline, are simplified as problems of some individuals or groups who are not seen as deserving to be treated as respectable citizens. The process of othering is exemplified with recent examples from public discussions on problematic youth behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter analyses populist reactions towards young people's non-conforming behaviour in public spaces and schools in Finland. We regard hegemonic struggles around the functions of the state as the dynamic force behind populism and as a sociological and political phenomenon. Its defining characteristic is an exploitation of the critical and bitter emotions among the population and the orientation of this energy towards strategically useful targets from the point of view of different contestants of the hegemonic struggle to gain or fortify access to political power. Populism is expressed mainly in the media and parliamentary processes as more or less simplifying an emotionally laden rhetoric in contexts where solutions to problems are looked after and articulated. The effects of populist trends should then be especially visible around the processes of political mobilization, parliamentary processes, and legitimation or critique of government's policies.

Populist trends are found among all movements and representatives of all ideological orientations. Since social problems are always extremely complex in their aetiology and solutions, all political ideologies and processes inevitably contain some populist elements. Populist activism and policy making can be done with different hegemonic strategies in mind and hence there is right-wing and left-wing populism. For example, in a recent interview feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser calls for a left-wing populism

to fight against the three major and converging crises facing humankind (economic, reproductive, ecological). In her view there is an urgent need for a new counterhegemonic block which could unite all potentially emancipatory forces behind a global eco-societal transformation process towards some sort of post-capitalist social order (Mosquera 2021).

An important element in populism is the proliferation in public discourses (media, parliamentary processes, official documents) consisting of words and narratives which can strike the bitter and angry emotions of economically, politically, ethnically, sexually, and culturally disadvantaged people and mobilise their moral outrage towards strategically chosen targets.. For example, Fraser in her above mentioned interview praises the rhetoric of the '99 percent and the 1 percent' used by the Occupy Wall Street-movement as 'quintessentially populist' because 'although it lacks the precision and analytical rigor of class analysis, it is immediately comprehensible and affectively powerful'. It had the effect of uniting sectors of the population to oppose the neoliberal order and may even have had the capacity to create an overarching left coalition in the US.

The political context of our analysis is the hegemony struggles between the capital-owning elite defending its interest of maximal capital accumulation and the non-elite population fighting for its possibilities for a humane life. A major target of the

capitalist elite is to stop the expansion of the welfare state that was well under way in the post-war political situation in most Western countries, and to replace it with a market-led society with maximum freedoms and support of capital accumulation combined with minimum investments in the social, health and educational needs of the population. This political project is known by the term ‘neoliberalism’ (Harvey 2007).

As Wacquant (2009) shows in his analysis of the US on its way to a punitive society, neoliberalist governance created the need to promote the production and dissemination of various versions of conservative populist argumentation to legitimate the regimentation of poor sections of society. A major tactic has been to accuse the poor as causing their own problems. The populist argument legitimating this mean treatment of the poor and other dispossessed people has been depicting them as immoral, unenterprising ‘welfare addicts’ not deserving of moral treatment as respectable citizens. Instead of ‘softness’, as populist views go, the poor need tight control and, in cases of deviancy, a ‘tough on crime’ policy. As a result, instead of alleviating poverty, control of social order has become a major preoccupancy of the elites in capitalist states like the US (Wacquant 2009).

In this chapter, we examine the populist reactions towards youth deviance as tightly intertwined with this change of governance policy in late capitalist societies. Inspired by the sociology of deviance (Cohen 1972; Wacquant 2009; Young 2011), feminist

critiques of liberalism (e.g., Tronto 1993) and the sociology of emotions (Ahmed 2004), we interpret the tactics of 'blaming the victims' through the mechanism of 'othering' as expressing the elite's interest in constructing a boundary between those who deserve moral treatment and those who do not. An abundance of populist discourses has been produced around this theme in the politics associated with youths and education.

In what follows, we first discuss populist rhetoric as a special form of communication. After that we explore 'othering' as a form of making politics with people's moral emotions. We then introduce a selection of representative populist speakers (elite, would-be-elite, and proletarian) and analyse how their utterances relate to their social position in the social context of the hegemonic drama in question. We approach the populist speakers with the classical sociological interest of trying to understand why people do what they are doing in their different social positions in a certain historical context (e.g., Weber 1978).

After this methodological contextualisation, we examine how othering is visible in public discussions on problematic youth behaviour in public spaces and schools, the two major arenas where othering of young people occurs. We first examine media reporting on the alleged propensity towards crime of young immigrants as a populist articulation by elites of the 'refugee problem'. We regard this reporting as an example of border-making between those who are entitled to welfare provisions and those who

are not. Our other examples are reactions to problems of disaffection and bullying in schools. These examples make visible the blame-the-victim-tactics used widely to individualise an essentially complex societal problem concerning the functional effectiveness of schools as educational institutions. The texts have been published in *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS)[1], which is the biggest broadsheet newspaper in Finland, read all over the country, and *Aamulehti* (AL)[2], a newspaper published in Tampere, the third largest city in Finland.

OTHERING AS WAY OF CREATING GOOD ENEMIES

Creating 'good enemies' is a widely used method in hegemonic struggles. The term was coined by criminologists Christie and Bruun (1986) in connection with the anti-drug politics starting in the US in the 1980s. A 'good enemy' is a powerless individual or group that can be depicted as the cause of social ills so that people's negative feelings are channelled onto them instead of the social reality as a potential factor behind their negative feelings. This is accomplished by the mechanism of othering, that is, depicting them as lacking some essential human capacities, like intelligence, morality, or an enterprising disposition. Othering is a dangerous use of societal power. It makes the social distinction between 'us', the good, and the inferior 'them', and this makes it possible for humans to behave towards these others in ways not considered moral with respect to other groups in their society, for example, refusing to share food or other necessary means of survival, treating them cruelly or

even killing them, which normally is something humans abhor (Collins 2008; de Waal 2018).

The success of othering as an important element in populism can be understood as a combined outcome of a strongly negative emotional life of people, produced by frustrations, humiliations, and feelings of hopelessness. Through the influence of 'othering talk' in society's discursive landscape, the mere existence of a certain out-group can be narrated as the cause of their miserable situation. These groups can then become identified to represent an evil to whom they can project their negative feelings. Making politics with our emotions, even in the form of mild othering talk, is potentially dangerous as it can promote progression towards more severe forms of violence against the othered individuals or groups (Ahmed 2004; Taylor 2009).

Western intellectual culture is filled with conservative myths about immanent hierarchies between humans (men/women, adults/children, white/coloured, genetically gifted and intelligent vs. those with inferior genes etc.) which can be exploited to legitimate othering of women, children, non-heterosexuals, people of colour, those with disabilities, etc. In the perspective of today's scientific knowledge, most of these narratives are ungrounded (and have in fact been radically problematised). As they often serve the purposes of conservative populism, they however have many bastions defending their validity, and consequently, we come across them time and again in populist talk (Lewontin et al. 2017).

POPULIST DISCURSIVE STYLES - ELITIST, WOULD-BE AND PROLETARIAN

Democracy involves different kinds of rhetoric in trying to win others to one's way of defining social problems and solutions. Every protagonist creates thought systems or political ideologies that aim to be simple enough and appealing to the people they want to reach. In defining what is *populist talk* we take here as a critical standpoint the classical Aristotelian rhetoric according to which good argumentation is based on a balanced mix of *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos.* Logos refers to the argument or substance of the talk itself, what is the information one wants to convey; ethos refers to the way speakers build their rapport or trustworthiness in front of their audiences; and pathos to how much speakers appeal to the emotions of their audiences to gain receptivity to their message (Kakkuri-Knuuttila 1999).

While a certain element of populism (emotionality, simplification of argument, and boosted self-confidence as speaker) is immanent in political processes, we define *strategic populism* to be public utterances and a communicative style that conceal the real interest of the speaker. This allows the speaker to make unwarranted claims about their expertise while 'telling the truth' about a matter (ethos), with the latter containing strategically biased and ungrounded information about the matter one talks about (logos) and which produces, with deliberate intent, the arousal of the

audience's emotions (pathos) in order to entrain them in an activity which is in the interest of the speaker but not necessarily in the interests of target audience.

Strategic populism in the media and political processes means consequently less substantive content and more biased and false information as evaluated by the need to understand issues spoken about (logos), more disdain of genuine expertise or coherent argumentation and more arrogant and haphazard use of ungrounded utterances (ethos), and more strategic use of an emotionally appealing communication style (pathos). All of these rhetorical attitudes and behaviours diminish the possibility of enlightened dialogue to gain new and shared understanding of social issues, which, of course, in a 'normal' or 'democratic' political discussion would be the whole idea. This means that an increase in strategic populism leads to a general deterioration of the democratic dynamics in which rational public debate among an *enlightened* citizenry is an essential element (Dahl 2000; UNDP 2002: 56-7).

In our empirical material on youth, deviance and school disciplinary problems, we have identified three kinds of populist talk, with each based on the position of the speaker in the hegemonic struggles fought in society around the articulation of public concerns about these issues:

1) *elite populism*, i.e., utterances of members of the elite using strategically populist argumentation in advancing their interests, regardless of the interests of the target audiences;
2) *populism of the would-be-elite*, i.e., strategic use of populist talk by non-elite persons wishing to be active in or to advance their role on the social or political stage; and
3) *proletarian populism*, i.e., populist talk and movements arising from deep distrust and anger from the most deprived sectors of the non-elite population, targeting the whole system, the rich, the politicians (e.g., all those in power who seem to do nothing to help their situation).

The elite are talking whenever they feel their interests, as described above, are being threatened in some way. Elite populism can take the form of hypocritical narratives and outright lies. It is also influenced by what in feminist theory could be characterised as 'epistemological innocence', which is based on the material and socio-cultural living conditions of the elites and excludes the experience of the proletarians (Harding 1986). Partly, these discourses can be based on a genuine psychological need of elites to believe in elitist versions of society, enabling them to justify their own life amid deep socio-economic cleavages in society; these discourses can also be based on actual innocence with respect to the nature of social problems.

The would-be elite persons step up to the public stage to further their political or social ambitions. They may pick up any social problem that seems to concern ‘the people’ and thus make possible media coverage for their utterances. The basic method in elite or would-be elite populist talk is strategic cunning in the use of communication style. Proletarian populist talk is more direct in its expression of anger and bitterness caused by personal trauma or ‘under-dog’ life experiences. As a result, proletarian utterances can take the form of coarse verbal tirades against the persons or groups deemed responsible for the suffering of the speaker.

Ideologically, proletarian speakers can identify themselves either with conservative right-wing (e.g., patriarchal-authoritarian anti-children, misogynist, familialist, nationalist, racist, anti-science, neoliberal, etc.) narratives, or with anarcho-leftist attacks on the ‘rich’ or the ‘system’, often in social-democratic terms in the name of the dispossessed. Frequently, their talk contains mixtures of all these narratives.

The elites have whole industries of ideology production and dissemination at their disposal, such as media and privately owned think-tanks. They also have easy access to politicians (Kantola and Kuusela 2021). The would-be-elite-people have fewer resources in this respect, but they try to attract media interest with suitable utterances over themes of public interest. The proletarians can also try to gain media coverage, but the media moderate considerably which messages get through to the public[3]. The proletarian speakers’ avenues in the hegemonic struggles are the media insofar as

these are open to their utterances and otherwise going into the streets to protest. Social media have also brought new and potentially explosive possibilities for proletarian populist talk. Thus, social media have become an important factor in the growth of populism as a characteristic of political processes (Tuomola 2018).

In the rise of populism, an axis of systemic feedback is formed that accelerates, on the one hand, the strategic populist talk of elite speakers or aspiring populist politicians and, on the other hand, the negative emotions of anger and bitterness of the proletarians. This dynamic intensifies the emotional element in the political process. Emotions are an important element in the formation of any political movement and can be exploited for morally divergent purposes (Ahmed 2004; Vaught 2012). The problem is, as modern neuroscience has shown, that strong emotions inhibit rationality in our thinking and action (Panksepp 2005: 23-5, 75-6) and can be a violence generating factor (Collins 2008). Strategic populism in egoistic and power/money seeking hands can thus be dangerous when it is used to arouse feelings of hate towards certain individuals, groups, or institutions. It can be life-threatening.. Questions about raising and educating children and youth, and the quality of education, are especially emotionally laden in society. In addition, schools are highly emotional social systems. Educational inequality is a source of negative emotions for those children and young people who systematically fail in the system. The stresses of schooling prevent them from effective learning, leadingto deep

feelings of bitterness and resistance towards the school (Lundstrøm and Øygard 2015; Tuck and Wayne 2014; Willis 1978).

THE HEGEMONY OF CONSERVATIVE ELITE TALK IN OUR WORLDVIEW

The global economic elite has promoted a neoliberal politico-ideological agenda all over the world for about half a century. Its vision of a good society challenges the social democratic welfare state vision that emphasises the need for a well-functioning state apparatus with high quality service provision based on the values of equality, justice, and solidarity with the members of society at risk of marginalisation (Esping-Andersen 1990). As a consequence, there is a constant hegemonic struggle taking place between these two social philosophies. In the present right-wing dominated political space of many nation states, we are surrounded by anti-state and individualist discourses and various scientifically outdated conservative/patriarchal views of human beings.

Hostility to humanistic and social sciences has been an important element in the hegemonic strategy of elites since the 1970s (Oppenheimer et al. 1991). An early target of conservative suppression of knowledge was criminological research that showed how societal factors, especially inequality, were part of the crime problem. US President George Bush's announcement that 'it is not society that commits crimes, it is individuals' (cited by Wacquant 2009: 10), UK Prime Minister Tony

Blair's slogan 'understanding less and controlling more' (cited by Davis and Bourhill 2000: 50), and the claim of UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that 'there is no such thing as society, there are only individual men and women and there are families' (cited byKalantzis and Cope 2021), all expressed the strong individualist-moralising, anti-sociology and anti-welfare state tone of neoliberalism. Views such as these set the media scene for a punitive attitude to the 'disruptive' and 'violent' behaviour of children and youth. Propagating an individualist 'there is no society' ethos is, however, against everything human sciences tell us about the nature of humanity and the way people develop as social beings (e.g., Tattersall 1998).

The essentially anti-humanist stance of neoliberalism has relevance to educational politics. Under neoliberal policy, schools can create substantial stress students, who are often packed in crowded classes and corridors, as well as their teachers. The lower the socioeconomic background of the student body of the school, the more stress and 'burnout' induced behaviour of students and teachers can be expected. Here, neoliberal policy creates conditions for populist reactions within the educational scene. Stressed young people, for want of more constructive opportunities, act out in 'disorderly' and 'aggressive' behaviour at school and in public spaces. For elites, it is important that these problems are not articulated in a way that would orient attention of the public to the sociological aetiology of these behaviours or cause demands for more social investments. Consequently, we meet a lot of strategic populist talk about these young people.

As has been documented by social constructionistic research, social issues differ in their suitability for becoming social problems needing immediate solution (Hakkarainen et al. 1993:). Children, their care or neglect, delinquency, youth violence, drugs, bullying and misbehaviour in schools are inevitably emotionally-laden topics for parents and the ‘concerned public’. This makes them suitable themes in populist campaigns to win the attention of voters. Human development and the promotion of it by good care and education are demanding and complex topics. This makes them vulnerable to populist talk propagating ungrounded myths and quick-fix solutions to complex problems.

The media is a significant platform where articulations regarding violence and unruly conduct of young people are constructed (e.g., Cohen 1972). Besides informing the public about crime, the media have stakes in the political struggles over crime and deviance (Young 2011: 212). In what follows, we study how the media acts as a platform for and a producer of populist accounts on youth non-conforming behaviour. We understand the media as an institutional domain representing and reproducing multiple sets of social relations, such as those of gender, race, or class. Our first examples are about youth with refugee backgrounds as a threat to neoliberalist austerity policy that requires strict border measures to avoid new demands for social service provisioning to migrants seeking asylum. The other examples concern disaffection and unruly behaviour of students in public schools. Here, the strategic

interest is the same, that is, avoiding the need for substantial additional investments to be made in education to decrease inequalities and improve its functioning.

THE IMMIGRANT QUESTION AS A CHALLENGE TO WELFARE STATE ETHOS

Creating new and stricter boundaries as to who is entitled to the services of the state is visible in the current public discussion on immigration, as global transformations and migration flows have caused demands for state actions. Immigration has become a burning social issue in the global north, as the ongoing eco-catastrophe, armed conflicts, wars and steepening income and property differences have forced millions of people to flee their home countries to seek for better life. The trend of increasing numbers of refugees and immigrants is creating pressure for socially and morally innovative articulations of of responsibilities and solidarity (Rättilä and Honkatukia 2021).

In 2015, Finland received 30,000 asylum seekers mainly from the Middle East, when the usual number per year is approximately 2,000. A significant number were young men who were unaccompanied minors (Finnish Immigration Service 2021). This so-called ‘refugee crisis’ was soon followed by populist ‘othering’ rhetoric. One channel of this rhetoric consisted in racialising depictions of violence. For example, in early 2019, there was intensive media reporting on the sexual offences committed by asylum seekers. In the news items studied here, it was alleged that the victims were

under-aged girls who had initially been contacted by the suspected perpetrators through social media. News items reporting on this incident in HS are revealing about the willingness of mainstream media to limit the problem of violence to this group of young perpetrators. According to our interpretation, the newspaper ’othered’ all young asylum seekers by depicting them as morally inferior as a group, and as not deserving the right to live in Finland nor to enjoy legal protections and access to welfare services. This is emphasised, for example, in an editorial comment in HS on 14 January 2019, A5:

> We still know very little about the suspected sexual crimes that were targeted at the underaged, but as based on the knowledge thus far the phenomenon has gained a new nature. It is about the power of the internet and a changing immigration situation.

In the imaginaries of writings about immigrant and refugee youth, oppressed Muslim women and girls serve often as a symbol for everything that is not perceived to be European or western (Keskinen 2009). This, too, was visible in the editorial which seemed to place the reasons for sexual violence in the culture of the underdeveloped societies with less-developed human rights that these young asylum seekers come from. According to the editorial, it is the obligation of us, the civilised and gender-equal citizens, to clarify ‘the borders set in law’ to everyone.

A frequent trick in the reporting was to let the representatives of racialised minorities themselves present the othering accounts. Through their voices, the males from 'patriarchal cultures' are presented as cultural dupes who are incapable of evaluating western women's and girls' conduct while acting according to gendered cultural models:

> He [the interviewee, an Iraqi man] also evaluates that Iraqi men might interpret Finnish women wrong for many reasons. There is no dating culture in Iraq and that might be a reason why men are not able to behave and read correctly what the woman means by her conduct. Moreover, in Iraq, men are not used to seeing drunken women, which may increase misinterpretations.
>
> (HS 13 January 2019, A11)

Besides taking part in the process of othering, the news items also called for punitive solutions to the problem. In this news story, a police officer pronounces that 'education does not bite those people who are prone to commit sexual offences', and therefore according to him 'more sturdy measures are needed'.

Another example of racialised othering was a recent debate on youth violence in HS. On 10 November 2020, it published a news story which was headlined 'A hundred of probably dangerous young people are moving around in groups in Helsinki centre

– according to the experts a new phenomenon related to immigration is behind this'(HS 10 November, A20). In the days following, HS published a series of feature articles in which the police, youth workers, child welfare experts, researchers and young people were interviewed. The stories reflected uncertainty and fear about the 'new' youth phenomenon and asked whether Finland was following Sweden, where violent immigrant youth gangs have been said to be causing fear in suburbs. Subsequently, youth violence was intensively discussed in other newspapers, on TV and in the social media, focusing on immigration. It turned out, however, that statistics did not unequivocally support the narrative about the rise of 'immigrant youth violence'. Media interest thus faded in two weeks.

At the end of the same month, HS (30 November 2020) published an editorial to wrap-up the discussion. Here, HS referred to and then deprecated structural explanations behind marginalisation, which, according to its editorial, are common in 'the welfare state model relying on collective solutions'. Instead, HS advised a turn to individual explanations: 'if youth crime is decreasing but concentrating on the few, the reasons are more and more individual'.

In this populist episode and media reporting process, youth violence, again first presented as a new phenomenon defined by immigration, was eventually framed as an isolated problem of some youth with immigrant or refugee backgrounds and their families. These individuals are blamed for their inability to integrate into Finnish

society. We can assume that the writers of editorials are educated people who should be able to make a distinction between *statistical prevalence* of a phenomenon appearing in some historical context and its explanation. The structural factors behind some behaviour in some historical contexts do not disappear, although the prevalence is, as in this case, low. Finland has a strict immigration policy and is a nation far behind other countries in the numbers of immigrants and asylum seekers. The large numbers confined in other European countries and those daily risking their lives by crossing seas to find places to live and work in Europe, are evidence of the weight of 'structural' factors behind the phenomenon of the presence of relatively few refugee youths in Finland. Discussion about this structural problem or how to effectively support young people with refugee backgrounds and their families to integrate is also missing in the editorial.

Behind this recent Finnish media reporting on youth violence, a similar gloomy landscape appears as that painted by Garland (2002): 'The neo-liberal social policies that increased the exclusion and hardship of specific social groups thus produced new problems of order and new fears about its maintenance' (153-4). Simultaneously, the contention in the HS editorial can be seen as an example elite populist strategy in the hegemonic political struggle. It turns a blind eye to the social and material reality of those who are in vulnerable positions, and wants to withdraw state responsibility in hardships while imposing punitive measures on certain othered individuals and groups.

There are numerous examples in the UK and US penal policies on how responses to high levels of crime shifted the responsibility from the society to non-state agencies and individuals, such as zero tolerance (Garland 2002; Young 2011: 127-9). The active role of the news media in creating enemy images of youth populations has been part of the propagation of zero tolerance policies in schools in the US and UK since the 1980s and 1990s (Welch and Payne 2018). This policy orientation was imported to Finland in the 1990s via a campaign started by the combined efforts of the media, conservative politicians and the police, who then saw youths displayed as a public threat to national security in various administrative reports (Harrikari 2008).

The above examples show that an anti-immigration and ethnic nationalist tone is added to this pejorative talk about society's youth population. Besides labelling the newcomers, these othering utterances form part of a process through which self-images of liberal societies are constructed. This is done by contrasting members of those societies to allegedly illiberal others who are portrayed as patriarchal, traditional and undemocratic, commonly referring to them as non-western and/or Muslim minorities (Honkatukia and Keskinen 2018; Keskinen 2009). In these discourses, instead of being an humanitarian question, migration is defined as a security issue (Aas 2007). By circulating these imageries, newcomers are depicted as different but also threatening, thus not deserving of the same rights and treatment as the 'respectable' citizens. Instead, newcomers are portrayed to need strict control or

and to be deported. This othering strategy is all the more evident in the present moment where there is a widely accepted policy in Finland to attract educated experts from abroad to enliven our economy. As a consequence, there is a political need to make a moral border between welcomed and unwelcomed newcomers (Kurki 2019: 11-12).

There are very few immigrants or youth with refugee backgrounds in schools in Finland compared to most European countries, but elements of racism have been detected in research on Finnish schools. For example, teachers in a basic school intervened in classes and corridors by telling immigrant children: ‘You must behave in Finland like the Finns do’, while the Finnish students are simply told ‘to behave’ (Souto 2011: 130-2). This kind of intervention conveys a racialising message. It depicts the immigrant students as representing an alien culture and for that reason not willing to internalise Finnish cultural codes. As a result of othering, the very existence of the immigrant students in the school is filled with the fear of being socially excluded and negatively commented on, including peers (Souto 2011: 140-3). As our above examples show, this kind of othering reaction towards youth with immigration or refugee backgrounds takes place in everyday life in schools and communities, and in public discussions and media reporting.

POPULIST TALK IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

Our other example of populist talk in media texts are about unwanted pupil behaviour in basic schools. Here, the othering of problem students happens mainly on two topics: one being about discipline problems and bullying, and the other being about the low motivation and underachievement of boys. In a schooling contexts, the othering of certain pupils as somehow problematic or inferior, even ‘hopeless cases’, is unfortunately a common practice. The process of grading and the use of strict codes of conduct generate classic instances of ‘underperformance’ and ‘deviance’ deviant for certain students. Lately, an increasing number of students with refugee and immigration backgrounds have been entering Finnish schools. On the one hand, this has amplified the problem of racism in schools as reported above, and, on the other hand, there has been significant progress within the educational field to develop anti-racist attitudes and teaching materials.

Labelling certain students as misfits has the inevitable effect of generating defensive reactions among these students, finding expression in various forms of coping behaviour. This can be anything from ‘bad language’ and sabotaging classroom teaching to exerting verbal or physical violence towards peers or the teacher (e.g., Kauppi and Pörhölä 2009; Salmi and Kivivuori 2009). As a result, vicious circles of social and moral distancing within the microsociology of classrooms and schooling communities are set in motion among peer groups and between the labelled students and the teachers.[4] With ‘unruly’ behaviour most probably accelerating, the students in question also start to appear to be the *cause* of the discipline problems. This

understandably increases the acceptance of an exclusionary approach to disciplinary problems among teachers. Rumours and stories of this ‘social reality’ in classes enter homes via students, which, in connection with sensational media reporting, have repercussions among the parents, who become worried about learning conditions and safety in schools. Bullying, especially, has aroused affective utterances in the public sphere. A stage has thus been set for populist reactions to ‘do something’ about disruptive behaviour and school safety. In a study on the introduction of the neoliberal ‘parental choice’ policy in the Finnish basic school system, it was found that the motivation of parents to select the school for their children was based on their impressions concerning the quality of the social atmosphere, in particular safety and discipline in schools (Seppänen et al. 2015).

Pedagogic discourses, which resulted in the first national curriculum of the Finnish basic school (POPS I 1970), articulated that discipline problems were to be solved mostly within the educational institution itself. Schools were to be developed as holistically, well-functioning communities, where all children were to be taken care of by a progressive teaching culture and a multidisciplinary team of special education teachers, school doctors, social workers and nurses (Miettinen 2013; Sahlberg 2015). The conservatives opposed this project as too expensive, and a quick change in discourse took place when the political hegemony shifted from centre-left to centre-right at the turn of the 1980s to the 1990s. A discussion about the need to ‘reform’ the basic school was quickly started along the lines of neoliberal reform politics

spreading internationally (Lindblad and Popkewitz 2004). This resulted in a move from the holistic pedagogy of the first curriculum toward an individualising and didactic discourse that excluded the immediate social context and organisation as important factors shaping the behaviour of students and their learning (Simola et al. 1997; Simola et al. 2002).

Notable in this individualist ethos of the mainstream expert talk of educational discourses is that it makes a *causal break* between the attitudes and behaviour of the students on one hand and the workings of the school as an institution on the other. This is in ideological congruence with the widely used blame-the-victims-talk of the conservative politics discussed above that put the responsibility of learning on the shoulders of the students and leaves the institutional order of the society outside moral considerations.

As part of the turn to right-wing hegemony of the political space, the neoliberal, anti-welfare state, individual responsibility talk of the 1990s (Julkunen 2006) invaded the discourses around school issues. An intensive discussion took place in the media and Parliament about the responsibilities of families and the state concerning the care and education of young people. There were often heated discussions in the media concerning the problems of school disaffection and the 'continually worsening problems' with discipline and bullying (Harrikari 2008). The teachers complained that discipline problems were taking too much time from their 'proper job of

teaching'. In connection with these discussions, pejorative talk of unruly students started to appear in the press.[5] These resulted in the promotion of a bifurcation of teaching into 'teaching' and the work having to do with disciplining students and 'telling them what is right and wrong'. The latter was eventually declared to be the job of parents by the highest authorities of the state (Vesikansa 2009).

The decontextualised and individualist-didactic teaching discourse that makes the students responsible for their learning and behaviour are identified in the examples below. These concern discipline problems and the under-achievement and low motivation of boys, often two sides of the same problem of an unsuccessful schooling process.

LAZY STUDENTS ARE THEMSELVES TO BLAME

Commenting on the discussions around the poor educational motivation of boys, the president of the National League of Educational Professionals (OAJ) whom we call here OL, is reported to have said[6]:

> I have been accused of accusing boys when I say that boys are not interested in making efforts. Still I dare to say that the schools' task is not to entertain.

(HS 28 November, A13)

OL admits that it is important to ‘develop schools so that they inspire and motivate’ but, ‘life needs efforts and pains, and one needs to grow into that’.

The message of the need to develop schools gets less weight in the story compared to references to boys’ laziness, which is made to seem like a self-chosen, deliberately negative attitude, a typical way of constructing a blame-the-victim discourse (Young 1999: 113).

The passive expression ‘you have to grow into’ is also noteworthy. It bypasses the fact that, according to the curriculum (Opetushallitus 2014), it is the official responsibility of schools to organise their activities in ways that promote the pupils’ interest in studying and in developing themselves, and also to *teach* the students how to learn, instead of expecting them to adopt an abstract Protestant Work Ethic through developmental mechanisms having nothing to do with the school. The real problem behind the disengagement in schools is, however, *societally induced* as the globalized knowledge society requires increasingly higher levels of learning which more and more students inevitably fail to accomplish without strong support provided by the the schools. (Illeris 2008, 75-95, 161, 175). Instead OL deliberately uses the media to stress that the students themselves are responsible for their failing motivation and even accuses them, as he admits, ‘repeatedly’, of wanting the school to be ‘entertainment’. Notable, too, is the title of the story, ‘National League of Educational

Professionals: The School's Task Is not to Entertain'. It emphasises the message that the students should be blamed, a message HS clearly also wants to stress.

According to who study teaching and learning, good teaching supports holistically the development of the students personalities, strengthens their feelings of competence, and encourages them to meet new learning challenges (Hautamäki et al. 2013: 13). To be able to 'grow into' the intellectual culture of academic learning, students need not just 'good enough' but, as it seems, excellent teaching, as the educationalist John Hattie (2009) argues. That level of teaching quality is rare, and it is not fair or just to blame students for their lack of enthusiasm.

In another context, we meet OL again commenting on some writing by a frustrated teacher published in the 'letters to the editor section' of HS[7]. The newspaper gave this letter the title: 'The teacher has ceased to be an authority a long time ago' (HS 24 October 2015, C20). In the text, the teacher describes how in secondary schools there are 'more and more lazy and unmotivated students whose basic knowledge and skills, including language skills, are deplorable'. The teacher suggested that abundant use of social media is the most important cause of this malaise. The text continues:

> The teacher has not for long been an authority, nor expert, but primarily a servant and entertainer. The students are customers demanding service. They have mostly rights but no responsibilities. They come to

> classes without books, because, as they maintain, they can't afford them, although during every break they can afford to smoke and buy fast-food. If they have missed a course at gymnasium because of their own laziness, they insist on special arrangements from the teacher in order to be able to participate in the graduating exams as soon as possible.
>
> (HS 24 October, C20)

Here, again, the problem is the laziness of the students. The next day, there was a small story in HS[8] where OL is reported to affirm the teacher's worry about the unwilling attitude of the students as being 'for the most part justified'. He also admits to recognising the description of situations where teachers have lost their authority and have become more and more like servants and entertainers. According to him, however, a 'majority of students are brilliant and full of initiative, and they develop faster than our own generation. But there are also those who do not care about anything'. Continuing his comment, OL stresses that, 'the school is not isolated from its surroundings. . . it does not create those negative phenomena, they are products of a society where indifference has increased [and] a general attitude is that the society will take care of you'. The solution he offers is:

> to educate to responsibility and not only in schools. We should discuss and draw lines between what is the individual's and what is society's

> responsibility. The responsibilities of families have diminished, and I do not like this trend. It is not sustainable morally nor economically.
>
> (25 October, A15)

There are several populist elements in OL's talk. First, the text takes part in the neoliberal austerity talk by belittling the fact that public education is a necessary institution with its own educational tasks and resourcing need, and that 'society', as represented in the will of politicians, has defined demanding responsibilities for schools, including moral and character education. It is thus not correct to characterise the situation as if families were 'transferring' their responsibilities to the schools, although this is the way the familialist discourse of the 1990s described it (Vesikansa 2009). Second, OL bypasses the fact that the rising qualification demands made on today's workforce create pressures on the state to make more investments in schooling than are presently being made. To use the opportunity given to him by HS to comment on the writing of the frustrated teacher, OL's familialist and responsibility-talk utterances exemplify how blaming families and their children is part of right-wing political rhetoric. OL is a prominent and authoritative figure in educational policy, and he is frequently interviewed in the media. We define his talk as strategic elite populism because it does not refer to the complexity of the problem of 'laziness' or disaffection but constructs a moralising, individualist, and curiously non-pedagogic argument as his reaction to the students' behaviour. There are many excellent studies that illuminate the transactional nature of the development of

school-going orientation in general and the marginalisation process especially, both in the international and Finnish educational literature (e.g., Goodlad 1984; Illeris 2008; Pollard 1985; Willis 1978). Moreover, the concept ‘school allergy’ coined by Takala (1992) is also widely known in Finland. Hence, for OL to ignore mainstream professional knowledge in his talk and to take at face value the ‘couldn’t care less’ argument is populist and othering. Describing these students’ unsuccessful developmental route as *self-chosen* contributes to the conservative, individualist rhetoric of blaming the victims. Third, OL’s talk deliberately creates a moral cleavage among pupils in basic school by opposing those students *who do not care about anything* to the ‘majority’ of students who are *brilliant and full of initiative.* He characterises ‘irresponsible’ students in an *essentialising* way, as a negative type of young person, totally different from a ‘good’ student. Furthermore, his notion that the school is *not isolated from its surrounding* gives the impression that the problems of school life enter the school walls only with individual, problematic students. He ignores the fact that the schools as institutions have developed historically within modern society, and their properties are an *integral*, not an isolated, part of that macrosystemic history (Walby 2009).

TEACHERS AS STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRATS AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BLAMING THE STUDENTS: EXAMPLES OF FRUSTRATED TEACHER TALK

Teachers, as *street-level bureaucrats* (Lipsky 1980), are the proletarians of schools as educational institutions. The front-line position of teachers meeting hundreds of students daily makes them vulnerable to overwork and a creeping burnout state, even more so than other social service and care professions (Dollard et al. 2003). It is characteristic of teaching that a high quality of personal rapport with the 'clients' is necessary to achieve satisfying results. This is because teachers must be able to activate the whole personality of their students for them to achieve satisfactory results in learning and thus to feel motivated. If pedagogic rapport is not recreated in a transactional process of reciprocal satisfaction, strong feelings of frustration will arise (Noddings 1988).

In today's societies of blatant inequalities and the *permanent austerity* imposed upon all social service professions under neoliberal retrenchment (Pierson 2001), the conditions for an adequate response to the needs of students are *structurally jeopardised*. This can cause negative repercussions in the microsociology of schools, negatively affecting the learning of students. The experience of teaching is bound to be full of stress and frustrations, which creates a strong need for coping through defensive behaviours (Lazarus 1985).

One such coping mechanism is to identify oneself with discourses that situate the causes of the stressful situation outside oneself – i.e., to general social problems, negative developments in social context of children and youths, neglectful parents,

or students themselves. Essentially, teachers may turn to anything that helps to neutralise and make psychologically more tolerable the professionally unethical emotional distancing and abandonment of a caring attitude. This dynamic is a known outcome of work overload in service professions (Greenglass and Burke 2003; Maslach and Leiter 1997; Sykes and Matza 1957). A neoliberal discursive space where relevant authorities offer othering narratives concerning pupils who cause teachers stress can act as a solacing presence that legitimates teachers' choice to abandon the most difficult students, as ethnographic studies of classrooms have demonstrated (Laine 2000; Paju 2011; Wexler 1992).

The following examples show how this neoliberal discursive space works at the level of teachers' talk arising from their frustrations of the work. All the texts have been published in AL. The first is a column written by a former journalist of AL who works as a teacher and writes about school life. From her writings, one gets the impression that she is a respected, strict, 'no nonsense' teacher who likes her job and most of her students. In 2018, she wrote[9] about how she had 'had enough' of the school-based actors, including other teachers, not wanting to talk openly about institutional problems. According to her, '[t]he Finnish school is good, but it is also bad. For example, the outrageous behaviour of students is stressing me and many other teachers' (AL 14 October 2018, B19). Then she described a situations where a substitute teacher reminded some students about the school's code of conduct that they had ignored, and another incident where that same teacher had urged a student to

concentrate on the learning task. On both occasions, that teacher received an indecent 'none of your fucking concern, you fucking asshole' (AL 14 October, B19) reply from students. The writer had discussed with her friend 'how it can be possible that students use such abusive language towards their teacher, and should the adults not stop this altogether'. Then she characterises as 'shit' the verbal abuse of the students, which apparently inspired the journal to give her text the somewhat sensational title, 'The shit in the schools must stop - it is time the adults take action.'

The next example is written by the same columnist[10]. It paints a rather sombre picture of schools:

> The school is a controversial place, full of creativity, strong willingness to work, ambition and joy. But then, something so sombre is pulsating there which fills one's mind with horror. There is violence, fear and utter carelessness and brutality. There are pupils, who have lost their sense of what is right, their empathy, their sense of fairness and good conduct. And although these pupils are a minority, sometimes one feels that there are no other pupils than misfits, vandals, thieves, and threatening and violent pupils throwing abusive words out of their mouths.
>
> (AL 8 November 2020, B11)

She then describes how this 'bunch of misfits' have realised that the school can do nothing to stop them, that they can do 'what they will', and that those who complain to the teachers about the misfit's actions will be beaten. According to to the columnist, it is increasingly difficult to promote good discipline because of the social power the misfits have over other students. The problem of achieving peace, as the parents demand, and the schools also desire, is that,

> . . . the misfits have won hegemony, so the road to peace is long. And it will not be reached without effective and rough measures. The trouble is that the measures allowed to the schools are scarce, they do not fulfil today's needs, they can be thrown out of the window.
>
> (AL 8 November 2020: B11)

She next describes the unsatisfactory possibilities teachers have to act in such problematic situations: First, they can have a pedagogic talk with the misbehaving student(s), register that talk in official school files, and 'then wait for the bad behaviour to transform into good behaviour, which does not happen'. The next step is keeping the pupil after school, which just makes these pupils laugh and make rude comments. After that, nothing happens, but neither do teachers, according to the columnist, have any other disciplinary means at their disposal.

Her text offers an eloquent contribution to the discussion in the media and educational profession about ‘restoring peace in schools’ and the purported need for rough disciplinary measureslike the right of headteachers to dismiss students troublesome situations. This campaign has been going on since the 1990s. OAJ has lobbied for it while educational experts and elite bureaucrats have opposed to it. During the writing of this chapter, this issue was under legislative preparation in the Ministry of Education and Culture, and many stories were published in the media where school discipline was taken up as a serious social problem, our example among them.

The next excerpt discusses bullying as a phenomenon in an emotional way. In it, the teacher describes the suffering of the bullied and the insistent wickedness of the bully, concluding that:

> As a teacher I am always startled when people talk about school bullying.[11] People wonder why school bullying cannot be stopped. It is maintained that the teachers do not do enough to eradicate school bullying. But . . . There is no school bullying. There is only bullying. And wickedness. And cruelty.
>
> (AL 8 November 2020, B11)

A noteworthy characteristic of the examples above is how they convey a kind of surprise in front of the unwanted phenomena in schools, as if the behaviour of the

students did not have anything to do with the school and how life in schools is organised and managed. Somehow these ‘lazy’, ‘shit throwing’ and ‘horror provoking’ students have just appeared. Also, there is a notable lack of pedagogic insight. According to the feminist educational philosopher Ruth Jonathan (1997), Western liberal thought does not contain any theory of education. Instead, it implicitly assumes that there is a society composed of autonomously acting adult individuals who just pop up from some unidentified place, as she in an ironizing tone describes this vision (1997: 164). This neglect of the role of the pedagogical production of human capacities which is in fact is the legal responsibility of the schools as public institutions, can be identified in the examples above. Their resonance with the conservative control and blame-the-victim attitude towards children and young people is apparent. In effect, with neoliberalist retrenchment of social services and education, a genuinely pedagogic teaching, and with it a pedagogic or developmental (Watson and Ecken 2019) approach to discipline, has been made very difficult with the result that controlling the students becomes a central issue in school governance.

IN CONCLUSION

Communicating with each other is a basic human activity. Communication, however, always contains power relationships, and the language we use is a politically laden medium that conveys a certain world view and social order (Bourdieu 1994). In this

chapter, we have concentrated on populist talk as a special form of communication applied by people in different positions in the hegemonic battles being waged in society. We have been especially interested in how conservative elite talk functions in these battles where at present neoliberal talk is hegemonic. We have identified especially the strategy of 'othering' of certain unwanted individuals and groups to be an essential discursive mechanism applied in the anti-welfare state strategy of the hegemonic class.

Populism creates many challenges for schools. For example, possibilities to promote othering among colleagues, between teachers and students, and among the students are abundant. They are built into the curriculum, in how different categories of people are talked about, and in the everyday interaction of school life. Extreme alertness and continual critical reflection are needed to avoid othering effects of teaching as it many times happens unconsciously and unwillingly (Alasuutari 2003; Arnesen 2003; Holland 2009).

According to school research, modern schools have strong practices producing both inequality and deviance characteristic of the school institution. The importance of negative emotions in the dynamics of populism should motivate educational politicians to take responsibility for how schools treat students and ask critically to what extent teaching and school governance cultures contain structural injustices that serve to 'other' students who fail to live up to the demands of the institution. The

challenge is, as Morwenna Griffiths (2003) reminds us, to create *justice practicing* schools, where educators have internalised the challenge to ask questions of justice in the everyday practice of teaching. This is because justice feels good.

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[1] In English, Helsinki News.
[2] In English, Morning News.
[3] For example, in the context of an immense media coverage of problems concerning families, schools and child and youth problems around the turn of the millenium (Jallinoja 2006; Vesikansa 2009), Helsingin Sanomat announced that it publishes about one fifth of the letters of the public sent to the editors. 'Keskustelu jatkukoon'/'Let's continue discussing this theme', HS, 31th December, 2001).
[4] This description of the microsociology of school-life is based mostly on Goodlad (1984), Wexler (1992) and on two important Finnish school ethnographies (Laine 2000; Paju 2011).
[5] 'Koulukuria halutaan tiukentaa Helsingissä' (HS 20th October, 1992). This little news feature about a report written by headteachers in Helsinki schools as a proposal to tighten discipline in schools contained the word "school misfits". This word did not, however, appear in the official documents of the school board nor the city council, so it must have been the invention of the journal.
[6] 'OAJ:'Koulun tehtävä ei ole viihdyttää' (Teachers' Union: The task of the school is not to entertain), (HS 27th November, 2017).
[7] 'Opettaja ei ole ollut enää aikoihin auktoriteetti' (The teacher ceased to be an authority for a long time ago), HS 24th October, 2015
[8] 'Koulu ei ole ympäristöstä erillinen saareke' (School is not a detached island from its surroundings). HS 25th October, 2015
[9] 'Sonta kouluissa saa loppua – aikuisten on aika toimia' (Shit at schools should come to an end – it is time for adults to act), AL 14th October, 2018.
[10] 'Vasikoita vedetään turpaan' (Informers are beaten), AL 8th November, 2020

[11] 'Koulu ei ole ympäristöstä erillinen saareke' (School is not a detached island from its surroundings). HS 25th October, 2015.