The Populist Imagination
On the Role of Myth, Storytelling and Imaginary in Politics

Jorinde Seijdel

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'Some may have forgotten, but politics still always is imagination, the capacity to dream collectively, to tell stories; politics still always accommodates a form of mythology. If we want to take populism seriously as a political force, we must above all consider it in the light of these aspects. At the same time, we must ask ourselves the difficult question of why our own politics no longer can appeal to the imagination.' With this provocative statement, guest editor Merijn Oudenampsen sums up the theme of *Open* 20 in his introductory essay. Sociologist / political scientist Oudenampsen (b. 1979, Amsterdam) conducts research on Dutch populism, and among other things is working on a book on populism and the politics of symbols. He is also the editor of *www.flexmens.org*, which reports on 'everything that makes life unpredictable – migration, war, art, crisis, modernity, and the housing market'. Perhaps someone of his generation is precisely the one who should pose this urgent question about politics and the imagination, someone who can go beyond the moral, rational and politically correct standpoints of traditional criticism, and far beyond the protest generation of 1968, in considering and questioning the current populist spectacle.

In the Netherlands, the formation of a new cabinet has been going on for months at the time of this writing, not lastly because of the prominent position that populist Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom (PVV) have acquired in the formation process. However, this issue of *Open* is not specifically about populism in the Netherlands, but also about its current manifestations in the USA (the Tea Party) and Italy (Berlusconi and the Lega Nord), and about the success of left-wing populism in Latin America. The contributions steer clear of the often all-too-easy moral evaluations of populist party programmes, or of passing judgments on populist leaders. Populism is not regarded here as a 'sickness', as *Le Monde* recently opined in a piece on the political situation in the Low Lands, but as a manifestation of the need for a politics that is not merely based on 'public management and a rational assessment of interests' (Oudenampsen). People have a desire for a new political discourse with room for the imaginary and for appealing stories. Not as a denial or simplification of the complex social reality, but as a recognition of its mythical quality. This irrevocably concerns the failure of modern politics, the emptiness of Western democracy, xenophobia, neoliberalism and the role of the media. But above all, this issue of *Open* is a plea for a more imaginative politics that emphasizes the importance of new, 'creative' ways of thinking.

Thus the American sociologist Stephen Duncombe argues for a *dreampolitik*. Politics should be the art of the impossible, says Duncombe, and for this we need tools and methods that inspire people to dream themselves, instead of being subject to the dreams of their leaders. He shows how the artists / activists the Yes Men and Steve Lambert organize 'political acts of imagination' that simultaneously shake people awake and give them an opportunity to momentarily drift off into a dream world. The Italian theorists Franco Berardi and Marco Jacquemet go into Berlusconi's media populism and explain his

success through a historically determined religious-cultural undercurrent, in which the image is divine. Political scientist Jolle Demmers and writer Sameer S. Mehendale analyse how, in the Netherlands, fantasizing about purity and moralizing over culture and citizenship has interacted with the neoliberal market and the media in giving rise to xenophobia.

Yves Citton, literary theorist, pleads the case for new emancipatory myths as a way out of the capitalist system, seen as crisis and not as being in crisis. Rudi Laermans' interview with the Argentinean political theorist Ernesto Laclau, author of *On Populist Reason* (2005) covers Latin American left-wing populism and populism as an inherent dimension of a democratic politics. In the column, British philosopher Nina Power declares that we must again appropriate the concept of 'popularity' as a way of countering the depressing populism we currently are witnessing. In a discussion on *mythopoesis*, the Italian writers' collective Wu Ming critically assesses its activist role in the demonstrations against the G8 summit and the IMF in Genoa in 2001.

Aukje van Rooden, Dutch philosopher, says that the greatest myth of our contemporary politics is the assumption that it can function without a mythological structure. The rise of populist politicians is accommodated by this faulty myth, according to Van Rooden. Sociologist Willem Schinkel contends that populism should not be considered a threat to democracy. In a time of radical depoliticization, populism is valuable as a mnemonic technique, a reminder of the political, states Schinkel.

In the pictorial / written contribution by the graphic design and research bureau Foundland, graphic design is employed as a way of researching the symbolism and media representation of populism and its leaders. In collaboration with anthropologist Lynda Dematteo, Italian graphic designer Luisa Lorenza Corna analyses the visual strategies of the populist movement Lega Nord.

Jorinde Seijdel is an independent writer, editor and lecturer on subjects concerning art and media in our changing society and the public sphere. She is editor-in-chief of *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain* (formerly known as *Open. Cahier on Art & the Public Domain*). In 2010 she published *De waarde van de amateur* [The Value of the Amateur] (Fonds BKVB, Amsterdam), about the rise of the amateur in digital culture and the notion of amateurism in contemporary art and culture. Currently, she is theory tutor at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and Head of the Studium Generale Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. With Open!, she is a partner of the Dutch Art Institute MA Art Praxis in Arnhem.

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