Populism and the Empowering Circulation of Myths

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Yves Citton, author of *Mythocratie. Storytelling et imaginaire de gauche* (2010), analyses the various affective levels that motivate sociopolitical movements and argues that they should not only be recognized but also taken seriously. Against that background it becomes possible to understand current populist developments more clearly, and even to learn from them. By creating new myths that are emancipatory, we can steer the future of our society in a better direction.

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Damned if you do (condone populism)! Damned if you don't (denounce it loud enough)! Between populist slogans and the denunciations of 'populism', it is often hard to see which ones are more distressing. It is impossible not to be extremely worried by the rise of xenophobic, nationalist, racist agendas collected by political analysts under the vague category of 'populism'. Yet, it is equally impossible naïvely to adhere to the elitist contempt for 'the masses' that implicitly fuels the vast majority of today's condemnations of 'populism'. [1]

It is usually in the most mainstream media that one hears the most sanguine denunciations of populism. Political analysts, it seems, enjoy telling the stupid masses how stupid they are, and the stupid masses enjoy being told about their collective stupidity (or rather their neighbours'). So goes the (anti-)populist Punch and Judy show, as if it was a structural feature of the mass media, rather than a corruption of democracy.

If we really want to believe that 'the people, united, will never be defeated', however, we better locate some intelligence brewing in this collective power. Does this collective intelligence merely result from being 'united'? Of course, the strength of an organized movement is superior to the mere sum of its individual parts; but, no truly progressive politics can be built on the assumption of the stupidity of the individual members of the multitude. Rather, as Jacques Rancière has stressed for a number of years, it is the very trademark of progressive (and democratic) politics to hold firm to *the presupposition of the equality of intelligence* among all humans. [2]

How can we then simultaneously claim the principle of equality of intelligence, and account for the fact that equally intelligent voters end up massively subscribing to intellectually disgusting agendas? A first intuitive answer suggests a distinction between *populism*, conceived as a valuable ability to connect with the feelings and perceptions experienced by (large segments of) the people, and *demagogy*, conceived as a ruthless attempt to exploit these feelings and perceptions, to hijack them through the shrewd art of storytelling, only to promote purely self-interested goals. If we want to explore this distinction a little further, I believe we should mobilize an economy of affects and a mythocracy of narratives in order to carve a representation of the political process where both the strength of populism and the dangers of demagogy appear under a more

empowering light.

Affective Importance

Whether people march and chant together in the streets, or whether they nod at the same sentence heard on TV (each viewer separately in his private apartment), a sociopolitical *movement* is made up of people who *move together*. The political question is: what *makes* them move together? What *motivates* them to take the streets or to stay home, to select this demagogue rather than a more 'responsible' candidate in the voting booth? This motivation needs to be analysed on at least four levels.

The first one is the *affective level*. We move because we are affected by impressions coming from the outside world and by the tensions they generate in us, in relation to the needs experienced by our bodily and mental machine. More than three centuries ago, in part III of his *Ethics*, Spinoza attempted to provide a 'geometrical' account for the dynamics of our affective reactions, laying the groundwork for an 'economy of affects' to which many thinkers contributed later on. [3] Since affects merely express *a relation* (of ease / joy, unease / sadness or appetite / desire) between an individual and the environment that surrounds and constitutes him, *an affect can't be wrong*. If you *feel* hungry, you *are* hungry. It may be bad for your health to eat more, you may be wrong in your identification of *what* is lacking, but *the feeling* of hunger becomes a reality as soon as you experience it.

Beyond issues of mere survival (need for food, water, heat), the affective level manifests itself through a perception of degrees of *importance*. Our affects concern and define what is important to us, the things that matter. Here again, we may be dreadfully wrong in identifying what 'really' matters, but we have to cling to the fact that *something* in our given situation matters: something we can not or will not tolerate, something we can not or will not do without. The presupposition of the equality of intelligence, at this basic level, means that we should trust people when they feel, say or show that something is wrong, or that something important is missing.

Whether it comes in the form of analgesic medication, mind-enhancing drugs or 'It doesn't *really* matter' statements, the *denial* of what some people actually feel paves the way to demagogical recuperations. When you tell people they are *wrong* to feel worried about crime, insecurity, losing their income, paying more taxes, hearing their neighbour speak foreign languages or perform strange practices – *you* are wrong: your telling them it is not important will not cause them to stop feeling that it matters. They will go to someone who will (pretend to) listen and provide them with this most basic form of preliminary agreement (and respect): yes, I hear what you feel and I'll try to respond to it (rather than denying your affects). Beyond mere politeness or manipulative role-play, such a response needs to be anchored in a fundamental postulate: in most cases, there is *a good reason* why people feel what they feel – even if we fail to see it up front, and even if we can't account for it with satisfactory explanations.

Epidemiocracy

A long tradition of political thought, where once again Spinoza can be claimed as a landmark, characterized politics as an *interplay of affects*. Only dreamers, we can read at the beginning of the *Tractatus Politicus* (1677), believe politics to be a matter of rational calculation about a nation's best interests: we humans, in most of our daily moves, cannot help but react affectively along the coincidental associations traced by our imagination. While it is supremely valuable to act on the basis of rational understanding (*intellectus*) when we manage to master causal explanations (which should be our highest goal), we are all necessarily tossed around by the coincidental associations of our imagination.

More importantly, this tossing around cannot be understood as an individual phenomenon, but needs to be understood along collective lines. The 'imitation of affects' (*imitatio affectuum*) is the most prevalent mechanism Spinoza referred to when he attempted to geometrize our emotional-social life – paving the way for John Stuart Mill's complaint that 'people like (things) in crowds', for Gabriel Tarde's *Laws of imitation* and for René Girard's 'mimetic desire'. Apart from extremely basic needs (hunger, thirst, etc.), my affects are never merely *my* affects, but always *ours*. My spouse's sadness makes me sad; seeing my neighbour afraid is likely to foster my fears.

We therefore need to study a second layer of motivations, an *epidemic level*, where each of us is moved by a variety of collective movements. This variety often pushes us in contradictory directions, but they always push us 'in numbers'. 'Populist' and 'non-populist' politics alike (whatever the latter might mean!) are fuelled by such contagions, structuring all democracies as *epidemiocracies*.

At this second level, it would be possible to make somewhat stronger claims to show that one could be 'wrong' to feel what one feels. Insofar as our individual lives follow their isolated course, I am likely to be misled by my neighbour's fears: his allergy towards being stung by a bee certainly matters to him, but my adopting his fears causes me unnecessary stress. Yet, in our increasingly interdependent and interwoven world, I am just as likely to be affected by what affects my neighbour, my contemporaries, my fellow-humans. At these two basic levels, therefore, if 'populism' refers to a capacity to connect with people's affects, to hear them, to listen to them, and to provide a response that is perceived as relevant to the importance of the matter, then we should try our best to be as populist as possible. Tyrants, kings, exploiters can show contempt for epidemiocratic affects – at their own risks! Self-proclaimed democrats can't, and shouldn't.

Narrative Structures

Affects, in themselves, appear as unbound energy. Desire may push me towards an object, fear may pull me away from it. But apart from the most simple examples (reflex, instinct), affects only become effective – in pushing us in this or that direction – when they are integrated into a narrative structure. Hunger, lust, envy, commiseration, hope, hate will certainly push me to *act*, but I won't be able to enter into any *specific action* until I can integrate my possible moves within the structure provided by a narrative or a story. From Aristotle's *Poetics* all the way to the 1970s' structuralists, a story has been minimally described as constituted by an initial state of affairs (a 'beginning') evolving (through a 'middle part') into an altered final state (the 'end'). We constantly (although implicitly) refer to narrative structures in order to make sense of our experience. My current (provisionally final) situation makes sense insofar as I can see how it results from previous situations, along transformations that are due partly to my intentional moves, partly to chance encounters. I can only 'act' insofar as I imagine my future possible moves as operating transformations leading to a (provisionally) final state, which I want to reach or to avoid.

It is on this third *narrative level* that affects become integrated into explanations about the past, and into actions for the future. I feel thirst, I remember I have not drunk for a few hours, I can foresee that, if I manage to boil myself some water and throw some dried leaves in it, I will enjoy a nice cup of tea. I hear the government is accumulating huge deficits, I have the experience of balancing my monthly budget, and I fear I will have to pay more taxes. I hear stories about factories closing down in Europe and companies outsourcing to China, and I feel anxiety about my job. I see reports of killings on the TV news, I see pictures of dark-skinned suspects, and I develop fear against immigrants from the South.

The stories we hear generate affects, as much as they are needed to integrate our moves into future paths of action. As it was practically impossible to separate the first 'affective'

layer from the second 'epidemic' layer (since we mostly feel 'in crowds'), similarly, it is practically impossible to separate the two 'epidemic-affective' layers from the third 'narrative' layer. In most of our experiences, *we feel in and through stories*.

It is crucial, however, theoretically to distinguish this third level, because it introduces a much greater distance than the two previous levels between our actual conditions of living and the orientation of our life-experience. While the reality of my affects can never be denied, the connection is much looser between what really causes my affects, on one side, and, on the other how I account for them in my narrative of the past, and how I plan to act upon them in the future. Here again, we should presuppose the equality of intelligence: nobody narrates his experience in totally extravagant terms. Since most of us manage to live most of our lives outside of mental asylums, we do, in most of our moves, manage to connect fairly well (fairly efficiently, fairly 'rationally') to our actual conditions of living. It would therefore be fair to say that there is *a good reason* why people tell themselves (or each other) the stories they tell. And here again, we would be well inspired to give more credit to populist narratives: if they were totally disconnected from reality, people would not buy them.

Yet, there are countless ways to narrate any experience. The framing, the editing, the wording of the narrative are crucial to its meaning. And, as any literary scholar knows, apart from deceivingly simple and uninteresting cases, it is ludicrous to claim that one narrative is 'more true' than another: they can be both equally true, and yet lead the reader in symmetrically opposed directions. Was Antigone merely giving proper burial to her brother, in a private act of care? Or was she threatening the civil order, by not respecting Creon's edict? Each character has his or her 'good reasons' to justify actions that nevertheless head for a violent clash.

Mythical Attractors

Since none of our lives follow an isolated course, since we feel 'in numbers', since, more often than not, 'our' stories are recycled from stories we heard, read, watched, received from someone else, narratives – like affects – must be conceived on a collective basis. They have their own existence outside of our individual subjectivity, they pass through us, temporarily inhabiting us, before moving on, in flows and in permanent metamorphoses. In other words, they have their own epidemiology, their own 'opportunism', like viruses and infections.

At a fourth level, we must consider the collective nature of stories as constituting *political attractors*. Independently of what Antigone herself (had she been a historical figure) could have experienced and narrated, her transformation from an obedient girl to a rebel has become a *myth*, a free-flying story which has managed to attract countless readers' and viewers' attention, providing them with a ready-made narrative structure. Among all the stories that we host (or sometimes generate), some feature the rare property of encapsulating and accounting for a whole block of relations defining a moment of our experience. Such narratives *attract* us – like a potential sexual partner attracts our gaze, like the light attracts the insect, like a pleasant melody catches our ear, or like a tasty dish pleases our palate. They *make sense*.

Sociopolitical life has always been maddeningly complex: the geometry of collective affects is bound to thwart any computing capability. The only way to make (some) sense out of this chaos, today as yesterday, is to resort to myths. Rational calculation of our 'objective' limitations and interests helps us make certain types of decisions (for example, how many barrels of crude oil can be drawn, from which countries, for how long, at what price?). But even if we stick to physical data and predictions, the carpet is very soon pulled from under our feet (how much nuisance will be produced in terms of greenhouse effects by the consumption of that amount of oil?). When human affects, tastes, decisions are brought into the picture, we have no choice but to resort to myths to understand our past, interpret

our present and imagine our future. Like it or not, myths remain our best bet to orientate our development, by mobilizing the power of political attractors.[4]

Towards an Empowering Circulation of Myths

We are now in a position to revisit the question-accusation of 'populism', and to understand more precisely where it is to be located within our four layers of political orientation. I will summarize my conclusions in four general theses, which I will use briefly to address some of the concrete issues most commonly associated with populism.1. *Populist discourses relay social pressures and tensions that are accurately perceived (but insufficiently articulated) by large segments of the multitude*. The common view expressed by traditional political analysts can be validated on at least one point: populism hijacks 'real' issues, to which it offers simplistic solutions, and for which more complex explanations need to be provided.

Example: even if populist 'tough-on-crime' policies are misled and misleading, people are right to feel that their modes of life are increasingly under threat. It would only be half-wise to remind them that no previous generation has led a more (materially) 'secure' living than ours (in the rich Western countries): both the generating causes of 'crime' and its perception express the growing fragility of our individual forms of life. As we find ourselves increasingly interdependent, as our growing common power induces a growing awareness of our individual powerlessness, we (rightly) feel more 'exposed', and we are (logically) attracted to politics of fear. It is therefore accurate to portray populism as providing bad solutions to real problems – and to call for a better (less simplistic) rearticulation of the (complex) issues at stake.2. *It is not sufficient to attack populist myths with accurate facts and rational arguments: (reactionary) myths need to be overcome by (emancipatory) myths*. Since human agency necessarily relies on narrative structures, and since political life necessarily relies on mythical attractors, those who are unhappy with populist mystifications should see it as their main task to substitute bad myths with better (more attractive) myths.

Example: the anti-tax fanaticism on which countless populist movements have ridden over the last 30 years (from Margaret Thatcher to the current Tea Party) has been fuelled by countless stories of welfare queens, tax evaders, blood-sucked entrepreneurs and arrogant bureaucrats. Even if such stories are generally mythical and mystifying, 'people' are right, here again, to regard the cumbersome, sometimes obsolete and often oppressive machinery of the state with the greatest suspicion. A vicious circle has simultaneously increased the services expected from public institutions, reduced their relative funding and, as a consequence, proven they were unable properly to do their job.

Populist anti-state feelings need to be re-appropriated and reoriented by new myths expressing our growing need to develop common institutions capable of providing the high levels of care we have been led to expect. The perceived failure of the privatization of the British railroad system, the need for universal health care coverage in the USA, the call for an unconditional guaranteed income among European Greens, the demand for the enforcement of environmental standards worldwide may all (partly) rely on myths: all the same, they all sketch stories paving the way for new modes of taxation, new promotions of common goods, new forms of collective agency – well beyond the bureaucratic structures of the existing (national) state. But we need myths to fight myths, if we are to reshape the political agenda.3. *In order to distinguish emancipatory myths from reactionary ones, it is less important to measure how 'mythical' they are than to consider in which direction they push our collective development*. If demagogical agendas need to be denounced, it is not because they rely on myths (simplifications, exaggerations, fictions), but because they mobilize *bad* myths, that is, political attractors that promote policies resulting in a decrease of our collective agency, either due to the suicidal nature of their injunctions, or due to the injustice they impose on some of us.

Example: even if the most vocal denunciations of populism tend to come from those who speak in the name of the 'rational' calculation of our best interests (orthodox economists and other expert engineers of market-based mechanisms), I would cite the hegemonic reference to GDP growth as a typical case of populism. For understandable reasons, we all want to have more means at our disposal. Hence, we are fundamentally right to hope for an increase in our Gross Domestic Product. The problem with using GDP growth as the final word of any political argument is not that it is mythical in nature. Of course, it relies on a tale, on a fantasy we tell ourselves ('Accumulate more material means and you will be happier!').

The question, however, is not to decide how realistic or unrealistic this tale happens to be. GDP growth is the best example of what Bruno Latour calls a 'factish': the mixture of a ***fact*** (it is calculated by scientific procedures autonomous from our subjectivity) and a ***fetish*** (its efficiency relies on the collective agency made possible by our believing in it).[5] The problem with the current hegemony of GDP growth is not that it refers to a myth, but that it acts more and more as a ***bad*** myth: its short-term bias pushes mankind in productivist and consumerist directions that threaten to ruin the very basis of our survival on this planet. It is demagogical insofar as it promises people to fill their pockets with wealth, while it simultaneously pulls the (environmental, social and mental) rug from under their feet[4].
Emancipatory myths best emerge from a media structure that favours a bottom-up circulation of myths, fuelled by a well-rounded circulation of information and knowledge.
The elitist bias disqualifying the beliefs of the masses in the name of a superior rationality to be cultivated by decision-makers could easily be replaced by an equally elitist bias asking 'intellectuals' to provide the people with 'good' myths. Against such a temptation, it may be useful to remind ourselves of the collective nature of myths, which rarely emanate from individuals, but circulate within a (sub) culture in a truly ***endemic*** fashion. Even if the determination of what constitutes a 'good' or a 'bad' myth is bound to be conflictual, since the evaluation of the direction in which it pushes us presupposes the determination of goals and values which constitute the very stuff (and battleground) of politics, one could propose a structural criteria to evaluate the formation of (populist and demagogical) myths.

Demagogy can be described as a ***top-down*** action, by which a (would-be) leader mobilizes powerful media channels and networks – from the speaker's place on the Greek agora to the primetime spot on the nightly TV news – in order to spread a myth within a population. By contrast, one could expect emancipating myths to emerge ***bottom-up*** from within a population, endemically. Unsurprisingly, the most important and basic political struggle concerns the structure of the mediasphere: demagogy may be the inevitable companion of a highly centralized, highly verticalized, highly monopolized structure (illustrated nowadays by Berlusconi's Italy). Those who really want to fight demagogy would therefore be well-inspired to do their best to promote a mediasphere in which myths can circulate bottom-up, from grassroots activists (right and left), coalescing from below into wider and wider movements. Obviously, the result of such a coalescence of myths will be a function of the quality of the information and knowledge circulating at all levels of this mediasphere.

Example: it is easy (and fashionable) to mock and discredit the promotion of diversity, cultural hybridization and creolization as hollow and hypocritical injunctions (while equality would often be a more serious demand). Yet, in a historical moment when institutional suspicion, violent rejection and outright hate target so many (legal or illegal) immigrants, it is extremely important to do everything we can to favour the bottom-up communication of stories among the various sectors of our increasingly mixed populations. For one Roma rapist instantaneously portrayed on all of Berlusconi's channels, how many un-broadcasted stories of humane gestures, personal assistance, fruitful collaborations, interdependence, solidarity, active resistance, community of fate uniting newcomers and past settlers? Creolization is no less a myth than ethnic purity, but it requires the invention of new (transversal) channels of communication in order to gather its attractive momentum.

Outcome / Coming-Out

In the fall of 2008, as globally coordinated national states were bending over and backwards to 'save the banks' (and global capitalism), reaching deep in pockets that had previously been looted by the increasingly arrogant greed of the financial elite, we cruelly lacked a truly populist movement, which could have united the passionate rejections of financial deregulation, the affective denunciation of the outrageous profits made by traders and CEOs, and the rampant disgust towards the profound absurdity of a system piling stress upon stress, and threat upon threat. As 2010 exacerbates old financial instabilities with new sociopolitical crises, Etienne Balibar has good reasons to write: 'We need something like *a European populism*, a simultaneous movement or a peaceful insurrection of popular masses who will be voicing their anger as victims of the crisis against its authors and beneficiaries, and calling for a control "from below" over the secret bargaining and occult deals made by markets, banks, and States.' [6]

Such a peaceful insurrection, if it is to take place, will certainly need us collectively to invent new channels of communication, to learn to listen and relay new stories, to activate and fuel new mythical attractors. The capitalist system is not 'in' crisis: it *is* a crisis. As such, it calls for an outcome – both a coming-out and an exit strategy. Populism (in its traditional right-wing as well as in its yet-to-be reinvented left-wing flavour) paves the way for something else to come out of capitalism. It is up to us to let it harden into a fascistic horror – or to help new emancipatory shapes emerge from its meltdown.

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Footnotes

1. Exceptions must be made, of course, in particular for Ernesto Laclau's book, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005).
2. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) and *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
3. For more on this, see Yves Citton and Frédéric Lordon, *Spinoza et les sciences sociales. De la puissance de la multitude à l'économie politique des affects* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2008/republished in paperback in 2010).
4. For more on this, see Yves Citton, *Mythocratie. Storytelling et imaginaire de gauche* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2010).
5. See Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA / London: Harvard University Press, 1999).
6. Etienne Balibar, 'Europe: Final Crisis ?', text published on the Internet on 22 May 2010. See also Balibar's reflections on Laclau's essay on populism 'Populisme et politique: le retour du contrat', in: *La proposition de l'égaliberté* (Paris: PUF, 2010).

Tags

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