Political Populism
Speaking to the Imagination

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Contrary to what many people might think, politics involves imagination, storytelling and the creation of myths. According to sociologist Merijn Oudenampsen, guest editor of this issue, recognizing this truth is absolutely essential if we are to understand and learn from populism as a growing political force.

This symbolic day and this symbolic place were seized upon this year by the right-wing populist talk show host Glenn Beck, epigone of the Tea Party movement, in order to organize an event around the slogan 'Restoring Honor'. The other Tea Party leader, Sarah Palin, was equally in on the proceedings. The idea, according to Beck during his show, was to 'claim' the civil rights movement – in other words, to give it a new political meaning, so that the Tea Party movement could tread in King's footsteps and claim the symbolic power and democratic legitimacy of this moment for its own agenda. Here we are dealing with a fascinating politics of rewriting history that, as evidenced by the many analyses of the civil rights movement made by Glenn Beck in his talk show (salient detail: he has a degree in history), is conducted very consciously.

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King's dream itself was already such an operation. Of course, it was the imagination of a new society, in which the systematic discrimination against the Afro-American population would be undone, but this dream did not stand on its own. Martin Luther King placed his dream in the American dream, referring to the ideals of equality in the American constitution. According to King, these ideals could only be realized by constructing a welfare state that, in the sphere of education, housing and jobs, would make equality for the black population more than a dead letter. 'I have a dream' was therefore a left-wing re-articulation of the American dream, in which, to use the terms of semiotics, the signifier 'freedom' was coupled with the signified 'expansion of the welfare state'. The dream of the Tea Party movement claims the same word as did the March on Washington – freedom – but imbues it with a series of opposite associations: anti-government, anti-tax and anti-Islam. By placing his own dream in King's dream, Glenn Beck overwrites it with his own meanings and thus erases the old ones.

Like the Hollywood blockbuster *Inception*, in which Leonardo di Caprio descends layer by layer, dream by dream, into human subconsciousness in order to plant an artificially created dream, what we have here is a dream within a dream within a dream, whereby one dream is used to give another a new meaning. It is a fight for the imaginary of American society, in which a populist right-wing campaign has set itself the goal of rendering harmless a historical past of left-wing protest, and of appropriating its symbolic power.

The significance of this episode extends beyond the polarized relations in the USA. Glenn Beck's speech symbolizes a sweeping reversal of roles that has taken place in many Western societies. Appealing to the imagination was an essential characteristic of the cycle of protest movements in the 1960s and 1970s – not for nothing 'All power to the imagination!' is still the most famous slogan of the May '68 revolt in Paris. At the time, it signified a form of liberation: the possibility of a radically different society, the casting off of existing, rigid role patterns, the breaking open of old identities: race, sex, class, etcetera. People imagined a new future in order to annihilate the past: *Cours camarade, le vieux monde est derrière toi* (Run comrade, the old world is behind you), another of those slogans from '68. Nowadays right-wing populist movements – Geert Wilders' PVV in the Netherlands, the Lega Nord in Italy, or the Tea Party movement in the USA, to name but a few – are storming the political stage and in turn enlist the imagination to fight the status quo. They do so in an opposite direction: instead of a new future, they imagine an idealized past. The Tea Party movement, for example, dons historical costumes from the time of the Boston tea party, and the Lega Nord organizes large-scale events with knights in armour and the accompanying heraldry; Geert Wilders steps into a rowboat in his campaign film and floats through a pastoral Dutch polder landscape with the indispensable windmill in the background. Right-wing populism, instead of dismantling existing role patterns and identities, is about the accentuation of these categories by placing the norm on a pedestal, which results from the appeal to 'ordinary people', or the stereotypical femininity of a hockey mom and the viral masculinity of a Berlusconi, or the theme of autochthon versus immigrant.

The remarkable aspect of the current situation is that people on the left of the political spectrum react to this new politics of the imagination by calling for rationality and realism. It is an illustration of the analysis Stephen Duncombe put forward earlier in his book *Dream*: the ideological inheritors of the May '68 protest slogan of 'Take your desires for reality' are now counselling its reversal: take reality for your desires. The left and right have 'switched roles: the right taking on the mantle of radicalism and progressives waving the flag of conservatism'. [1]

As the Martin Luther King example shows, these politics of imagination and storytelling are not limited to populism; these can be found to a greater or lesser degree in almost all historical political movements. However, the use of imagination and storytelling is an essential ingredient in populist politics. After all, without imagination, it cannot appeal to the people – a prerequisite for populism, as we shall presently see.

Populism: Imagining the People

Although in some countries almost the entire political game revolves around the threat of right-wing populism, until now very few people seem to take that same populism seriously as a political force. This comes to the fore most clearly in the (hardly productive) disqualification of populism as demagogy, simplism, gut politics and the like. In many cases, the word 'populist' is used as a simple insult, which sooner shows a lack of intelligence of those who use it than of those who are accused of it; after all, it does not produce much more than moral self-gratification. Another curious commonplace regarding populism is that it simply means 'the people's wish is our command', or rather, a sort of direct (gut) democracy. Political elites in particular comment on populism in this condescending manner. This accusation is first of all remarkable because it makes abundantly clear what the established parties' notion of democracy is: you vote, we rule. Secretly, of course, it is no news that democracy always means guided democracy;[2] it is only somewhat naïve to make this explicit in the expectation that it will result in a change of electoral fortunes. It is also remarkable in that the populists' claim that they speak for the people is swallowed uncritically – which allows populists to present themselves as the democratic opposition and to sideline the political establishment as alienated from ordinary people. This commonplace notion of populism prevents us from seeing what we are discussing in this text: the role of imagination and storytelling in populist politics.

There are many different interpretations of the concept of populism. The prevailing academic consensus is that it is an extremely intangible phenomenon that is difficult to define. Isaiah Berlin once said that populism has a Cinderella complex, there is a shoe in the form of populism, but no foot to fit it. As the label of populism is bandied about so often, I would think it more realistic to turn this statement around: there is a wealth of populist feet, in all sorts of shapes and sizes; however, there is no populist shoe with a fit that can accommodate this diversity. Nonetheless, with a bit of effort one can draw a minimal consensus from the cacophony of scholarly observations on populism, namely that populism is a politics that speaks in name of the people and opposes itself to the establishment. Regarding the so-called 'people', however, there is something special going on with populism: the term is never equivalent to the entire political community, there are always groups that are excluded from it – starting with the establishment, of course. This splitting up of the political community into different components is precisely where the essence of populism lies, according to Ernesto Laclau in his book *On Populist Reason*: 'An institutional discourse is one that attempts to make the limits of the discursive formation coincide with the limits of the community. …' The opposite takes place in the case of populism: a frontier of exclusion divides society in two camps. The 'people', in that case, is something less than the totality of the members of the community: it is a partial component which nevertheless aspires to be conceived as the only legitimate totality.'[3]

Let's look at a recent example. In the American elections of 2008, we witnessed two different ways of appealing to the people. Barack Obama's campaign was an example of institutional discourse. In his speeches he appealed to the entire American population, with the American dream as unifying symbol. On his website you could obtain stickers: 'Latinos for Obama', 'Gays for Obama', 'Dog Owners for Obama', 'Labor for Obama', 'Farmers for Obama' – you name it, there was a sticker for it, or a Facebook group. On the other side of the political spectrum, the Republicans John McCain and Sarah Palin also appealed to the American people, but in a radically different manner. They spoke of 'the real America' ('small town America', 'the heartland' and 'the silent majority' are comparable concepts), setting it against the unreal America, that of the 'liberal elite'. We find the same discourse in the Tea Party movement. Here we see the populist logic, whereby one component – the pure, unspoiled rural or suburban America – becomes a symbol that serves as a substitute for America as a whole. The logical conclusion of this type of discourse is that certain components of the community are excluded from 'the people', and hence from political legitimacy.

In the Netherlands, the same typically populist operation takes place with an appeal to virtual categories such as *Jan met de pet* (the average Joe), 'ordinary people', or 'the hard-working Dutch'. These are symbolic elements that function as a substitute for a political community as such and stand in opposition to other elements (for example, the estranged left-wing elite and Moslem immigrants or welfare recipients and profiteers) who are excluded from political legitimacy. An illustration of these 'front dynamics' in Dutch populism is the speech given by Geert Wilders during the debate on the national budget for 2009, in which he declares that the Netherlands under prime minister Balkenende is a 'state of two Netherlands', that of the subsidy-guzzling elite, and of the hard-working ordinary people who are forced to swallow the consequences of the elite's failing multicultural policy: 'The Balkenende state is a state of two Netherlands. … On the one side is our elite with their so-called ideals. A multicultural society, outrageously high taxes, the insane climate hysteria, the unstoppable Islamisation, a Brussels super state and senseless foreign aid. … This is the left-wing canal belt and their sticky friends. The other Netherlands, my Netherlands, consists of the people who have to pay the bill. Literally and figuratively. Who are robbed and threatened. Who are weighed down by the harassment of street terrorists, burdened by high taxes and who yearn for a social Netherlands. These are the people who have built up our country.' [4]

A front divides society into two camps: the Netherlands of the left-wing elite and that of the 'ordinary' taxpaying citizens, the people. It is the 'plebs' – a relatively excluded and undervalued part of the community – that are declared to be the only legitimate 'populus'. The front that is produced between the elite and the people through this technique is what Laclau calls the 'internal frontier'.

This last concept shows an interesting similarity with the idea of the 'democratic gap' between citizens and representative politics. It is a view often heard: the widening confidence gap between people and the political system is the reason for the rise of populism. However, Laclau points to an opposite causal relation: populism is not so much an expression of this gap, but actually aims at producing it. Geert Wilders, for example, misses no opportunity to show that he is not one of the government types in the Hague with their backroom political talk and mores, while at the same time continually hammering away at how far the reality in which politicians and administrators live is removed from the 'reality on the streets', whatever that might be.

If we follow Laclau's reasoning further, the democratic gap, by definition, can never definitively be closed. In his view, society is not 'totalizable': it cannot be neatly summed up in universal common denominators or simplified into a series of social classes with corresponding needs and demands: in fact, there is no such thing as ***the*** society, he claims, in an unexpected variation on Thatcher's famous slogan. Consequently, society can never be represented in its entirety. So there are always political demands from the population –

democratic demands, says Laclau – that fall outside the boat, that are not politically represented, with political dissatisfaction as the result. As long as this dissatisfaction exists in separate pockets – as long as it can be handled 'differentially', to use Laclau's term – everything goes smoothly. In other words, as long as the democratic gap is comprised of a lot of different, 'singular' gaps that are separate from one another, this dissatisfaction cannot crystallize. As long as people's dissatisfaction about traffic jams does not mix with their dissatisfaction about derelict neighbourhoods, or dissatisfaction about bureaucratization is separate from that about crime, political dissatisfaction is divided throughout the society but finds no crystallization point. However, as soon as a series of demands remains unfulfilled and a connection is created between these demands – what Laclau calls the 'chain of equivalence' – through a political discourse, then it can happen that one of the demands appoints itself as a symbol for all of the other unfulfilled demands. This is the populist moment in Laclau's theory. Thus populism revolves around the transformation of singular democratic gaps into one collective gap, a crystallization point of political dissatisfaction.

One example of this is the way in which the theme of integration in the Netherlands is charged with very different meanings as a symbol of a larger dissatisfaction with politics: failing government bureaucracy, a welfare state that no longer functions for 'ordinary people' but only for foreigners and the left-wing cultural elite, concerns about crime and a judicial process that is 'too soft', the problems in the depressed districts and with urban renewal, etcetera. In many cases, these are storylines that do not have anything to do with integration per se, but do resonate with its theme. The populist technique revolves around the 'charging' of a person or an issue with such symbolic connotations, bringing together different storylines around a face or a slogan. Ambiguous symbols are used for this purpose, the empty signifiers; the notion of 'freedom' we came across earlier with Martin Luther King and Glenn Beck is a good example: it is such a flexible concept that it can be articulated for both the expansion and reduction of government. The so-called vagueness of the populist discourse is therefore not an indication of its underdevelopment. Precisely because of its vagueness, populism can be a very advanced technique for binding together an extremely heterogeneous electorate with very heterogeneous demands.

What we can conclude from a reading of Laclau's work is that populism is not so much about giving voice to the will of the people – for that remains largely a virtual concept. It is more about giving *form* to 'the people' and the will of the people, and about constructing an internal frontier, through the creation of images and the telling of stories: first of all, through negative identification, by placing certain groups out of the community, the so-called 'constitutive outside'. 'The people' take form by the disqualification of certain groups, by determining what they are *not*. Being opposed to the liberal elite, or the 'estranged elite', and to the Other (the enemy) – in the Dutch case usually Moslems (terrorists), or immigrants – provides an identity for an otherwise formless and very heterogeneous electorate that shares no clear ideology or policy preference in the positive sense. Moreover, populism's symbolic politics in the positive sense revolves around the appropriation and politicization of cultural symbols that might be able to express this limited idea of 'the people'. This brings us back to the beginning of this article, the politicization of the Boston tea party in order to reduce the essence of America to an anti-tax and anti-government sentiment.

Is the electorate so uncritical and malleable that it will swallow everything that it is offered from the political arena? Of course not. This is a reciprocal relation; as long as the images are good enough, as long as people recognize themselves in the rhetorical figures presented to them – the average Joe, the hard-working, taxpaying, ordinary people – then the chance that they will adopt the corresponding worldview is greater. This is a process of ideological manipulation that the French philosopher Althusser once described as interpellation. [5] Althusser's famous example is a police officer who yells on the street, 'Hey, you there!' Those who feel personally addressed acknowledge the police officer's

authority. According to Althusser, the same process takes place during people's ideological formation: they feel personally appealed to, addressed by an ideological exposition that they make their own. Interpellation is an ideological recruiting process, whereby images and storylines are used to fit people's everyday world into certain political interpretive frameworks by describing concrete, actually existing situations.

The Role of Myths

At the beginning of this article, I referred to the way in which the imaginary of American society – based on cultural symbols such as the Boston tea party or the American dream – becomes the subject of political struggle. This is in line with Claude Lefort's proposition that every society creates an imaginary image of itself, and that – in a democratic society – this self-image is the subject of continuous conflict. Lefort draws this conclusion from a reading of *Il Principe* by Niccoló Machiavelli (1469-1527). In this famous book, in which Machiavelli sets out the power tactics and strategies that a political ruler of his day ought to have at his disposal, he states that one of the most important functions of the prince lies in his reflective capacity: providing society with an image of its identity. In the monarchies of that time, the prince literally embodied power and, as such, held up to society a unitary self-image, a mirror. In democracy, says Lefort, this imaginary place of power is empty, a terrain of continual conflict. [6] A society stages itself, imagines itself and understands itself by way of the conflict in the political domain. In a certain sense, therefore, we should understand politics as a theatre play, a form of telling stories about the identity of a society. In a monarchy, by definition, there was only one performer; nowadays, a number of politicians fight over who can tell the best story on the political stage.

The thinker who placed the greatest emphasis on the importance of this kind of story for political practice was the French syndicalist Georges Sorel, who published his famous *Reflexions sur la Violence* in 1906. The most interesting theme in this book is the mobilizing power of social myths. According to Sorel, these can surface as national myths, such as the legend of the French Revolution, or as myths of particular political movements, such as the leftist myth of the inevitable collapse of capitalism. Myths must not be judged on their sense of reality, but on their effectiveness in bringing together a populace that otherwise is divided and heterogeneous. The myth of the American dream has a comparable function. Sorel himself argued for the myth of the general strike, which he described as 'a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by Socialism against modern society'. [7] With this emphasis on irrationality, he broke with the prevailing idea in Marxism that people are politically formed by their material circumstances and their rational consciousness of that fact (if people did not understand their own interests, that was due to a form of false class consciousness, on which few words were wasted). Myths, says Sorel, 'enclose with them all the strongest inclinations of a people, of a party or of a class'. [8] Just as with Laclau's populism, Sorel's myths served to construct an internal frontier, in order to advance socialism's 'war against modern society' and to further broaden the gap between workers and capitalists. We therefore can consider Sorel one of the founding fathers of modern populism.

The image that Rita Verdonk used to launch her political party, Trots op Nederland (Proud of the Netherlands).

Election poster promoting Hendrikus Colijn, a conservative politician of the 1920s and '30s; the helmsman will have to steer 'the ship of state' through the pre-war crisis.

Sorel's writings would have a very important influence on both the left and the right. At the time of his burial, both the Soviet Union and fascist Italy offered to pay for a mausoleum. One of the most famous of Sorel's readers was Benito Mussolini, who claimed: 'I owe most to Georges Sorel. This master of syndicalism by his rough theories of

revolutionary tactics has contributed most to form the discipline, energy and power of the fascist cohorts.' [9]

Mussolini used the idea of the Sorelian myth for his own project, that of building fascism out of the mythical re-enactment of the Roman Empire. At the same time, on the other side of the political spectrum, we find another famous reader of Sorel's, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. He was imprisoned under Mussolini's regime, at which time he wrote his famous Q*uaderni del Carcere* (Prison Notebooks). One of its most important sections, called 'The Modern Prince', is a reflection on Machiavelli, in which he remarks that the figure of the prince in the work of Machiavelli must be understood as a mythical symbol: 'Machiavelli's Prince could be studied as a historical example of the Sorelian myth, of a political ideology expressed by the creation of concrete phantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organize its collective will.'[10]

And so we arrive at the description of the contemporary political leader as a myth, a 'body of images capable of evoking instinctively … all the strongest inclinations of a people, of a party, of a class'. The prince in Machiavelli's classic work thus becomes a form of branding, which focuses on the irrational passions of the population with the help of mythic images. Think of Obama as the embodiment of the American dream, of the hope of redemption; Putin as the embodiment of the Russian bear; Berlusconi as the ultimate mediacrat and symbol of Italy's irrepressible virility, and so forth. The figure of Wilders can also be studied as an instance of the Sorelian myth. The Dutch foundational myth has its origins in the Netherland's eternal struggle with water. Creating the polders from the water; the flooding of the land as a line of defence under William of Orange; the polder model, inspired by the culture of consensus arising from the district water boards; the flooding of 1953; the colonial past of the Dutch East India Company – all of these are vital elements of the Dutch national identity. We recognize some of this symbolic material in Hendrikus Colijn, an authoritarian politician from the 1930s, and in today's Rita Verdonk. Here, the sea symbolizes danger in a classic manner and the ship is the nation, on which the skipper looks to the horizon and steers the people to safety. Wilders makes his appeal to the mythical past in his political promotion films, where in two films he is portrayed on a beach, one time as an indomitable figure facing a dangerous surf, peering towards the horizon, with the turbulent sea symbolizing danger from the outside (most likely the tsunami of Islamization) and another time standing beside a lighthouse (a reference to rescue and his capacity for orientation), or sitting in a rowboat in a pastoral polder landscape, where he cheerfully announces he is rowing against the current. At the end of one of the films, a seagull flying overhead suddenly transforms into the party logo, the seagull of the PVV, symbol of the freedom for which the PVV stands. It looks like a children's exercise for the recognition of visual metaphors.

How do we deal with these mythological aspects of politics? The Italian writers' collective Wu Ming, which has applied itself to the development of contra-myths, makes a useful distinction between 'technified' myths *à la* Leni Riefenstahl, which lull people to sleep, and authentic myths, which leave people's critical reasoning power intact. Their own contribution to this issue shows that the latter requires a continual questioning of the self.

In conclusion, this article is not really so much about making a moral judgment. Nor is it a plea for a return to a politics that limits itself to rationality, simply because we would feel more comfortable with that. As the average psychologist knows – but politicians, scholars and the media still do not seem to comprehend – man is far from being a rationally thinking creature. What the protest generation of 1968 was aware of, what the current populist movements are also thoroughly aware of, is that politics involves more than public management and a rational assessment of interests. Some may have forgotten, but politics still involves imagination, the capacity to dream collectively, to tell stories; politics still contains 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 appeal to the imagination.

(We row against the current' is the message Geert Wilders conveys in this PVV campaign commercial.

Election poster promoting Hendrikus Colijn, a conservative politician of the 1920s and '30s; the helmsman will have to steer 'the ship of state' through the pre-war crisis.

The image that Rita Verdonk used to launch her political party, Trots op Nederland (Proud of the Netherlands).

An example of the PVV's use of symbolic imagery: a lighthouse figures prominently in this campaign commercial for the European elections of 2009.

In one campaign commercial, a seagull flying overhead morphs into the logo of the PVV, symbolizing the 'freedom' (***vrijheid***) referenced in the name of the party.)

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Footnotes

1. Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: New Press, 2007).
2. See Jacques Ranciere, *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2007).
3. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 81.
4. The speech can be found on the website of the PVV: http://www.pvv.nl.
5. Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in: *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* (New York/London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 121-176.
6. Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, translated by David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).
7. Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999/1908), 118.
8. Ibid., 115.
9. Quoted in the introduction of *Reflections on Violence* by Georges Sorel, ibid.
10. Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 126.

Tags

Activism, Democracy