

Populism as Fundamentalism: A Psychodynamic Reading of the Phenomenon

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Abstract

Today, the most disturbing political question seems to be of a psychodynamic nature: what occupies the minds of individuals and society in general, other than a wealth of contradictions and a great emptiness? The accumulation of insensitivity and cruelty towards the world and towards oneself seems to be shaping up as the biggest problem facing this new century.

To this end, the present study lays out an innovative psychodynamic reading of the political and cultural attitude of populism. The phenomenon is herein analyzed using a psychodynamic perspective, which will enable us to deduce just how such an orientation, in its phenomenological aspects, lends itself to fundamentalist connotations typical of saturated thought. If it can be said that the individual often acts in a manner that seeks to consciously utilize reason and emotion through the intermediary of the Ego, the masses tend to act impulsively and without any conscious awareness of their actions, on the basis of unmediated instinctual drives. Understanding the unconscious dynamics that underlie the attitudes and behaviors which the general population assumes in the face of crises, social emergencies, diversity, economics, and ecology is an essential step towards developing sustainable, concrete solutions at the psychological, social, and political levels, precisely by taking as a starting point a profound awareness of the psychodynamic mechanisms which dictate the orientation of the perception of reality and the resulting decision-making process.

Key words: *Fundamentalism; Populism; Groups; Psychodynamics; Saturated Thought*

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Introduction

Historical facts are essentially facts of the psyche, which, in their own turn, are configured on the basis of their historical and cultural roots, in a reciprocally influential manner. Every single political situation is an expression of a parallel psychological problem present in millions of individual minds. The goal of comprehending the, largely unconscious, motivations behind, and causes of, these situations, is to propose sustainable solutions to these problems, and to put into practice more efficacious political models. However, such a proposal encounters a certain amount of resistance in the form of the fear that many face when it comes to investigating the unconscious dimension of one's own psycho-social existence. In this respect, it is necessary to overcome this difficulty in order to try to comprehend the unconscious mental representations that are present in each and every individual, in order to prevent said representations from dictating our lives, and rendering us mere playthings in the hands of economics, politics, and fate (Winnicott, 1968; Jung, 1975, 1916).

In the final analysis, it is therefore necessary to consider the individual both as a single entity and as a member of the community. In its original formulation, the term 'community' – from the latin '*cum-munus*' – meant 'a common gift/privilege, obligation, or task'; in the present age, however, the term seems to resemble more a '*cum-moenia*', or 'common wall', as today we seem to get together in order to build walls, and configure our communal reality on the basis of demonizing the other, and defining them as the enemy. In the following, we intend to demonstrate how this phenomenon is the result of an impoverishment of both semiotic capital and the resulting social capital, taken as a dysfunctional reaction to identity anxiety which prevents us, in times of crisis, from conceiving both our own proper place and the future as common, universal projects.

The world is expanding, and the various continents belong to all of humanity; by denying this reality, we are trying to reduce the world first to national, and then regional realities, realities which it seems to us to have rediscovered, in order to compensate for the hidden panic that globalization has instilled in us; but quite often, these realities are fictions invented by our own fears (Zoja, 2009; Pergola 2010a, 2010b; Sideli, et al., 2018).

The foregoing was already elaborated by Jung back in 1931, when the latter, in addition to bringing the possible problems and relative solutions back into the psychological sphere, identified the soul as the origin of such unresolved difficulties. Such a concept of the 'soul' is defined, by and large, by the greater uterus of the cultural atmosphere in which it was conceived, in which it gestated, and in which it grew, a culture defined in terms of symbolic universes.

The Phenomenology of Populism

Hyper-modernity tends to compress and exert a certain pressure on both external events and internal mental processes; the mind suffocates beneath this sense of urgency, and, as a result, the individual who is suffocating becomes preoccupied with the short-term, narrow-minded, immediate future of taking their next breath. This necessity creates a situation in which problems that require a wider, more inclusive and expansive ideological and cultural approach end up being negated, separated from the subject, and attributed to an adversary. Escape mechanisms and projections end up being created, which correspond to the psychopathological models known as: manic flight and paranoid projections. Furthermore, these mechanisms tend to feed on themselves: as the complexities being faced grow, our need to escape from said complexities grows as well, in the interest of simplifying conflicts, by presenting them as clashes between distant adversaries (Zoja, 2009; Jung, 1917-1943). We experience our

relationship with both our internal world and the world outside in terms of 'demonizing the other and defining them as the enemy'.

Previously there existed totalitarian regimes, which managed to establish themselves as a reaction in the wake of an anxiety-provoking and destabilizing socioeconomic crisis. The people would call forth a leader who promised a rapid, authoritarian solution to the said crisis. The foundation on which the masses are based in a totalitarian regime is the identification of said masses with their leader: the collective might well be compared to cement, in that it is firmly united and incapable of being broken up by, or subjected to critical thought. The individual ends up annihilated and in a state of perpetual subservience vis-à-vis the supreme leader. This said subordination has been made possible by the leader, who provides the subordinates, or subjects, with security and protection in exchange for the sacrifice of the critical individuality of the members of said society (Mannino & Giunta, 2015; Mannino et al., 2015; Lo Verso, 2012). The request of the subjects, on the other hand, is to be reassured. They accept the infatuated, mad gaze of the leader as the latter delivers his speeches due to the fact that they have been hypnotized and rendered incapable of questioning said leader. By adhering to disguised idealistic causes (race, history, party, etc.) with which the masses can identify, individuality and diversity end up being renounced and sacrificed: if it can be said that the individual acts consciously on the basis of reason, the crowd acts impulsively and without any awareness, on the basis of instinctual drives. It could not be any other way, given the fact that this same 'crowd' was born out of a process of non-individualization that implicates the irrational acceptance of reciprocal influence (Mannino et al., 2017; Morin, Gembillo & Anselmo, 2011; Napolitani, 2006). It is a representation of the world that is in contrast with the one theorized by Foulkes (1964; 2018) – the founder of group analysis. In the theory articulated by Foulkes, one refers to individual bearers of a matrix viewed as a

net- or network-like object, capable of containing all of the exchanges and interconnections which organize themselves around the individual as soon as the latter is born, and which represent the very motives for the construction of the individual's personality (Ancona, 1996).

The Ego gets spread throughout the mass of human beings, which, in adapting itself ever more to collective behavioral models, loses its own energy and identity; what emerges from this process is the type of 'adherence of the Ego to the group' which is so typical of fundamentalism (Giunta, Lo Verso & Mannino, 2016; Giunta et al., 2018). It is a form of adherence which risks the reintroduction of collective scenarios and functions typical of the 'non-psychology' of primitive human beings. As already affirmed by Jung, primitive man lacked any concept of psychology, in the sense that everything belonging to the realm of the psyche seemed to exist externally. Even dreams, for all that they are elements belonging to the realm of the psyche, can be taken for reality. The human being that elaborates a form of identification by means of projection creates a world that incorporates the subject not only physically, but at the level of the psyche as well. The individual will never be the master of this world, but can only appear there as a sort of component element (Jung, 1931; 1926-1946; 1949; 1961).

In this manner, certain citizens experience a neighborhood full of foreigners in a paranoid fashion as a sign of the disappearance of reliable certainties and of life prospects over which we are losing control and which are resisting every effort we make to realize said prospects. Foreigners come to signify all the evasive, weak, unstable, and unpredictable elements which poison our chaotic days and fill our sleepless nights with nightmarish premonitions (Bauman, 2017). Unable to do otherwise, we allow ourselves to become literally petrified by the nostalgic gaze with which we turn to the past as it once was – though even more so, as it can be now imagined to have been: a past that was

unequivocally 'ours', uncontaminated by 'them' and their intrusive presence (Bauman, 2017). Thus, each and every individual, at the same time, brings to the group, and places in the group's care an unbounded anxiety, as well as a sense of life shot through with the persecutory theme that surrounds the foreigner. The group performs an apparently therapeutic function on behalf of its members: by taking up the burden of the anxiety of its members, it partially liberates them from said anxiety, and, at the same time, by accepting the persecutory theme, it enables each and every individual member to feel capable of facing that which instills fear in particular moments and on particular occasions. The group allows each of its members to respond to the anxiety generated by the phobic object, not by becoming paralyzed, nor by trying to escape, but by going on the attack. The result is an increase in self-esteem by means of the actions of the group (Nathan and Zajde, 2013). The search for that particular form of purity which we already mentioned, the leader, thus insinuates itself in the political arena.

Democracy becomes merely a question of governability, at the expense of more profound ideas and concerns; economic liberty is being subjected ever more to the concerns of the marketplace; and international politics are being reduced ever more to the war on terrorism and immigration. And so we are seeing the rise of populism, in which reality is simply reduced to a clash between the People and the Political Class, or to the moralistic conflict pitting We-the-People against You-the-Elite, in a repudiation of the political dialectic that would allow for a conciliation of the discordant interests that make up all social configurations. This gives rise to a visceral hatred for democratic institutions and for democracy itself, in the excessive search for an absolute, 100% consensus. This assumption of purity, paranoid and homogenous as it is, does not leave room for any doubt or self-criticism: whoever belongs to the Elite is impure.

One of the consequences of said processes, which are founded on a presentation of the crises as being crises of identity, is that they lead to a form of 'psychological sovereignty'. The social system, rife with rancor and delusion, 'looks to the authoritarian sovereign for stability' and no longer believes in progress, because they fear the upheavals that will come with change. The people tend to rally firmly around the idea of a sovereign nation, by supposing that the causes of injustice and inequality can all be found in a lack of national sovereignty. The response we encounter is so-called 'promise-of-change politics', in which challenges are issued to international communal organizations. There is a widespread polemical and aggressively negative attitude that erects invisible, yet rather thick walls which, in counterproductive fashion, lead solely to the creation of immobility and a pessimistic outlook vis-à-vis the future.

All of this is being amplified in exponential fashion in the present day and age, precisely as a result of one of the great accomplishments of the 20th century, the spread of information, which contains a terrible flip-side: bad information gets spread around right alongside the good. In this manner, mass media end up functioning as 'amplifiers of paranoia': a distant and relatively insignificant event can turn into a source of anxiety when the information outlets manage to render it 'something right nearby', 'in real time'. This leads to violence in places where, in previous times, there would have been none: the mere distant news item announcing a particular act of aggression is enough to provoke a call to arms. This, in turn, determines that a large part of the work being done to reduce violence must be directed towards reducing this paranoia, by demonstrating, first and foremost, the extent to which it is unfounded. As already emphasized by Hillman, the most profound problem in the art of governing, is the question of how to govern the inherent paranoia of the State in such a way that its symptoms do not degenerate into corrupt tyranny and byzantine paralysis. By way of

example, these symptoms can include secret police, oaths of fidelity, polygraph tests, electronic surveillance, the fear of weakness, and the absence of such human qualities as humor, an aesthetic sense, and mild manners or docility, all of which are replaced by grandiose ideals. Given this inherent subconscious paranoia, the need arises for the creation of an imaginary enemy by means of projection (Hillman, 1991), in which the communal living space is conceived as a *cum-moenia*, a common network of walls.

World Visions

Before delving into these complex themes, it is necessary to provide a working definition of culture, to which end we have decided to adopt the definition provided in *Semiotic Cultural Psychological Theory* (Salvatore et al., 2018): culture is conceived in terms of symbolic universes and their capacity to model the manner in which people interpret their experiences. Every single symbolic universe is a system of generalized assumptions, which functions as a global and affective vision which encompasses the personal and social identities of the actor; or, in the final analysis, it is a sort of lens through which every element of the experience is filtered and thus rendered significant. It is worth emphasizing that these generalized concepts do not rest inside the heads of the people. Rather, they are integrated in the cultural atmosphere; people are exposed to them and therefore internalize them (Salvatore, 2014, 2017, 2018).

It is possible to distinguish five different types of Symbolic Universes:

1) *The Ordered Universe*

Here we find a generalized positive attitude towards the world (including institutions and service providers, people, the place where one lives, one's country, the future) which is considered reliable, in addition to being receptive to efforts to get involved and improve things. Identification with transcendent values and ideals (such as justice, morality, solidarity, and the refusal of opportunism, conformism, and power) promote one's get-

ting involved in order to improve things, where said involvement is viewed as a value in and of itself: one looks to make life meaningful, rather than pursuing material interests. The fundamental assumption here is faith in the inherent ethical order of the world. Justice, morality, and efficacy all come together – that which is just is also efficacious in the improvement of things.

2) *The Interpersonal Bond*

Being part of a world such as this is an end in and of itself: the sacrifices here (in terms of adaptability and conformism) are a necessity and are repaid in terms of security and satisfaction, in addition to promoting a moderate sense of action, trust, and openness. In the Universe of the Interpersonal Bond the fundamental assumption is that all one needs is love.

3) *The Caring Society*

Here society is receptive to the exigencies and needs of individual people. This vision favors a generalized sentiment of trust in life, optimism vis-à-vis the future, and a sense of being active, where all one needs to do is stick to the rules of the game, seeing as those who control the game are responsible for running things in the best possible manner. People who identify with this type of symbolic universe feel capable of pursuing their goals because they feel that they are part of a system which both supports and allows for their efforts.

4) *A Niche of Belongingness*

Here we find a generalized negative connotation of the world outside the primary network, in terms of a pessimistic outlook vis-à-vis the future, fatalism, and a sense of the unreliability of public agencies and institutions. In such a context, the primary network, conceived in terms of familial power, is a necessity which responds to the need to find shelter and survive the anomy which threatens outside.

5) *Other's World*

Here we encounter a completely negative, even desperate, vision of the world: there is a generalized sense of unreliability, a sense of impotency, a lack of agency, and anomy. The world belongs to those who hold power

and the vanquished can only try to survive day by day, as they surrender to those who have the power to direct the game.

Morals and values are a luxury given the fact that the sole possible preoccupation is keeping any damages or harm to a minimum.

The symbolic universes are hyper-spatial, incarnated; they are global visions of the world, rather than specific complexes of ideas, affirmations, norms, and representations of discrete objects; symbolic universes are forms of life, and ways of being in the world. As a result of this fact, they are located at a rather basic level, cutting across socio-economic, political, and ethnic differences (even though the distribution of symbolic universes may well vary in different countries, as well as different ethnic, geographic, and social contexts).

This observation is relevant because it implies that the culture does not consist of the identity that each individual expresses as a result of their being part of a particular social group or practicing community, and the shared institutions of said group or community (i.e., language, norms, values, ideologies, religious creed, traditions, rituals, myths, and the like). In actuality, every single social group can exhibit a plurality of symbolic universes (albeit in differing proportions). This means that it is not identity which defines the culture, but the other way around: the culture, understood as symbolic universes, models identity.

In other words, viewing a culture in terms of symbolic universes allows us to better recognize and understand the variability in any given social group. For example, while one can well speak of Neapolitan traditions and identity (that is, of the entire socio-territorial group of symbolic and material products, practices, sense of belonging, etc.), it must be recognized that a Neapolitan who identifies with a specific symbolic universe (such as the ordered universe) interprets his or her identity in a different manner than a Neapolitan who identifies with a different type of symbolic universe (such as other's world). As a result, this variability can be explained on the basis of the different symbolic uni-

verses underlying the various group identities.

The symbolic universes influence/model socio-political subjectivity and behaviors – a good example of which might be the Brexit referendum. The regions of the United Kingdom in which the percentage of votes in favor won out were primarily characterized by a high incidence of the following three symbolic universes: the interpersonal bond, a niche of belongingness, and the ordered universe.

Symbolic universes are also notable in that they influence the manner in which important topics (including immigration, Islam, homosexuality, health, participation and democracy, and subjectivity) are handled by the media.

It is necessary to analyze the relationship between supply and demand under populism; that is, how and to what extent is the populist supply capable of aligning itself with the demand on the basis of the symbolic universes that mediate said relationship. Such a methodological approach will allow us to analyze the various different components of populism (such as its content and rhetoric) in terms of their cultural significance (that is, the particular symbolic universe in question). In a future paper we intend to analyze populism in terms of the coherence between the symbolic universe which the populist commander transmits/expresses and the symbolic universe that has characterized the segments of society being analyzed.

It goes without saying that the attention paid to the symbolic universes as mediating populism on the basis of supply and demand does not imply an underestimation of the role played by other factors (including the political, institutional-economic, and socio-demographic factors) which are implicated in said relationship. Rather, such a stance implies the recognition of the extent to which these factors perform their roles by means of the mediation of and their interaction with the symbolic universes.

In light of such a theoretical picture, the growing populist trend must be analyzed in terms of how, and to what extent the populist

supply is capable of aligning itself with the manner in which relevant segments of society interpret their experience of the world.

In this regard, it is important to note that there exists a potential plurality of populism, that is to say, one may well encounter different forms of populism, each characterized by the particular manner in which it aligns itself with the primary exigencies of any given society that is, with the symbolic universe that characterizes the cultural atmosphere of any given national or regional society. It is also necessary to note that the various forms of populism have a dynamic relationship with the demand of any given society and populism alters the cultural atmosphere just as it is, in turn, altered by the same.

However, once we reach the level of radicalism, which occurs quite often under many forms of populism, we observe a dynamic in which the creation of meaning is regulated by a system of highly hierarchical concepts – that is to say, a system whose entire mode of functioning is tremendously subservient to a system of generalized concepts. In other words, a system of highly hierarchical signs is a system characterized by a network of general concepts that has the power to amply frame and discipline the manner in which the subject's experience is interpreted – and, by extension, one's way of thinking, feeling, acting, making plans, and so on; in a word, one's entire life.

Under the fundamentalist type of populist phenomenology, a phenomenology characterized by xenophobia, the group is the protagonist of the entire story, while the individual remains in the background. The xenophobic group has a xenophobic history, and it is composed of individuals whose evolutionary history is characterized by a profound discomfort which the group, through its presence, accepts, contains, and, at times, enacts against the designated victims (Fiore, 1997, 2008; Pergola, 2011).

In certain groups the 'we' that characterizes membership in a community is replaced by the 'we are' which, almost of necessity, brings with it intolerance of and potential violence towards those who belong to the other

group. In the well-known process of projection, the other is employed in order to preserve the sense of Self, by avoiding frustration and regulating negative emotions. The unworthy and humiliated aspects of one's own Self can be projected onto the others and, in the worst case scenario, there can emerge a desire to liberate oneself from these undesirable parts of the Self by means of violent acts, to the point of getting rid of one's own enemy, where the latter is conceived as a scapegoat.

Here we are referring to groups that function in a sadomasochistic fashion, as will become clearer upon further analysis: the masochistic trend consists of the annihilation of the individual in the face of the ideal being pursued, an ideal that is the sole source of life and salvation; and the sadistic trend, on the other hand, becomes apparent in the absolute persecution of dissidents and anti-conformists, understood as those who do not conform to the group, who must be annihilated insofar as they are responsible for all the evil in the world.

Among the members of fundamentalist groups, we find a connection between narcissism and paranoia: normal aspects of the paranoid psyche include suspicion, fear, a precisely 'paranoid' reading of the facts, and the inability to subject said facts to reflective thought (Giordano, Giunta & Lo Verso, 2011; Giunta, Lo Verso & Mannino, 2017; Granieri et al., 2017). This way of thinking can be connected to narcissism given the fact that it draws a representation of the self from the paranoid lived experience which is both gratifying and self-idealizing. Fundamentalist individuals often suffer from debilitating feelings of isolation, panic attacks, and eating disorders: all expressions of situations in which the person lives with a, seemingly groundless, fear of the outside world, and of an authentic, profound relationship with the other, the foreigner (Lo Verso, 2015; Lo Verso & Di Blasi, 2011; Mannino, Giunta & La Fiura, 2017; Formica et al., 2017).

Conclusion: Can the regeneration of semiotic capital provide a solution?

Morin (1988) invites us to consider a new threefold ethic: individual-species-society. Such an ethic would be possible if we were to make use of social capital and thereby the Relational Goods such as trust, reciprocity, and cooperation. It would be necessary to start with the regeneration of semiotic capital, using the only remaining incubator for said resources: the schools. In such an educational agency it would be possible to succeed in reconfiguring both the personal and collective identities. Through the Semiotic-Cultural Theory of Salvatore (Salvatore et al., 2018) we have already seen how identity is both a relevant question, as well as a phenomenon that it is more or less critical to deal with through the lens of the more fundamental and universal structure provided by the notion of symbolic universes. In this sense, schools are a chrysalis of semiotic capital, or rather, of those cultural resources which refer to particular symbolic universes (the ordered universe and the caring society) viewed as being characterized by functional forms of thought (a propensity for risk-taking, and flexibility). Social capital is closely interconnected with semiotic capital, insofar as it is the 'flesh and blood' of every single individual. We might well compare the relationship between the two to the relationship between the engine and the battery in an automobile, where the battery is the semiotic capital: they give each other energy in a reciprocal fashion if there is a proper connection, which, if interrupted, prevents the battery from charging back up and the engine from starting. We are in the process of consuming semiotic capital, but we are not managing to regenerate the amount necessary in order to live out the relationship with the other in a manner that is both constructive and beneficial for all parties concerned, to which end it is necessary to expand the cultural resources so that they might aid us in giving complex meaning to our in-

teractions with and representations of the other, in such a way as to reduce the level of discomfort and the resulting identity anxiety that lead to the demonization of the other as the enemy. An increase in semiotic capital would allow us to reactivate our own ability to make constructive plans for the future.

There is a need for a new way of knowing, understanding, and self-understanding, in order to counteract reductionism (Lo Coco et al., 2018; Gullo et al., 2015; Gervasi et al., 2017), or rather, to counteract the cognitive attitude that reduces multiform experiences and complex points of view to one alone. In the proposed vision the mistakes that must be dealt with are not solely factual errors – such as ignorance, mistaken ways of thinking, or dogmatism – but the mistaken mode of partial thought, or a binary way of thinking that conceives things in an 'either/or' fashion, incapable of inclusive thought, not to mention the more profound errors constituted by reductive and disjunctive modes of thought, both of which are blind to the existence of any complexity whatsoever (Morin, 2011; Novara et al., 2018). Haste and a lack of critically constructive self-analysis are causing our identity to fall apart by giving pride of place to functionality, which focuses on immediate results.

However, there is also a positive form of reductionism, which serves to enrich: reducing things to the heart of the matter. It is an attitude which gets rid of useless details; that returns from the periphery to the center; that leaves behind the superfluous and gets back to original inspiration (Zoja, 2009; Pellerone et al., 2016). The amount of violence is proportional to the extent to which one's own point of view is restricted: expanding the visions we employ to give meaning to our interactions with the Other will enable us to configure the common living space as a *cummunus*: a space in which gifts and privileges are shared.

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