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Narrating crises and populism in Southern Europe: Regimes of metaphor

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to propose an exploratory critical response to the two following main research questions: (1) why, in moments of crises, particular metaphors operate in the construction of interrelated cultural narratives; and (2) in which ways metaphors generate alternative intellectual horizons for social renewal under the rise of populism in the Southern European context. A metaphor is not only a linguistic device but also a cognitive operation that configures and shapes the pre-figurative poetic acts which articulate our worldviews. It is my working hypothesis that by studying the metaphorical systematicity produced within certain imagined communities, it is possible to ground the conceptual system that informs cultural and political practices such as populist movements, while also tracing novel metaphors that can activate renewal and produce structural change in our societies. In this essay, I propose to critically define such conceptual systems as 'regimes of metaphor'.

Introduction: research questions; theoretical limitations of *On Populist Reason*; why metaphors

Research questions

The aim of this article is to propose an exploratory critical response to the two following main research questions: (1) why, in moments of crisis, do particular metaphors operate in the construction of interrelated cultural narratives?; and (2) in what ways do

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metaphors generate alternative intellectual horizons for social renewal under the rise of populism in the Southern European context?

On Populist Reason: *theoretical limitations*

In order to achieve this goal, I will briefly review the latest developments in Critical and Conceptual Metaphor Theory in connection with my working hypothesis on what I have defined as 'regimes of metaphor' within the context of the 2008 financial crisis in Europe, its aftermath and the rise of cultural politics of populism. Despite the growing number of scholarly studies on the conceptualization of populism from a political theoretical perspective, we are missing an in-depth study on the metaphorical systematicity produced within certain imagined communities,[1] in order to ground conceptual systems that inform cultural and political practices which produce structural changes in our societies. It would be ill-argued to suggest that Laclau's work *On Populist Reason* (2005) has already filled this gap in the scholarship. It is important to highlight that Laclau understood populism as a 'way of constructing the political' (2005: 11) and 'a political logic' (2005: 117), and he approached the phenomenon from an angle that did not consider cultural rhetoric (Pujante, 2017),[2] neuroscience (Damasio, 2018) and important developments in social sciences (Mudde and Rovira, 2017; Müller, 2016; Rensmann, 2017; Wodak, 2015) concerning the cognitive configurations of our mind, our public sphere and our cultural systems (Pujante, 2017: 53). Instead, Laclau engaged with a critical corpus focused too closely on certain nineteenth-century conceptions of the nation and popular sovereignty that are not necessarily applicable to the twenty-first-century context, which features new and expanding modes of political, economic and cultural globalization. It is not my intention here to comprehensively critique *On Populist Reason* but to acknowledge some of the theoretical limitations of Laclau's work.

Due to the uncritical acceptance of Laclau's ideas in certain academic contexts, I would like to point the reader to a couple of major flaws in Laclau's work converging around the category of 'people' (a key notion in studies on populism). Firstly, Laclau explains that the notion of 'people' is articulated under a 'nominal' and not 'conceptual' level. In this vein, Laclau also affirms that there are other empty signifiers, such as 'justice', 'freedom' and 'equality', which do not hold logico-conceptual connections but attributive-performative ones. From my point of view, this is a problematic and very debatable point because Laclau neglects the role of individual agency in the prefigurative poetic act of communication (Pujante, 2017) and meaning processing. Following his line of reasoning, Laclau elaborates that notions such as 'justice' or 'freedom' do not hold a pre-relational and pre-narrative mental configuration. Laclau's view leads to a conceptual contradiction: if a subject does not comprise a pre-relational and pre-narrative mental configuration, then he/she is not able to operate the set of meaning expectations that make communication possible between different actors. However, the reality is that actors do exchange information in a collaborative, networking and relational way, as we see in our everyday social, cultural and political arena. This is possible because of the interrelation of four rhetorical cognitive mechanisms in the pre-figurative poetic act of creating meaning: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony.[3]

Secondly, Laclau's analysis is connected to the existence of so-called chains of equivalence that orientate the signifiers' informational processing. The key issue in order to activate social mobilization, according to Laclau, was (a) to intervene in the production of chains of equivalence and (b) to fill empty terms with meaning that have the potential to be instrumentalized by any actor on the political spectrum. This is why, in Laclau's view, 'populism' overcomes the traditional divide between left- and right-wing political parties. In actual fact, this assertion allows Laclau to strategically move the academic discussion from discourse analysis to the performative and political possibilities of good versus bad populism. Such false dichotomies open up the ground, at the same time, for an understanding of 'populism' which remains largely uncritical of the fictional modes deployed to ensure cultural and political hegemony of any sort. Thus, a self-claimed 'eliteless' elite (good populism) could articulate cognitive metonymic modes of becoming by claiming to be part of the 'people' in an assertively 'positive' manner. One example of this is the famous statement of Donald Trump, after being implicated in several scandals by major media actors in the USA, that 'news media are the enemy of the people' (Wootson, 2018). Trump employs a powerful bi-directional inferred metonymy: he positively projects himself as the people and the people metonymically identify with Trump. Therefore, any questioning of Trump's political actions immediately becomes a questioning of the will of the people.

Consequently, as this example concisely illustrates, political expression is the result of cognitive operations[4] which involve complex processes of informational, rhetoric and experiential narrative configurations. Where Laclau can only consider the individual through its potential to be activated as a cultural-political collective self in a given nation-state symbolic realm, I argue that there is a more entangled net of symbolic construction processes connected to psycho-emotional modes of individual-collective becoming under what Marco Caracciolo has brilliantly defined as 'consciousness-enactment' (2014: 11). Caracciolo emphasizes the 'experientiality of narrative', where the subject experiences the first person's ongoing tension with the second and third attribution to a fictional being (2014: 111): the abstract negotiates and orientates the performative. The 'consciousness-enactment' approach sheds a different light on Laclau's rather biased explanation of the semantic capital of terms such as 'equality', 'democracy' and 'justice':

> The semantic role of these terms is not to express any positive content but . . . to function as the names of a fullness which is constitutively absent. It is because there is no human situation in which injustice of some kind or another does not exist that 'justice', as a term, makes sense. Since it names an undifferentiated fullness, it has no conceptual content whatsoever: it is not an abstract term but [is], in the strictest sense, empty. A discussion of whether a just society will be brought about by a fascist or by a socialist order does not proceed as logical deduction starting from a concept of 'justice' accepted by the two sides, but through a radical investment whose discursive steps are not logico-conceptual connections but attributive-performative ones. (Laclau, 2005: 96–7)

Contrary to Laclau's assertions, from the field of narrative theory, Caracciolo has extensively proved that 'expression' is 'a double-sided concept: it ties together the subject's experience (which is expressed) with the experiential background of other subjects (who

interpret an utterance as an expression)' (2014: 37). In other words, Laclau's alleged emptiness of certain categories is a misconception. Inversely, the action of expression together with the semantic charge of any given term ultimately relies on the cognitive, the experiential and the relational configurations which emerge from pre-figurative poetic acts and historical realizations.[5] The meaning of a term is a net of symbolic expectations in the making. It is never empty, but is instead always a negotiation between probabilities and symbolic expectations.

Why metaphors?

My main focus on metaphors has two primary reasons: first, space constraints prevent extensive discussion of other meaning-processing mechanisms in this article; and, secondly, metaphors boast unique transformative possibilities for social mobilization and change. In this regard, I leave detailed examination of the three other cognitive rhetorical operations – metonymy, synecdoche and irony – for further research.

   A metaphor is not only a linguistic device. It is also a cognitive operation that configures and shapes the pre-figurative poetic act which articulates our worldviews. Metaphors can be verbal or non-verbal, embodied or unembodied, incremental or revolutionary. They hold the potential for re-signifying a given information process. Thus, the study of metaphors provides a tool for identifying underlying sets of practices, attitudes, beliefs, aesthetics and ethical values which configure the citizens' ideological and moral matrix. As explained by Gibbs (2017a: 264):

> The original proposal that metaphor was part of our ordinary conceptual system was never intended to dismiss the historical, cultural, social, and aesthetic dimensions of metaphorical experience. . . . Metaphor is not just a linguistic device, and has many roots in pervasive patterns of cognitive and embodied activity.

In this vein, it is my working hypothesis that by studying the metaphorical systematicity produced within certain imagined communities, it is possible to ground the conceptual system that informs cultural and political practices such as populist movements, while also tracing novel metaphors that can activate renewal and produce structural change in our societies.

   The 2008 financial crisis produced structural change in almost every stratum of Europe's social fabric. In other words, it triggered the downfall of the set of cultural, political and institutional values taken for granted prior to 2008. The resulting cultural and political configurations evolved from a context of unprecedented social instability in Europe. Wodak defines the new context as a 'politics of fear':

> Currently, we observe a normalization of nationalistic, xenophobic, racist and anti-Semitic rhetoric, which primarily works with 'fear': fear of change, of globalization, of loss of welfare, of climate change, of changing gender roles; in principle, almost anything can be constructed as a threat to 'Us', an imagined homogeneous people inside a well-protected territory. (2016: 114)

Such processes, I argue (Valdivia, 2017; Valdivia et al., 2017), emerge as the fictional engendering of different sets and configurations of the citizen's ideological and moral grid operating in a given cultural narrative.

In a recent study from the field of Communication Studies, Burgers (2016) has noted that 'metaphors are commonly used in communication, as approximately 16.4 per cent of words in written news, 7.7 per cent in interpersonal conversations, and 18.5 per cent of words in academic texts are metaphoric.' Furthermore, there is sufficient evidence to prove, in Burgers' words, that:

> metaphors provide frames of thinking about societal topics, by highlighting particular aspects of the target [domain] while obscuring others. Because frames of thinking about the old situation shift in the context of change, focusing on the metaphors through which these frames of thinking are expressed in language is an efficient way to model change in communication. (Burgers, 2016)

Therefore, analysis of the pervasiveness of metaphoricity in a given cultural narrative is key to understanding the confluence of factors which intervene in the creation of alternative cultural and political imaginaries and, thus, social change. As stated by Gibbs (2017a), 'Conceptual Metaphor Theory is not a complete theory of how language is understood, because conceptual metaphorical knowledge must be complemented by a diversity of other linguistic, cognitive, and social-cultural processes'. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980a, 1980b; Lakoff, 1990, 1993, in Howe, 2006: 80): 'Our metaphor system is central to our understanding of experience and to the way we act on that understanding'. From my perspective, such 'understanding of experience' is deeply connected to the fictional narrativization of space, time and self-referential expression. We are the fictions we engage with and which are hierarchically operated under multi-directional and multi-layered forces.

According to the research developed by Casasanto, 'although initial evidence for metaphor theory was based on descriptive analyses of how people talk, there is now abundant experimental evidence that people also think metaphorically – even when they are not using any metaphorical language' (2017: 46). Addressing fundamental questions such as 'Where do our mental metaphors come from?' 'Does everyone use the same mental metaphors, at least when they are thinking about universal experiences like the passage of time?' 'Once established, do our basic mental metaphors ever change?' has led Casasanto to sketch what he defines as a 'Hierarchical Mental Metaphors Theory': an instrument to understand 'common mechanisms by which our mental metaphors are shaped [through] language-specific, culture-specific, or body-specific patterns of experience' as well as 'the origins of our thoughts, the extent of cognitive diversity, and the dynamism of our mental lives' (2017: 60–1).

In this regard, by following Kövecses' work (2010), Winter and Matlock (2017: 110) have noted that 'cultural representations of metaphors (understood broadly as including artefacts, gesture and linguistic expressions) feed back into the cognitive systems at the individual level'. This is to say that metaphors 'underlying conceptual systems (the individual level) lead to cultural representations (supra-individual), but that the connection between individuals and representations is a two-way street'. Gibbs (2017b: 167) explains it is possible to study metaphoricity in thought if

> we no longer simply see conceptual metaphors as purely cognitive entities. Instead, conceptual metaphorical thinking emerges from a complex interaction of forces, ranging from history and

culture to cognition and neural activities. Conceptual metaphors specifically incorporate rich socio-cultural, embodied knowledge that shapes people's sensitive, in-the-moment metaphorical actions.

I suggest that such hierarchical configurations of metaphors, which carry a two-way symbolic capital under the tension and interaction of forces, produce 'regimes of metaphor', where sets of hierarchies are privileged, activated and made visible to the detriment of other sets of metaphor whose symbolic capital becomes underrepresented in a given cultural narrative.

Cultural narratives of crisis and populism in Southern Europe

What is a cultural narrative?

Due to the absence of a comprehensive definition of the term 'cultural narrative',[6] I propose here a tentative understanding of the concept as the *moral and aesthetic coded symbolic matrix-in-the-making which orientates behaviour and signifies the imaginary relationship between an individual (and/or [virtual] community) and her (his/their) material conditions of existence in a given historical-spatial context*. In short, a 'cultural narrative' is a sort of 'dark matter' that establishes the cognitive and performative grounds of social interactions, attachments, expectations, rationalities and modes of becoming.[7] Cultural narratives operate as cognitive and performative thresholds. They create meaning and orientate behaviour in multi-directional ways. Cultural narratives share an essential property attributed to the notion of a process in the theory of mind: 'a relatively permanent form or pattern displayed by continuously changing processes, just as a wave maintains its form although it is constituted by different volumes of water at different times' (Blackburn, 2016).

Crisis? What crisis?

Another key term that requires critical clarification is 'crisis'. This notion comes from the Greek verb *krinein* and its etymology encompasses notions of 'separating' and 'deciding', with roots in medical discourse which are associated with a turning point in disease after which a patient is either destined to die or will proceed to recovery (Bauman and Bordoni, 2014). Currently, it implies a moment of rupture and instability, as exemplified by the 2008 financial crisis and the ongoing refugee crisis (Sassen, 2014). Crises always involve turbulence and discontent but also rethinking and innovation. They generate new ways of analysing and engaging with the past and present, while opening paths to the articulation of possible futures that can challenge traditional ideas (Cardoso and Jacobetty, 2012). From an institutional perspective, the study of Europe's recent crises has been key for the implementation of social and political practices that will enhance a new narrative for Europe as manifested by the European Commission's *White Paper on the Future of Europe and the Way Forward* (2017). In the words of Castells et al. (2018: 428–30), 'Europe's crisis is a crisis of its own making . . . Europe's crises are therefore part of a

cumulative process that is strong enough to challenge the core institutions of the European Union, institutions that are already threatened by a growing lack of legitimacy.'

Is it possible to define populism?

Populism is a contested term. According to Mudde and Rovira (2017: 6), it can be defined as a 'thin-centered ideology for understanding the oft-alleged malleability of the concept in question . . . In fact, populism almost always appears attached to other ideological elements, which are crucial for the promotion of political projects that are appealing to a broader public.' In this vein, Müller approaches the term as a 'particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified – . . . ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior' (2016: 26). Although recent years have witnessed increasing numbers of scholarly articles on right-wing populist movements (Mudde, 2017), there is not sufficient scientific research on the challenges that populism poses in connection to human rights and democratic cultural narratives in Southern Europe. As argued by Alston (2017: 1), 'The nationalistic, xenophobic, misogynistic, and explicitly anti-human rights agenda of many populist political leaders requires human rights proponents to rethink many longstanding assumptions.' Consequently, regarding the field of cultural production, there is also an urgent necessity to analyse the cultural features that play a decisive role in the construction of the populist narratives within the current European public spheres.

As Betz suggests (2016: 348), 'The rise and success of radical . . . populism in western Europe can . . . be interpreted as the result of the increasing social and cultural fragmentation and differentiation of advanced Western societies.' In his words, these processes are closely connected to an overarching development involving the general individualization mechanisms unfolding in post-industrial societies. This development is 'gradually destroying the bases of the great all-encompassing projects of modern politics' (2016: 346). Betz also notes that:

> in a social, cultural, and political climate characterized by fluidity and insecurity, radical . . . populism appeals to the new egocentrism which prevails throughout the advanced Western world and which finds expression as much in the picture of the 'fortress Europe' and the renewed outbursts of nationalist separatism as in the hostility towards foreigners and the denunciation of the welfare state. If this is correct, the radical . . . populist parties are symptoms as well as . . . by-products of the general turbulence of the present age. (2016: 346)

Subsequently, I argue that the centrality of a metaphor such as 'fortress Europe' is the result of a displacement or obscuring of other cognitive representations of the European Union, such as the depiction of it as a building or a family, within newly articulated regimes of metaphors. These shifts have been triggered by major changes and unfolding events following the 2008 financial crisis and the refugee crisis and their aftermaths, together with the emergence of populist narratives that have responded to and/or engaged with a context of unprecedented instability which has put into question the pre-2008 mindset. As argued by Castells et al. (2012) and Crosthwaite (2012), crises are 'symbolic

crises'. In my view, 'populism' is both a symptom and an attitude. Its genuine power of attraction lies not only in its ideological capability to activate a regular citizen as populist, but also the cultural and aesthetic psycho-emotional rewards it presents: belonging to a group; the fictionalization and centrality of the citizen as hero in the social narrative; affect compensation; and a foundation in an apparently non-mutable storytelling, among others.[8] This fictional mode of becoming is being triggered mainly by social and news media channels. In line with this reasoning, Cardoso et al. (2018: 424–5) have argued that:

> Networked autonomy of individuals can be argued as a new modality of power. Social media becomes an integral organizational part of contemporary social movements, allowing flexibility across various conditions, issues and scale, and, through the formative element of 'sharing', enables individualized public engagement and personalized collective action formations . . . Social media, and ICT's in general, constitute themselves as the elected tools that strengthen ties between individuals within political protest, but they have not been particularly good at connecting political institutions and individuals.

Indeed, most European institutions are lagging politically behind the new configurations brought about by a new set of social and power relations where 'networked individuals are the message' (Cardoso et al., 2018: 424–5). In this novel era, discontent has mutated into new political attitudes where 'people seem to increasingly think about social liaisons, institutions, power, social transformation and autonomy as based in networks' (Cardoso et al., 2018: 424–5). According to Cardoso et al., this phenomenon represents 'the fundamental novelty brought by new media to social mobilization in regions like Southern Europe' and it 'is something that new political parties that rose or shared momentum with the protests against austerity, such as M5S, Syriza or Podemos, have understood and incorporated into their political practices' (2018: 424–5). In short, the post-2008 European context needs new conceptualizations to relatively old problems. Therefore, in this article, I understand populism to be a mode of becoming active in the social fabric and not as a state or a political premise. Any of us can potentially be a populist, but the open questions are: what activates citizens as populists? Which factors intervene in the process (economic, inter-generational, political, economic, psychological, emotional, linguistic and so on)? And how decisive are regional, cultural and spatial factors?

What is Southern Europe?

In consonance with Castells et al. (2012), 'the crisis of global capitalism that has unfolded since 2008 is not merely economic. It is structural and multi-dimensional. The events that took place in its immediate aftermath show that we are entering a world with very different social and economic conditions from those that characterized the rise of global, informational capitalism in the preceding three decades' (2012: 1). Thus, in the context of the 2008 financial and later refugee crises, individuals and communities have generated cultural representations and intellectual responses to challenging situations. In Southern European countries, including Portugal, Greece, Spain and Italy, the financial and refugee crises have led to a fundamental rethinking of democratic, social and cultural

values. The crises have fostered new social and cultural forces, and even political parties, as has occurred in Portugal with the Bloco de Esquerda, in Greece with Syriza, in Spain with Ciudadanos and Podemos, and in Italy with La Sinistra-L'Arcobaleno, Lega Nord or Movimento 5 Stelle (see Castells et al., 2018).

Portugal, Greece, Spain and Italy shared the heavy financial and social impacts of the 2008 financial crisis; they are all coastal areas of Southern Europe that are exposed to the flow of refugees, migration and inter-cultural border conflicts; they face increasingly transnational challenges in policy-making under the framework of the European Union, and they share high levels of economic inequality (Piketty, 2018). These countries also show the highest growth in inequality of income distribution (alongside Eastern European countries) according to the latest data on the Gini coefficient published by Eurostat in 2015 (Portugal: 34; Greece: 34.2; Spain: 34.6; Italy: 32.4). In this context, national protest movements have gained visibility and have given rise to cooperative and solidarity-based organizations. This visibility and cooperation are accompanied by intense cultural production and social renewal, reflecting a growing anti-European political unrest (Flesher-Fominaya and Cox, 2013). Such unrest has given birth to the oppositional but paradoxically close poles of left- and right-wing populism, which share nativist principles while differing on certain political issues such as migration policy and the re-distribution of wealth. However, both attitudes coincide in their vindication of nationalism and national identity as a common denominator for social organization, political and economic protectionism, and anti-European attitudes. Both cultural and political trends follow a similar narrative mechanism: they identify an idyllic pre-political state based on the nation-state metaphor where social welfare is fictionally assured. These socio-political movements articulate their agendas around the imperative of giving back control of their lives to the 'people' which they define against any 'other' that might prevent them from successfully accomplishing it. As stated by Castells et al. (2018: 191):

> For a small minority of Europeans, largely members of social and economic elites, the EU is a cosmopolitan project in which transnational and transboundary relationships are only likely to grow. For many others, instead, it is linked to processes of globalization and marketization that have largely excluded them.

In a reductionistic equation, according to populist supporters, cosmopolitanism is equivalent to the evil of neoliberal practices. In practice, a theology of the nation-state metaphor replaces the principles of universal human rights or, so to speak, human rights only become valid within the borders of the cultural and political imaginaries of the nationalist narrative.

Consequently, we face an exceptional new economic, cultural and social paradigm, which is multi-directional as well as multi-dimensional due to its cross-class implications (Bauman and Bordoni, 2014; Milanovic, 2016). The polyhedral nature of the financial and refugee crises and their aftermaths challenges our traditional narrative of the nation-state and thus forces us to reconsider our standard notion of national culture as declared by the European Commission under the *New Narrative for Europe* project (2014). These challenges urge us to rethink the limits of European national cultures by changing our scope to a transnational reality where technological innovations engender

a new social structure based on different information networking (Castells et al., 2012). Southern Europe is a socially, culturally and geographically diverse entity, but also an advanced laboratory for social engineering where the future of the European Union is compromised.

Regimes of metaphor

To summarize my line of thought so far, I argue that there are four main factors that have intervened in the configuration of the post-2008 crises and the rise of populist in our societies: (1) a clear socio-emotional turn in political discourse; (2) a cultural rhetoric which appeals to the confrontation between the Eros (in a Lacanian sense) of the discussion and pragmatism of the compromise where actors in social media do not seek common ground but an emotional reward in conflict-making itself; (3) a pervasive cultural hegemony of the economic metaphor; and (4) an institutional blind spot created by attempting to tackle societal challenges through looking only at social, political and economic issues, and not paying sufficient attention to the implications of social mobilization under new cultural networks of meaning production and processing.

Burgers (2016) has convincingly explained that social change and metaphor production are interrelated. A good example of what he defines as *incremental change* can be found in the foundational metaphor of 'laying the foundations of the EU' which contributed to establishing the principles of the European Union in the post-war period. A good example of what he terms 'fundamental change' could be traced in the cognitive, and therefore cultural and political, informational processing of the metaphor 'Europe is a building' to another one commonly present at institutional discourse, 'Europe is a family' (see Figure 1).

According to Burgers, a metaphor can be exhausted and/or normalized when it becomes a conventional metaphor. In this regard, his theoretical approach builds on the research carried out by Lakoff and Johnson (1980b) about 'primary metaphor', and the notion of 'unconventional metaphors' as conceptualized by Gibbs (2017a) and Kövacses (2010) (Figure 2).

This scheme helps in the understanding of the scientific contributions and debates from the initial conceptualization of 'primary metaphors' to the latest findings connected to what Andreas Musolff (2006, 2008, 2012, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2017) has brilliantly problematized as 'metaphor scenarios', which are the 'organization of source concepts into mini-narratives or "scenarios" that dominate the discourse manifestations of source domains'. Musolff provides examples of this by using a corpus of British and German public debates on the European Union. Complementing this approach, Zaiotti has applied the term 'pragmatic metaphors' (2008) to metaphors such as the 'Schengen laboratory' when studying the political and cultural framing of European Union law-making. In my view, Zaiotti's 'pragmatic metaphors' provide good examples of Musolff's 'metaphor scenarios',[9] as they

> help members of a community find a reasonable way to justify the undertaking of practices that break with what is the prevailing norm. As special types of cognitive 'mirrors', they illuminate the yet unexplored path actors wish to undertake and thus support their 'commute' between the existing and the potential new commonsense. (Zaiotti, 2008: 68)
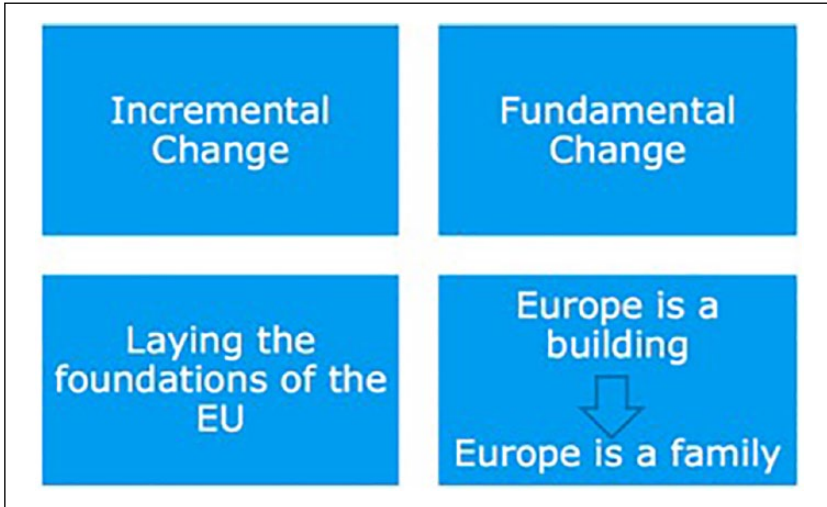
Figure 1. Fundamental change in cognitive processing of the metaphor 'Europe is a building'. © Pablo Valdivia.
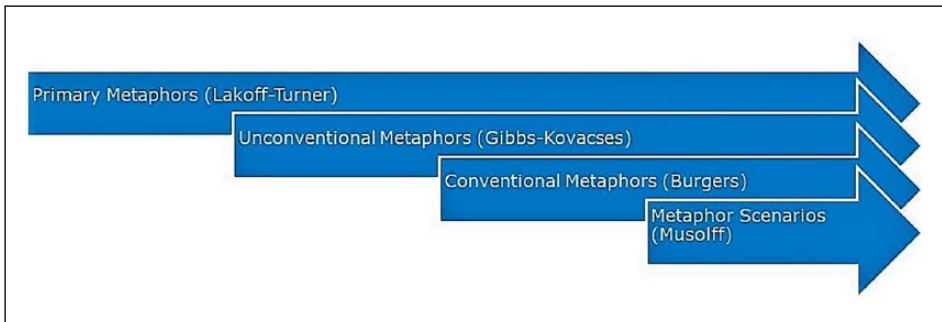

Figure 2. Conceptual metaphor theoretical building: from primary metaphors to metaphor scenarios. © Pablo Valdivia.

The disciplinary development of the study of metaphors from Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Turner) to Critical Metaphor Theory (Musolff) has been rich and enlightening for two reasons: (a) it has proved that constructing worldviews and decision-making are part of complex processes and not by-products of ideological causality; (b) it has provided a more solid and scientific grounding for metaphor studies in methodological terms, thanks to new data-processing tools and interpretative communities, transforming what, in the past, was a product of subjective impressionistic critique.

In this regard, I would like to contribute to the ongoing debate on metaphoricity and social mobilization by filling a gap that I believe to exist between the cognitive-performative agency level of the 'cultural narrative' (where social interactions, attachments,

expectations, rationalities and modes of becoming take place) and the brilliant contribution made by Andreas Musolff on 'metaphor scenarios' at the level of metaphor meaning processing. I agree that source concepts are organized into mini-narratives (scenarios). Building on this idea, I suggest that there is a not sufficiently problematized upper level above the metaphor scenario (e.g. the 'Schengen laboratory') but prior to the configuration of the cultural narrative (i.e. populism). In this meaning processing level there is a key intermediate cognitive operation where metaphors are narratively enacted, made visible and experienced. This is what I call the 'regime' level.

I will use an accessible policy-making document belonging to institutional discourse in order to illustrate what I have explained so far: the European Commission's *White Paper on the Future of Europe and the Way Forward* (2017). This document was presented to the European Commission on 1 March 2017. Its aim was to open a debate and foster critical reflection on the goals of the European Union for 2025. The second half of the title, 'the way forward', is telling of the metaphorical frame that the conceptual grounding of the document relies on. Terms such as 'drivers', 'carrying on', 'accelerating', 'continue to' and 'moving on', among other examples, are predominant in the document. This is especially evident in one of the five possible scenarios the document contemplates, entitled 'those who want more do more', where 'carrying on' (as a vanguard or leading group) is one of the most privileged notions. In short, the document operates conceptually according to metaphors of motion, as indicated by the title. In my view, a given regime of metaphors operates within a feedback loop of meaning processing which, in the case of the White Paper, can tentatively be summarized as in Figure 3.

My modest contribution to the current scientific debate is to acknowledge how a regime of metaphors establishes a hierarchy of conceptual frames which articulate the conditions of possibility of a given cultural narrative. If we take the example above, the privileged primary metaphor of 'Europe is Motion' engenders certain expectations of meaning that foster particular, and no other, (un)conventional metaphors which further articulate a specific mini-narrative or scenario (progress). Once the mini-narrative or scenario is articulated, then a specific regime becomes active by obscuring other possible (or probabilistic) regimes. After the regime is active and visible, it enacts the configuration of a cultural narrative (which I call a narrative because it comes from the action of narrative enacting) as a mode of becoming.

If we accept my conceptualization of the regime(s) of metaphor as a plausible mode of processing meaning, then some urgent questions should be addressed: how and why do these regimes of metaphor emerge? How do they become active? How and why is a particular regime privileged and hegemonic before others? How do cultural narratives absorb, produce, transform, consume and disseminate regimes of metaphors? How do regimes inform policy and decision-making in the institutional sphere? Why are some regimes possible only in particular historical contexts and not others? From my perspective, these questions can only be answered by problematizing what an interpretative community is in the age of informational networks. If we accept the definition of 'regime' as a particular way of operating or organizing something, then it is key to analysing the hierarchical tensions which take place in the cultural and performative thresholds of processing meaning.
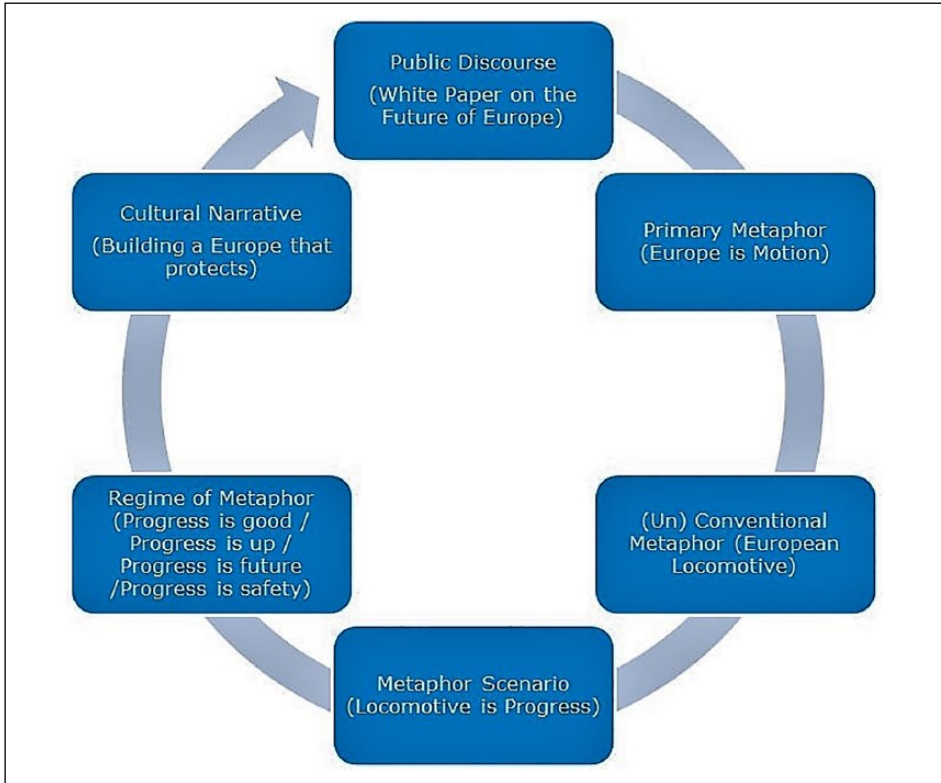
Figure 3. General scheme regime of metaphor theory applied to the European *White Paper on the Future of Europe and the Way Forward.* © Pablo Valdivia.

Therefore, it is my understanding that the populist modes of becoming active in Europe after the 2008 financial crisis and the refugee crisis have gained momentum and support through a confluence of different factors, including, fundamentally, the activation and rise of regime(s) of metaphor. In this regard, we face a turbulent moment where certain regimes of metaphor, the postwar conceptual configuration of the European Union, is collapsing and being challenged by a new one.

While the postwar metaphorical configuration orbited around conceptualizations assembled in the fashion of the following collapsing regime: 'European Union is a Building'; 'European Union is a Family'; 'State Members as Friends'; 'European Union as Equilibrium'; European Union as an Alliance'; currently, the European Union is being challenged by a populist-nativist and nationalist metaphorical configuration under the new rising regime of metaphor:[10] 'European Union as Corrupted Body'; 'European Union as Panopticon'; 'State Members as Rivals'; 'European Union as Imbalance'; and 'European Union as Company'.

Perhaps, as I suggested at the beginning of this essay, the metaphor of 'fortress Europe' epitomizes the cultural and political crossroads we currently encounter, where

the cultural narrative of populism activates European citizens as anti-European, and the postwar regime of metaphor is being exhausted, lacking narrative legitimacy in the aftermath of the post-2008 crises. Thus, I would like to argue that new regimes of metaphor based on equity and inclusion are urgently needed if democratic systems do not wish to see the social fabric eroded and if they hope to renew the goal of creating all-encompassing cultural and political projects. As Castells et al. (2018: 192) note:

> Indeed, it is my hypothesis that it is in the realm of values, of new values, where we could find the seeds of a potential European identity. On the basis of surveys and attitudes, and a review of the literature, I have identified some elements of what I have called a 'European identity project'. This is what appears empirically to possibly carry a broad cultural consensus throughout Europe, besides the values of political democracy and liberty in all its manifestations (which are widely shared values, but not distinctively European). These elements can be identified as shared feelings concerning the need for universal social protection of living conditions; social solidarity; stable employment; worker's rights; gender equality; universal human rights, including gay and lesbian rights; concern about poor people around the world; extension of democracy to regional and local levels, with a renewed emphasis on citizen participation; the defence of historically rooted cultures, often expressed in linguistic terms.

I find Castell's proposal for a European identity project very valuable, as I have shown that the material conditions of existence are cognitively and performatively experienced, enacting specific configurations of modes of becoming as cultural narratives. In this sense, I argue that cultural narratives (and their metaphoricity) are key to understanding the mechanisms that 'transform . . . a group of like-minded people into a motivated, mobilized tribe' (Barlett, 2018: 47), and how people can be activated through 'a sense of shared struggle and common grievance' (2018: 48).

Conclusions: cultural thresholds

I began this article by posing two urgent questions: (1) why, in moments of crisis, do particular metaphors operate in the construction of interrelated cultural narratives?; and (2) in what ways do metaphors generate alternative intellectual horizons for social renewal, particularly in response to the Southern European rise of populism? In response to the first question, I have sufficiently demonstrated that specific metaphors become active through the conjunction of crises because of their cognitive and performative relational abilities during the pre-figurative poetic act of processing meaning. Contrary to the arguments of Laclau, I have explained that metaphors are narratively enacted. This is to say that terms such as 'justice', 'freedom' or 'progress' are not empty, and configure modes of becoming in the public sphere when certain potential conceptual expectations, and not others, are made visible, privileged and activated in a given cultural narrative. Therefore, signifiers are not hollow but the result of a complex metaphoricity tension in the interrelated informational meaning processing of cultural narratives. I must insist on the fact that the experientiality of narrative cannot be neglected.

In answer to the second question, I have proposed an analytical approach which builds on previous findings from Conceptual Metaphor and Critical Metaphor Theory. My analysis suggests that metaphors function under regimes, which become visible through

relational counter-tension with other regimes that have become exhausted, naturalized or which are simply losing legitimacy. Out of the four rhetorical devices which operate in pre-figurative poetic acts – metonymy, synecdoche, irony and metaphor – the last is especially relevant because of its pervasive presence in communication and its creative ability to establish mini-narratives that re-signify source concepts. In the context of Southern Europe, where the effects of the post-2008 European crises were especially critical, new political parties supporting populist, nativist and nationalist positions have re-signified the cultural imaginary of the nation-state in opposition to European cosmo-politanism. In Barlett's words: 'We are living, as McLuhan predicted, through a re-trib-alization of politics' (2018: 43). This is exemplified by the rise to power of Podemos, Lega Nord or Movimento 5 Stelle. In this regard, populism has been successful at creat-ing an alternative cultural horizon for social renewal by activating and making visible a rising regime of fundamentally anti-European metaphors.

Finally, there are three points I would like to conclude with: (1) populism is not an ideology but a mode of becoming (an attitude) in a cultural narrative. Accordingly, any citizen has the potential to become populist under the right regime of metaphor and the experiential enacting of a shared cultural imaginary. This explains why non-factual polit-ical positions gain widespread acceptance, misinformation has become a strategy to achieve a goal without risking being seen as morally blameless, and 'post-truth' has become a familiar term in institutional discourse. (2) Metaphors gain properties of social and political mobilization at the regime level, not before. Their potential for social change or renewal can only be further developed if they become narratively enacted and form part of a major cultural narrative. (3) Cultural narratives operate as thresholds. There is no causal unidirectionality from the cultural narrative to the public sphere or institutional discourse. This feature explains why a cultural narrative can simultaneously hold a position and its contrary. In other words, it explains why a model citizen might hold a specific political orientation in some matters while simultaneously becoming a populist nativist in others.

These conclusions lead me to affirm that the re-tribalization of the public sphere is feeding populism, while at the same time it fuels partisanship. It poses two concerning new questions that should be addressed in future lines of work: (1) If populism manages to theologically displace the notion of citizenship, does spectrality become the central characteristic of those who do not accommodate the populist cultural and legal frame-work, i.e. are we on the narrative threshold of the legalization and cultural validation of xenophobia?; and (2) How long can a populist cultural narrative based on a post-ideolog-ical utopia where tribal loyalty centrally articulates an imperative mode of becoming last? Perhaps, in order to answer these and other complex questions, we should look back to Hannah Arendt, who wrote that:

> The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e. the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e. the standards of thought) no longer exist. (1951: 474)

Literary scholars are experts in interpretative communities and the pre-figurative poetic acts that inform critical thinking. Humanities and new literary studies should now have a

leading role in the understanding of cultural narratives and the configurations of the social fabric.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. In the field of neuroscience, Antonio Damasio (2018: 61) has noted the importance of cognitive mechanisms in the configuration of decision-making:

    The absence of mapping and image-making capabilities entails other fatal consequences: consciousness cannot arise in the absence of minds, and the same applies, even more fundamentally, to the very special class of processes called feelings, which are constituted by images closely interwoven with body operations . . . Why was having images so important? What did having images really accomplish? The presence of images meant that each organism could create internal representations based on its ongoing sensory descriptions of both external and internal events . . . Central processors manage the process of image manipulation that we otherwise know as thinking, imagining, reasoning and decision making.

    On the notion of 'imagined communities', see Anderson (1983)

2. Pujante (2017: 48) has pointed out in his academic work the existence of this gap and the key role of cultural rhetoric in the formation of worldviews:

    Language therefore formulates the realities with which we live and in which we believe, as well as those we enjoy. They are realities at various levels, which exist while their constructs are created: we can talk about Beethoven's music and Cervantes' Quixote as human constructs, but this also applies to all the discourses that interpret the world in the events related – both historical discourses and those concerning present and future possibility, because there is no possible distinction here between discourses for reality and discourses for fictionality.

3. See Pujante (2017: 55):

    According to White, the four basic tropes, or four possibilities of prefiguration (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony) are four types of awareness of the experience obtained from living. A linguistic process is what makes the contents of our experience (our cognition) conscious. Broadening this approach – which is an approach rooted in rhetoric – when engaging in any rhetorical analysis of public discourse, what we have to seek is the relationship between elocutive structures and the inventio-dispositio, that is, the discovery of the ideas of

the discourse and its interpretative design of the part of the world that causes it. This interpretation takes place through forms of language and gesture, and does so on several levels: primarily the narrative and the tropological. We certainly produce a plot (a narratio in rhetorical discourse, a subject in literary narrative discourse) which explains events as we see them – this is the composition of our consciousness. However, according to White, and continuing the tradition of Vico, there is a poetic act of prefiguration of the historical discourse, a kind of infrastructure.

4. In connection with the relationship between political expression and cognitive expressions, Damasio (2018: 26) has argued that the brain is 'the organic basis of the capacity to learn and to manipulate symbols'.

5. See Pujante (2017: 55):

There are four possible types of prefiguration, which are based on four basic tropes: metaphor (experience in object–object terms), metonymy (party–party), synecdoche (object–totality) and irony (denial of the assertion). These four tropes are four types of consciousness of the experience gained from living. We make our experiences (our knowledge) conscious through language. Tropes are the mechanisms that enable us to understand this process of consciousness: the mechanisms of figural language. So when different historians consider the French Revolution, for example, they are faced with the same events, but historians offer us different ways of relating them, because they have different conceptions of nature, society, politics and history itself, which they convey with their figural characterizations of the whole. The narrative suggested by the historian does not therefore lie in the events, which are the same for everyone. Events are not inherently tragic, comic or satirical, with the latter understood as construction, as direction of meaning.

6. For working definitions of the notions of 'culture' and 'narrative', see Damasio (2018: 14, 91–2, 96–7).

7. In this regard, see Damasio (2018: 97):

The constant search and sweep of our memories of past and future enable us, in effect, to intuit possible meanings of current situations and to predict the possible future, immediate and not so immediate, as life unfolds. It is reasonable to say that we live part of our lives in the anticipated future rather than in the present.

8. Regarding the conceptual genealogy on these mechanisms, see Crouch (2018: 318–19):

As . . . some other observers have pointed out, the 'universalism' of the social democratic welfare state has almost always been a limited universe that stops at the national border, as it has been based on the powerful, egalitarian concept of national citizenship, rooted in people's sense of shared membership in a national community. There has never been any reason why social democracy's voters, as opposed to its thinkers, should have cosmopolitan attitudes. The idea is expressed most clearly in the Swedish concept of the welfare state as *folkshemmet*, the place where people can feel at home . . . To assert the limitation of social citizenship to 'real' nationals now can no longer be the *folkshem* of a people who just happen to be ethnically homogeneous, but becomes symbolized by the demand of the Front National that rights be limited to *français de la souche* (best translated broadly as 'true born French'), requiring active exclusion of those deemed to be outsiders.

9. Similar terms, but not exactly the same, have been proposed by Gibb's conceptualization of 'dynamic metaphors' and Ritchie's 'story metaphors' (2017). I acknowledge their

contributions to the ongoing debate about metaphoricity. I also find these contributors useful as they all attempt to articulate a better understanding of how metaphors interrelate with discourse-making and social factors. Unfortunately, I cannot provide an overview and genealogy of the terms here, but I invite the reader to pay attention to different academic conceptualizations of the same research problems by reviewing the references at the end of this article.

10. A general look at institutional discourse posed by Southern European politicians illustrates the pervasiveness of the metaphors included here. For more information, see Castells et al. (2018).

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