Relating to the real

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Why it is worth paying attention to the public personas of political leaders

by Maria Brock

Barely a month after the news that Donald John Trump had been elected the next president of the United States, some commentators were bailing the end of Western democracy.

Political scientists who normally study American democracy in splendid isolation are starting to turn their attention to what happens when authoritarians win elections and democracy morphs into something else.

In some Russian circles, the response to the election result was less the anticipated celebration, and more an exasperated sense of “welcome to our world” as the American electorate seemed to have chosen a candidate that combines Vladimir Putin’s powerful authority and authoritarianism with the bufoonery of the long-standing Duma member Vladimir Zhirinovsky. In fact, the way Trump’s personality relies on a combination of unbridled masculinity, celebration of authority, populist rhetoric, and mastery of the media spectacle displays many common features with Vladimir Putin, currently in his 3rd presidential term.

Therefore, rather than nominating 2016 as the year democracy succumbed to right-wing authoritarianism, examining the many reasons that led to Trump’s becoming president-elect. These range from fear and racism among those who voted for him, to the fact that the American political system, while not democratic, is still fairly representative.

The image has been manipulated.
Buffy is a caramel and white Bulgarian shepherd Karakachan Dog. Buffy was ten-weeks old when he was given to Putin.

feel threatened by the increasing diversity of the US, to the hopelessness and anger of the white working class “losers of globalization”, to the lack of appeal Hillary Clinton might have held among key demographics – despite having won the popu- lar vote by a significant margin. Not only is an intersectional examination of the causes of Trump’s election important to understanding how he managed to appeal to multiple sections of the populace, but the low voter turnout also suggests that analyses should not stop at the level where Putin is President Trump through their ambivalence or indifference. However, while it may not necessarily have been a messianic belief in Donald Trump that led to his election, there is much skirting around the issue of what makes him appealing. In fact, paying attention to the forces that prepared the arena for political fig- ures like Trump should not mean a critical turning away from their personalities.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST such discussions insist either that dwelling on character is not productive in furthering a more sociological understanding, or that a psychological, let alone psychoanalyti- cal reading is bound to succumb to cliché or even misinterpreta- tion. Notwithstanding, there was clearly an “irrational” ele- ment in Trump’s victory, as the list of factors such as those men- tioned above do not invariably add up to Trump-as-president. There is, however, another perspective that translates this “irrational” element into evidence of less conscious forces at work, and in many cases a replacement of reality by entertain- ment, is characteristic of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This has led to the creation of numerous “pseudo- events”, some of which the public may no longer discern as such. As is the case with any type of “pseudo-event”, its suc- cess is “measured by how widely it is re- ported. The question, ‘Is it real? ’ is less important than ‘Is it newsworthy?’ Its relation to the underlying reality of the situation is ambiguous. Its interest arises largely from this very ambiguity.” Notably, Richard Waterman’s statement quoted here refers to strategies employed by US politicians. The case of Donald Trump is in many ways an even star- ter illustration of the power of spectacle, as his forays into television and film preceded his entry into politics. Indeed, through his appearances in films and TV shows – notably “The Apprentice”, Donald Trump the character was already a house- hold name. While the Trump brand’s biggest supporter seems to be Donald Trump himself, closely followed by his immediate family, Putin assumes a somewhat more modest public per- sona, letting his deeds speak for themselves. At the same time, the amount of Putiniana, or cultural output and commodities featuring the Russian president – from toothpicks to songs and calendars – is not too far from the manner in which the Trump name is used as a trademark, lent to products such as steaks and cologne, and turning a profit at the same time.

However, the transformation of politics into entertainment products can also generate a greater cynical distance from politics in general, creating the impression that “in the enter- tainment industry when there is a sign it seems there isn’t one, and when there isn’t one we believe that there is”, as Umberto Eco observes. “Symptomatic of this disorientation is the media speculation that surrounded a walk the Russian took in 2013 in St. Petersburg after the funeral of his first japhad coach. He ostentatiously wished to spend time alone – without bodyguards or the press – in his old neighborhood, but pictures of Putin on his solitary walk soon flooded the Internet, often accompanied by the question whether this was actually staged, perhaps to imbue Putin with greater emotional depth, which would link it to several later occasions during which he was seen shedding tears in public. However, it is usually the newsworthiness of an event that trumps any such speculations. The fact that Donald Trump’s campaign often seemed to be less reliant on a coherent action plan than on his ability to tap into American voters’ ids, also points to the fact that spectacles do not need to rely on ter- ribly intricate strategies, their crudeness instead lending them further appeal.


However, Putinism has also been described as a populist leader – another feature, along with “petro-masculinity” he is seen to share with figures like Silvio Berlusconi. Examples of his forays into vulgar language include the promise to “finish” (Chechen) terrorists in the crater in his days as prime minis-
ter, to a more recent instance, again evoking unorthodox ways of punishing Chechen rebel fighters:

When, a couple of years ago, a Western journalist asked him an awkward question about Chechnya, Putin snapped back that, if the man wasn’t yet circumcised, he recommended him to visit Moscow, where they have excellent surgeons who would cut a little more radically than usual.

These outbursts — recruiting the Russian “national other” of the Muslim separatist, and combining it with sadistic and darkly sexual imagery — occur very sporadically, but always attract media attention like incidents of Putin publicly telling racist jokes.

While the presence of such rhetoric may be partially related to past violence that has remained unexorcised from contempor ary and distant discourses, it appears to be employed with strategic intent. But why would the Russian president need this “obscene supplement” to his speech? And again extending the obvious comparison, why has Trump’s forays into the crass and the obscene had such positive resonance among many Americans? The president-elect is notoriously thin-skinned, but even his public obsession with the perceived size of his hands and what might imply has receives less negative attention among his supporters than expected. Similarly, when footage appeared of him boasting how his fame enabled him to “grab them [women] by the pussy”, — this proved to be less detrimental than his critics hoped.

One explanation sees the deployment of populist rhetoric as a way of strengthening bonds with the community, tailored to appeal specifically to society’s “ordinary” members. In the case of Putinism, however, and in contrast with Ernesto Laclau’s more optimistic vision of populism as a force for change, we may wonder how the central identity — the president’s words “his identity is split: he is the father, but also one of the brothers.” One easy manifestation of this is the (usually) red baseball cap Donald Trump wore at his rallies:

With his red cap on, the glossy billionaire living in a gilt Manhattan apartment appears to have something in common with a farmer of his own region, whom he refers to as “my redneck friend”. In Laclau’s words “his identity is split: he is the father, but also one of the brothers.” One easy manifestation of this is the (usually) red baseball cap Donald Trump wore at his rallies:

A “composite of King-Kong and the suburban barber”

The leader needs to find ways of appealing to the group that will put him both in charge and in the midst of its members, so as to gain both authority and legitimacy. How might one understand this dual identity? In Laclau’s words “his identity is split: he is the father, but also one of the brothers.” One easy manifestation of this is the (usually) red baseball cap Donald Trump wore at his rallies:

According to Slavoj Žižek, “the popular movement needs the idefi cative fgure of a charismatic leader”. However, if all of a “popular movement’s” coherence and content are pro vided by its leader figure, then this also proves to be its weakest point. The site of the miracle of appearing as an average person, just as Hitler posed as a composite of King-Kong and the suburban barber.

Nevertheless the leader figure, in Adorno’s analysis, is not impervious to historical contingency: while the authority is originally born under particular circumstances, it decreases in importance in a less repressive society. What re mains is the need to convey an “impression of greater force and of more freedom of libido” than the rest of the community.

In the case of Russia, it appears that a classical panacea to this dilemma has been found. To achieve this, the government relies less on the President as sole master signifier, and more on ways of turning Russia’s inherent tensions outward. Indeed, the surge of patriotism that followed the annexation of Crimea and subsequent armed con flict in Ukraine may have secured Putin’s reign for many Russian voters. The manipulation of national discourses, its construction as a monolithic vision are branded as traitors, and members of the opposition press designated as belonging to the “fifth column”.

The ways in which the Trump campaign similarly had relied on nationalistic ideas — chiefly through a vilification of immigrants and the prelapsarian idea of “making America great again” — as well as the schizophrenic relationship it maintained with the media, simultaneously accusing it of lying while also relying on it to gain as much publicity as possible, demonstrates that the primer on how to win followers and infl uence people relies on certain perennial and transversal principles, such as the ones discussed in detail by Ernesto Laclau. The leader is presented both above and below the same electorate, by combining superiority — be it physical or psychological — with the right amount of populist rhetoric or folksy demeanor. Internal tensions are best channelled outward, in a process of “negative mobilization”, whereby dissenters of this vision are branded as traitors, and members of the opposition press designated as belonging to the “fifth column”.

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**references**

3. David Runciman, ibid.
23. Maria Brock is post doctoral researcher at Centre for Baltic and East European Studies, Södertörn University.