

The People as a Virtual Body: Populism, Paranoia, and Digital Communication
by Claus-Dieter Rath

In his dialogue with Einstein in 1932 on "Why War?" Freud writes:

"Thus the union of the people must be permanent and well organized; it must enact rules to meet the risk of possible revolts; must set up machinery insuring that its rules – the laws – are observed and that such acts of violence as the laws demand are duly carried out. This recognition of a community of interests engenders among the members of the group a sentiment of unity and fraternal solidarity which constitutes its real strength."

This is not achieved by some once-and-for-all act, but is a permanent task. In this activity the city is constituted as Agora, Polis, Forum.

1

The *City of the Future* – the city that must arise, in Antonio Gramsci's vision of 1917 – isn't just an urban structure. To be urban, Hardware and Apps are not enough; a functioning *citizenship* is needed.

Modern technologies allow us to delude ourselves that devices already constitute a social link between individuals (a similar error sometimes occurs in city planning). Three apps are pertinent to stage the perfect functioning of human relationships: one apparatus (administrative), another apparatus (machines and machines), and applications (the programs).

The perfect functioning of the apparatus is represented by the bureaucracy – e.g. by the keyword "*Brussels*" – and by the technocracy – e.g. from the Internet.

2

The utopia of communication underestimates or denies the power of technocracy. The Internet seems to achieve, besides a radical democratization of information, a utopia of communication.

According to a utopian vision of the media, it is possible a) that everyone should exchange without differences, that everyone should participate, b) that the things subjected to censorship must ultimately be articulated (including psychic censorship), c) that through exchange everything is said and done without the request of the *sujet supposé savoir* and without a control.

A political movement that aims everything toward the Internet either has no clue to this aspect of technocracy, or neglects it. It's as though the Agora, the Polis, the Forum were repealed – some come to argue that the parliament could be replaced by the "Network."

"The network" is, in their eyes, a neutral, clean system of relations. All the dirt is attached instead to people (personalization), corrupt, or failed, or greedy

3

The theme "mass communication" is linked to psychoanalytic theorizing as early as the start of the First World War, when Freud considers "public opinion" as representative of the ego ideal.

The ego ideal "arose from the critical influence of the parents (conveyed to him by the medium of the voice), to whom were added, as time went on, those who trained and taught him and the innumerable and indefinable host of all other people in his environment"¹ (in Freud's German original, "*host*" is "*Schwarm*" = *swarm*). Freud adds in brackets: "(his fellow-men and public opinion)."

In the 1950s Lacan formulated his critique of communication, and in 1974 he expressed himself on the function of *gadgets*, of the apparatuses with which we surround ourselves and which confront us with the real of science, of the fear that arises and of the search for meaning, truth and consolation in religion, which could become so strong as to leave no chance for the *psychoanalysis project*.²

4

Even if we realize that today what frightens us may have already taken place and that it is only a variant, or if we think that these phenomena, so striking today, are nothing but initial shocks that will soon be absorbed and defused, we live these qualitative and quantitative leaps as fracture and shock.

Internet, smartphones etc. are not burdens that overcome the absolute threshold of the human psychic apparatus, but they do overcome boundaries, as in the case of a provocation – with effects on the libidinal economy.

To these current excessive demands belong new multisensory stimulations, such as the strict order to identify ourselves, which does not assail us in the guise of a rumbling voice, but as a mute claim on the part of the system, in the most trivial Internet procedures.

5

Many types of violence/power derive directly from the object-apparatus and object-programs (such as smartphone and app) (I use this term in analogy with the Freudian *object person*):

¹ Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," in: S. Freud. *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, Pelican, vol. 11 (trans. [J.] Strachey), p. 90

² Jacques Lacan: "La troisième," Rome 31.10.1974, in: *Lettres de l'École Freudienne*, Rome, 7ème Congrès de l'École Freudienne. Nr. 16, Novembre 1975

- We are continually aroused by the permanent mobilization of our partial drives: incorporation, registration, exclusion ...
 - Breaking news keeps us in a state of permanent agitation
 - We are caused by perverse acts that are later denied: "I never intended this! They want to persecute me! "
 - We are constantly checking something and we are constantly under control
 - In the same apparatus and in the same programs that keep us in agitation, we seek the remedy, the advice, and the possibility of discharge of the excitement.
 - In apparent contradiction to this generalized media mania, the refusal of any kind of representation, mediation or intellectuality is articulated in the name of immediacy and spontaneity – in short: of sublimation.
 - The critical and judicial *process* is reduced to a libidinally heavily invested act of consent or rejection, of inclusion or exclusion or even of a spill (*Brexit*). Emotionalization, the dominance of affect in brief communications does not mean an increase in information, does not mean approaching the thing, or that communication contains more "truth." What results is an atrophy of interpretative skills (in reading and writing regarding such a reading).
 - In many of the so-called populist movements with which we are confronted, paranoid traits are recognizable. Both the figure of persecution and conspiracy, which should legitimize the attack – as self-defense – on some minorities or groups of power. As well as paranoid interpretative folly: instead of clashing with the thing, making assumptions about those of another opinion. And this in a tone of certainty, claiming to know well what the intentions of the opponent are with regard to one's own pure, innocent, just cause.
 - At the same time, discourse about lies, the lying press, etc. rages on.
- How can we – we psychoanalysts – intervene in this discourse we deal with in psychoanalysis, with respect to the relationship between truth, knowledge, language?
- Concepts such as people, system, power (*Macht*), identity, culture, truth are fetishes in a logo (*generation identity*). A tendency to holophrasis destroys the dialectics of such concepts and rejects their translation and plurivocity.

6

The current use of the term "people," which does not differentiate or articulate or grasp in its articulations, nor does it include a people capable of articulating, leads to an ignorance of the political. The political is now understood as a search for singular interests.

Populism is not the realized domain of the people, but it is the fetishizing use of an abstract concept of people as unity. It is claimed to represent it; one feels delegated to it, be it through real elections or through precise demands. If, then, part of this "people" makes its voice heard in a way that is not appreciated, it is defamed as not a true people: bourgeois, privileged, etc., accused of pursuing personal interests – to the detriment of "the people."

This is close to what Agnes Heller wrote, referring to the political style of Viktor Orbán and others; she speaks of an accumulation of power and a new feudalism (<http://politicalcritique.org/cee/hungary/2018/agnes-heller-orban-is-a-tyrant/>).

7

People and *Democracy* are transformed into the opposite of the *Republic*. One can differentiate between a *non-contained* people and a *constituted* people, who are castrated. The first is encountered in a certain undifferentiated conception of democracy (domination of the people in the sense of domination of the majority), the second, which refers to the "thing," *res*, as regulated by the constitution, corresponds to the republic. Some conceptions of the plebiscite put the will of the people above the law. But at the same time the sovereign people is subjected to the dictatorship of saying yes or no.

In the politics of populist movements the theoretical possibility of a multi-party communication is reduced to a mass participation in the exercise of active consent and obedience to a norm and to a leader. Critics of political representativeness consider themselves natural representatives of the people.

The leading figure of today's populism confuses his followers, explains to them that they do not have an overview, that all divergent opinions are idiocy, hoax, or conscious falsifications (lies), gives them the feeling he has the situation firmly in hand and will free them and punish the bad guys. We must believe the *Big Brother* and give ourselves to him.

Some of these populist figures guide themselves as brothers and not as leaders. They reject any form of privilege, as they pursue only the good – or even the happiness – of the people (not better defined). But they are indeed leaders, despite the supposed horizontal structure of their movement or party.

8

Yet there is also a resistance to the political: With "resistance to the political" I mean a not wanting to know the truth of the subject as socially bound. Those who distance themselves from the political dimension do not want to know anything about what constitutes them as a subject, which refers to the neighbor and to the law or to the imperatives of culture. A general reason for the detachment from thinking in terms of a collective is the hostility toward the culture and the asociality of the neurotic underlined by Freud, as well as the neurotic conviction of being autonomous (or the current emphasis in certain political currents on *sovereignty*).

The resistance to *the political* is more serious than the revulsion toward *politics*, that is the aversion to show and to political jargon, or the disappointment with specific political figures (politicians), from whom more was expected.

In all psychoanalytic treatment – and this does not contradict singularity – the question of the individual's relations to the *Polis* is central, as are, therefore, those to the small "o" others, to "fellow men," and to the big "O" Others too, the law and laws, both written and unwritten. In this sense, even the most private psychoanalytic consulting room is a *Polyclinic*.

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