Narrative Practices of Exchange: Europe in the face of Exclusionary Populisms

Amy Daughton

Abstract
As Europe continues to live within and through the consequences of demagogic populism, a reminder of how politics can be built from grassroots may prove crucial to the survival of the European project. Engaging with the work of Paul Ricoeur throughout, and drawing on political theory and recent Catholic theological and practical theological interventions, the chapter seeks to understand and respond to European populisms through the frame of narrative. Narrative offers a tool to analyse populisms that manifest in exclusionary ways; it characterises the hermeneutic lenses of Ricoeur's understanding of European plurality and exchange; it represents the utopian, future-oriented result of concrete civic and political encounters, pointing onward to what may (still) be possible. This analysis ultimately relies on an understanding of the human person as constituted narratively, and so summoned to act and narrate with others in political community, through theory and practices of exchange and encounter.

Key-words
Ricoeur, Populism, Narrative, Practical Theology, Encounter, Catholic Social Thought,

In an oft-cited essay, Paul Ricœur, that great European, spoke of what Europe needed in order to replenish its own self-understanding (Ricœur 1995a). He drew on the hermeneutic lenses that would characterise much of his ongoing systematic work in that period: translation, exchange of memory, and forgiveness. These are exchanges that Ricœur would characterise as taken "in imagination and in sympathy" (1995a: 6-7). Now, over a quarter century later, we confront a Europe all the more fractured and facing challenges to its purpose as a shared endeavour of living together. Together these lenses may speak to the problem of contemporary political discourse and how political theology is responding to this moment.

This chapter seeks to examine the continuing significance of these lenses for this present moment, proposed by Ricœur over twenty five years ago. I will first examine the nature of populisms arising in contemporary politics, considering them in narrative terms in relation to the lenses of translation, memory exchange, and forgiveness, as well as what populisms represent for the project of European political and social life. Second, I will turn recent theological responses to populism that have used myth. Throughout I will continue to use Ricœur's work on political and narrative concepts to interrogate what is at play in those responses, especially

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - CC BY-SA

drawing on his idea of utopia. What is of interest to examine in these two strands is the move from the no-place of utopia to the role of practices in inculcating the "new ethos" for Europe that Ricœur outlined (1995a). Using Ricœur to interrogate this theological response helps examine what is actually proposed: both a critical and alternative response to populisms as they are being analysed in Europe while acknowledging some similarity. Ricœur represents both important conceptual resources for responding to populisms in his own right, but also a significant influence on contemporary Catholic theology in the writings of Pope Francis whose recent work evokes and directly cites Ricœur, and aims at discussing populisms in relation to the "mythic" people.

1. Exclusionary Populisms of Europe

Any amount of ink has been spilled over the last twenty five years on the phenomenon of populism, as the term became increasingly used in both academic and public-facing discussions of contemporary politics in Europe, though it had long been part of Latin American and other discourses. This interest in and use of the term corresponds to an observed rise in populist politics both in new political movements and as the character of established parties across the region. Important work on mapping that rise has been accomplished by the Popu-List project, where scholars have sought to quantify the electoral vote share of populist parties across more than thirty European countries since 1989, including categories of far-left and far-right as further differentiation (Rooduijn et al 2019). That project presents an approximate rise in vote share of populist parties from ten to thirty percent.

Many of the scholars who have engaged with interrogating this political shift have noted that the rise in populist success at the polls has accelerated in the wake of the double dip recession, but also that the economic crisis cannot be taken as a single direct cause. Rather, the argument runs that this crisis coincided with a political crisis of weakening party identities resulting in lower memberships, lower voter turnout, and electoral volatility, all creating room for new parties and politics to emerge. Also noting the rhetoric of cultural crises introduced by public discussion and political policing of migration, political scientists Manuela Caiani and Paolo Graziano have observed that this set of pressures has "without any doubt, provided a specific 'window of opportunity' for the emergence of new political actors which capitalised on citizens' discontent" (Caiani/Graziano 2019: 1141). It remains to be seen how the handling of the ongoing

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

covid pandemic further shapes these trends, and whether the rhetoric of welcome for Ukrainian refugees alters the broader cultural and policy landscape.

In the face of both political identity and economic security shifting, it is not surprising that the actual content of populist politics in Europe is extraordinarily disparate, as well as appearing both in new party forms and through changing established parties (Caiani/Graziano 2019: 1146 tab.2). Already in 2004, Catherine Fieschi was noting "populism's propensity to appear as a component of diametrically opposed ideological stances" (2004: 235). Cas Mudde's relatively restrained definition is therefore of particular help, as he suggests that populist parties are

> parties that endorse the set of ideas that society is ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (2004: 543).

Such a stance can readily be assimilated into and shape various types of projects across the political spectrum. To take just two illustrative examples of the extensive analyses that have been offered over recent years, Carlo Ruzza and Rosa Sanchez Salgado (2021) have suggested three distinct categories of political priority in just right-wing European populisms: neoliberal, where the priority is the market and its populism primarily consists in strategic rhetorical devices; nationalist, with a project of redefining national identity, often in nativist terms; and socially conservative, which comes with particular focus on social topics such as same-sex partnerships and reproductive rights. These threads may appear separately or entwined.

This diversity of political content has naturally given rise to an interrogation not only of the stated priorities of such examples but also therefore to the nature of populism. Some commentators, such as Fieschi, have taken up a term of Michael Freeden's to describe the narrow political core of many populist examples as "thin-centred ideology" (1995: 485). This Freeden had used to identify political projects that stopped short of offering an integrated political vision, tending instead toward issue-driven advocacy, and so attached themselves to other forms of political ideology to scaffold the work on that issue. Sometimes such movements, and here Freeden points toward Green party examples, do develop beyond issue-based politics into propositions for the social and political whole (2017: 3). Freeden himself however has concluded that even "thin-centred" may suggest a more deliberative, developed focus than the eclectic "high selectivity of topic, ideas, and catchwords" (2017: 3) that he sees characterising

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

populisms today: "A thin-centred ideology implies that there is potentially more than the centre, but the populist core is all there is; it is not a potential centre for something broader or more inclusive. It is emaciatedly thin rather than thin-centred" (Freeden 2017: 3). Such populist projects do attach to other political ideological forms, as illustrated above, but lack more robust foundations of their own.

In Freeden we see an analysis that approaches populism with concern. His analysis of the underlying logic of populisms is: "an inclination to conceive of society as a singular unitary body… an appeal to the origination and integrity of a defining founding moment or natality… and a visceral fear of imported change in law, customs and people" (Freeden 2017: 4). This may be coupled with Pauline Johnson's critique of the consequences of such a monist understanding applied to the people as the basis of the populist stance; specifically, those opposed to a given populist position are opposed to the people. Jan-Werner Müller argues that the implication is then that populist politicians "claim that they and they alone represent the people. All other political competitors are essentiality illegitimate, and anyone who does not support them is not properly part of the people" (2016: 101). Johnson is focused on the consequences of such a rejection of the legitimacy of opposition as allowing the ducking of "the normative investment of the public use of reason" (2016: 83) and links it to "an authoritarian rewriting of the ideal of an active civil society" (87). Johnson's diagnosis finds support in later work by Carlo Ruzza and Rosa Sanchez Salgado who offer a concrete analysis of the way contemporary populisms, including government action, have been limiting and damaging the work of civil society organisations (2021, 472). This includes direct regulation and other practices such as limits on freedoms of association, assembly, and other counter-terrorism provisions.

It will be important to interrogate the implications of these analyses further as we turn to Ricœur, but as a final contextualising observation, it is worth noting that taken together this pair of critiques offer an illustration of the types of analysis that Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser observe as the norm: "populism is usually seen as a dangerous trend that, by emphasizing a rigid interpretation of the ideas of popular sovereignty and majority rule, may pursue problematic goals such as the exclusion of ethnic minorities and the erosion of horizontal accountability" (2013, 149). However, this observation is offered with a note of caution, suggesting that such readings miss inclusive models of populism that seek to expand political participation and representation. In this way, Freeden and Johnson's analysis seems borne out for Europe by the contrast Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser build between such "inclusionary" populisms manifest-

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

ing in Latin America in the 2000s versus the "exclusionary" populisms characterising Europe (2013). As we shall see in the turn to theological resources below, the differences are significant despite the shared reference to the popular constitution of the political.

For now, let us return to consider Europe. Drawing on this range of political analyses we are presented with rising populist activity across the political spectrum in various forms, frequently exclusionary and coming to bear on the meaning and action of identity, public debate, and political participation. I will now place this description back into conversation with Ricœur's hermeneutical lenses for Europe, which allows a further sharpening of the analysis of populism, especially through the category of narrative and so points onward to theological responses as well.

2. *Exclusionary Populisms versus Ricœur's new Ethos*

Ricœur's lenses are forms of exchange and dialogue. First, translation, sharing memories, and forgiveness are all by their nature offered across differences, between people. Thus these lenses represent a hermeneutical framing of the European project as a shared enterprise in the context of original difference between people, at the levels of language and culture, and the polysemy of perspective even on shared events and histories. Translation offers a mode of thinking about exchange that emphasises difficulty of communication, the multiplicity of meanings, and the risky possibility of just not understanding or getting it wrong.

Second, the exchange of memory makes that polysemy all the more challenging as it insists on multiple readings of shared events, and the excavation of events that others had buried or forgotten. The exchange of memory involves a willingness to re-narrate on both sides of the exchange. This recounting as repetition had long been understood by Ricœur as a risk, but he expressed it exactly in that late great monograph – *La memoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* – when he observed that "most events to do with the founding of any community are acts and events of violence" (2005: 26). On Europe, he argues that the referencing back to such "founding events" can be atrophying and destructive. "The repeated commemoration and celebration of [originating events] tend to freeze the history of each cultural group into an identity which is not only immutable but also deliberately and systematically incommunicable" (Ricœur 1995a: 7). Memory must remain a dialogical exchange rather than a single repeated story, and even the writing of history had to be attentive to the plurality of recounting.

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

The alternative is an impoverishment of both self and others, as we shall see.

At the same time, Ricœur still wishes to replenish the roots of one's own particular culture, and the other side of this risky coin is the disillusionment with one's own community. As Bengt Kristensson Uggla argues, "by memory work we are inescapably confronted with the fragility of our own identities, originating from the inexorably selective character of our relationship with the past and the often painful confrontation with the Other" (2010: 103). This was more significant in Ricœur's analysis of cultural shifts in the immediate post-war period, where he sought to protect cultural identities that he saw as weakening in the face of emerging global structures. His concern was that the exchange of culture could reveal the fragility of one's own identity (Moyaert 2011), and uproot oneself, when "it becomes possible to wander through civilizations as if through vestiges and ruins. The whole of mankind becomes a kind of imaginary museum" (Ricœur 1965: 278). Again, this is an attempt at protecting self and others as distinctively themselves, in their narrative identity, and all forms of cultural sedimentation.

Third, forgiveness is an interesting reflection back on translation and memory. It is a category of exchange which Ricœur would later bracket carefully as an epilogue in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, as a subject perhaps not appropriate for systematic thought, a horizon of possibility only. Yet here it appears as part of an ethos for action, responsive to the exchange of memory in a "further step: that of taking responsibility, in imagination and in sympathy for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern that other" (1995a: 6-7). It represents an exchange with the other, albeit one that transcends the exchanges of redress, becoming instead an exchange of imagination and care:

> it is necessary in reality that the peoples of Europe show compassion for each other, imagining – I repeat – the sufferings of others just as they are about to call for vengeance for the injuries which have been inflicted on them in the past. What is demanded here strongly resembles forgiveness (1995a: 11).

All of this is part of Ricœur's proposal that an ethos in individuals, groups, and peoples toward each other in Europe is a necessary ground for the success of any formal political enterprise. A set of attitudes toward the other, to translate, to share memory, to transcend harms together. That is how these lenses function, not as discrete tasks although they manifest in real dialogues, but as the ethos of the essay's title: a spirit of encounter, we might describe it, especially through narration and reflection on stories.

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

By contrast, Freeden's characterisation of the monist accounts of political community offered by some populisms reveals mono-narrative and a refusal of exchanges of all kinds. It perhaps even represents a weaponizing of narrative since such monist accounts seek to shape who gets to participate in the political community, and which traditions are permitted to fuel and nourish political conversation. In this way, "exclusionary" populisms present a shadow image to the always already present plurality that shapes Ricœur's hermeneutical horizon.

Ricœur's own hermeneutical hope for Europe may be presented as a needed alternative to over-emphatic origin histories that devolve into a single story, becoming unchanging and unavailable to plural dialogue. In the mid-1990s Ricœur's analysis was already speaking the consequences of exclusionary populist narratives. The replenishment that Ricœur recommends to the work of Europe is also at the level of civil society, reflecting the thread of analysis introduced above from the work of Pauline Johnson and others. Ricœur is also not levelling this advice to the European institutions, but instead aiming at the public and civic sphere, when he points to the "ethical and spiritual activities of individuals […] intellectual communities, churches and other religious denominations" (1995a: 3). The plurality of others in which self-understanding is entangled extends also to a plurality of political and social groups and spheres of discourse. Moreover, as Ricœur argues in his systematic ethics, self-understanding is constituted by these always already present encounters with others (2004). Closing oneself off in a single story about who a community is, which cannot be shared thus stands as an impoverishment of oneself and a refusal of the moral imperative of recognising the other as another self with another story.

In turn that harms the political whole, collapsing the plurality of identities, political spaces, the reflexive and deliberative character of the public sphere, of legitimate discussion and challenge. This analysis is not revolutionary, but it names sharply what is at stake: the functioning of political discourse as a place of genuine disagreement and negotiation, the collapsing of different spaces and forms of political discourse into one social whole – an undifferentiated "society" – all shaped by the reifying of rigid national origins, boundaries, and narratives: a new landscape for conflict. Altogether then, Ricœur's defence of narrative forms of exchange in translation, memory, and forgiveness as precisely about forming relationships across difference represents an alternative basis for the understanding of political community in contrast with exclusionary populism. Let us begin to connect these insights with those offered by political theology.

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

3. Political Theology: Myth-building Practice

Given the narrative character of the preceding analysis, it will be no surprise that some political theologians have turned to narrative concepts as a way to respond to populist discourse. It is at the narrative level, the rhetorical, emotive calling on identity that the populist enterprise is shaped and, as Timothy Stacey has argued, "Only myth can challenge myth" (2018: 575). For Stacey, this is partly because he understands the myths presented in populism to be appearing in response to a vacuum in contemporary liberal politics. Here he is in agreement with the broadly postliberal theological argument that current politics is characterised as mere technocratic resource management and "no longer seeks to tell a story about who we are as humans, as Americans, as Brits or as Indians, it no longer engages people in a common trajectory" (2018: 576). Any liberal story is reduced in this analysis to an economic commitment to diversity or globalization, without anchoring that in a meaningful account of solidarity. There are echoes here of Ricœur's concern about the encounter with the other leaving the self as an unmoored other amongst others, which he would later suggest links to a privatised vision of life, leaving commentators as "belated Romantics" regretting the collapse of the public (1987: 42). Stacey is identifying the political implications here also, and moreover, Stacey argues that a liberal settlement founded in Hobbesian reasoning deliberately attempts to abandon myth, by reading myth as a function of exclusionary groups and consequently part of the inevitable violence a Hobbesian contrast is intended to quieten. By contrast, a populist call to the people is about the people as the foundation of the political endeavour – while its exclusionary, fragmented, and sometimes exploitative character remains the concern.

Consequently, Stacey argues that the postliberal analysis is correct but he does critique the postliberal response of resituating the political within the framework of Christian theology. Such a solution requires particular beliefs to fully invest and runs the same risk of narrowed participation, as another turn to a set of shared beliefs about reality. Yet the political need not remain Hobbesian, argues Stacey, and myths can be created across ideological differences precisely because they operate imaginatively. It is consequently a category more broadly accessible:

> religious and secular people alike draw on stories of exemplary characters and events to inspire solidarity. Myths are designated as overarching narratives that draw these exemplary characters and events into a

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

> trajectory toward an ideal future…. Only myth can challenge myth (2018: 575).

In an earlier work, Stacey has identified that by myth he means "simply 'the stories we tell ourselves about moral responsibility'" (2017: 142), a concept he draws from the work of sociologist Robert Wuthnow. The role of myths, Stacey suggests, is not an end in themselves, but as a "means of rediscovering a shared social imaginary" (2017: 142) which can draw on religious and non-religious roots. Crucially, for Stacey, such myths can be newly generated, collectively.

To discover those stories, these alternative myths of solidarity, Stacey turns to his ethnographic study of concrete gathering in local politics and civil society. His example is his experience with London Citizens, following the model of community organising by way of large gatherings of local groups and participants with politicians and civil representatives, sharing stories that are emblematic of the challenges and hopes for action of a diverse community. This he characterises as "including ordinary people in developing myths of alternative solidarity" (2018: 586). The London Citizens events include local politicians, hearing these testimonies, often accompanied by music – Stacey writes evocatively of

> the blowing of the Shofar, a Jewish instrument mentioned in the bible as sounding the beginning of jubilee years, in which all debts are forgiven… Together the music signified to a diverse group of people a sense of inclusive solemnity and celebration (2018: 586).

The practical setting then is of a large gathering at an event developed over time amongst community groups, inviting together diverse actors, music, testimony, and responses from politicians.

Stacey's analysis of this event is that it develops myths of solidarity in three ways – an overarching narrative of politics as a gathering of diversity where everyone is actively involved, carrying normative expectations that politics should be about such comings together and perhaps constituted by them. A micro level of individual narratives as emblematic of community needs, chosen through community organisation over time. The third level mediates between these by gathering the micro level stories up within the context of the macro coming together – "rather than putting the diverse myths represented to one side, they are deliberately brought together in harmonious *bricolage*, contributing to the aesthetic depth of myths of solidarity" (2018: 577).

Evidently, the category of myth is doing significant work here. On one level Stacey has referred to myth in terms of its imaginative character

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

without relying on objective reality, as a "reflexive, even subjunctive or as-if act" (2018: 575). On another, he suggests that concrete practices create such an imaginary and motivate participants to ongoing solidarity. Here Stacey is relying on an integrity of practice and idea, with a mutual forming that can continue onward from the concrete example. Let us turn back to Ricœur to consider these two levels and their relationship.

Ricœur did not often examine particular concrete examples. As a philosopher his interest was in the philosophical understanding of the systems of symbolic action. Those familiar with Ricœur's work on metaphor, myth, narrative may already recognise a practice-driven echo of his systematic philosophy. For Ricœur, we are always already "entangled" (1994: 161)[1] in myths, stories, characters, that reveal and inculcate values and in response to which we distantiate and reappropriate to form our visions of the good life. This insight itself represented the great hermeneutical turn in Ricœur's work. It is both culturally situated and prioritises the self as a reflexive agent who can examine and critique her own formation, and understands that as a moral task.

Moreover, Ricœur has himself observed the way a hoped-for imagined end plays key functions in both the limits of philosophy and the narratives of religion. He suggested that the scriptural stories of the Greek New Testament and the Hebrew Bible offer a way to imagine the possibility of choosing the good life and so structures thinking about the human condition – and indeed, God (1974: 407) - by that hope. Understanding this hope for the good to be the defining character of the Christian narrative undergirds the logic to Christian myth, for Ricœur. He argues that in Christian thinking, "seen from the standpoint of hope, life is not only the contrary of but the denial of death" (1995b: 206). It is not a conclusion of an argument, but a new framing of the future, and of how to live and reason. In this sense then, there is a move from narratives themselves to their underlying logic taken as a chosen rationality that asserts the meaningfulness of our freedom to choose the good. In Christian terms, Ricœur concludes: "Freedom is the capacity to live according to the paradoxical law of superabundance, of denying death and asserting an excess of sense over non-sense, in all desperate situations" (1995b: 207).

Logics that go beyond mere equivalent exchange are frequently given this function by Ricœur, as a horizon against which thought and practice can change: forgiveness and love both fall in this superabundant category. These horizons can be made manifest in practices, like gifts. What these

1 Evoking the work of Wilhelm Schapp.

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

categories do not do in Ricœur's thought is offer an already political vision. Instead they operate to rejuvenate the pre-political reasons by which people commit themselves to each other and to living together. Stacey's myth is operating by establishing the possibility of solidarity by way of exchanges of memory. It is not a purely imaginative level, but the concrete generating an imaginative horizon. In this sense Stacey is seeking to render myth as specifically political imagination that changes people's expectations and engagement with politics – it is an interplay between rhetoric and concrete forms of relating between people of a community and consequently there is more here to interrogate. To turn to the specifically political categories of Ricœur's may offer further nuance into the operation of Stacey's idea of myth. I turn to the specifically political concept that operates at the level of imagination: that of utopia – and ideology.

4. Utopias and Ideologies

Utopia represents (literally) a "no place" from which

> an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now opened beyond that of the actual, a field for alternative ways of living. The question therefore is whether imagination could have any constitutive role without this leap outside. Utopia is the way in which we radically rethink what is family, consumption, government, religion, etc. The fantasy of an alternative society and its topographical figuration 'nowhere' works as the most formidable contestation of what is (1976: 25).

For Ricœur then utopia is not only effective but the most powerful way in which current concrete political settlements can be challenged – through reimagining. To level this analysis at Stacey's concept, it operates from the concrete into the mythic, rather than presenting a "no-place". For Stacey the enacting of a gathering provides an opportunity for testimonies to solidarity, exchanging memory and naming experiences of different ways of relating and generating commitment to the idea that solidarity is possible as a horizon for action. "Imagination is here constitutive in an inventive rather than an integrative manner" (Ricœur 1976: 24). In this way the direction is of practices that are theory-laden, pointing toward a "no-place" from which one can then also critique failures of solidarity, from the perspective of what could be possible. While not strictly a utopia,

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

in Ricœur's technical sense of the "no-place", Stacey is offering *utopian* myths, evoking a possible world but through accounts of real exchange.

However, utopia understood as a reimagining, reveals, in turn, the significance of the imaginative articulation of the political settlement itself, to which Ricœur puts the name of ideology. Ricœur argued that ideology is a symbolic system that operates to "reinforce the belief in the legitimacy of the given systems of authority in such a way that it meets the claim to legitimacy" (1976: 22). An authority makes a claim to legitimacy which is met (or not) by belief in that legitimacy from the governed individuals. Understanding this in symbolic terms reveals the potentially distorting character of ideology as a rhetorical over-claim. Such a pathology of ideology is found in the conservation of power, where the redescription shifts the relationship between claim and belief by representing its claims as universally believed in.

While Ricœur argued that this lack of transparency is inherent to the rhetorical functioning of ideology, he also suggests it need not become pathologised into a distorted authoritarian account and practice of political power. As a rhetorical practice ideology must have a relationship to the underlying symbolic meaning of action: "the relation between the ideology and its so-called real basis may be compared to the relation of reference which a metaphorical utterance entertains with the situation it redescribes" (Ricœur 1976: 23).[2] Consequently to be effective the offered ideological account of political authority must have some relationship to the systems of symbols that already mediate action, even while it may be offering a new or changing meaning. For example, as Margaret Canovan has argued, populist claims "rely upon a framework of legitimacy provided by notions of popular power: an idea of democracy, in other words" (1999: 5).

Thus when considering exclusionary accounts of populism the tension arises as a distortion of the symbolic meaning of the people already operant in making sense of action rather than as "an original dissimulation" (1976: 27). This is key also to Ernesto Laclau's analysis in the later development of his work on populism where he suggests that "[t]he so-called 'poverty' of the populist symbols is the condition of their political efficacy – as their function is to bring to equival homogeneity a highly heterogeneous reality, they can only do so on the basis of reducing to a minimum their particularistic content" (2005: 40). While reductive, such populist

2 Ricœur is here relying on Clifford Geertz and Kenneth Burke, following their trajectory of reading political ideology as a form of figurative language.

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

symbolics still mediate reality in some sense. This analysis underscores that exclusionary populisms do display both a utopian claim to reject political authority as instantiated in an elite, but also an ideological claim that political power will be legitimately founded by the people if ceded to the populist leaders. While this operation is reductive, it still relates to reality, to the desire that politics be responsive to, representative of the people. Its over-claim comes most sharply to bear on the eradication of the political and civic institutions that mediate and nourish the people in the broadest possible sense, and instead claiming a direct relationship with the popular will. A powerful example can be seen in the UK referendum on Brexit and subsequent rhetoric of the "will of the people."

To relate this back to Stacey's account, there is not only a utopian reimagining of ways of relating at play but also an account of encounters with political power. What is striking about Stacey's account is that his analysis also seeks to root that power in the people. The London Citizens event drew on politicians and other local leaders in wider civic society, reaffirming the political settlement. It is a re-establishing of the power relationships between the people and those wielding political power. Stacey is not offering a different type of argument to that of exclusionary populisms, but a different account of the people and their relating. It is a utopian account of relating by solidarity, rather than by reference to a monist identity, while perhaps giving an ideological indication of the proper situating of political claims to authority in their representative relationship to the people.

Taken together this analysis reveals the dialectical pull between ideology and utopia as different forms of social imagination: as both playing roles of integration and renewal. As Ricœur observes, "[t]his is why the tension between ideology and utopia is insurpassable. It is even often impossible to tell whether this or that mode of thought is ideological or utopian" (1976: 27). Both forms of myth, populism, and solidarity as framed by Stacey, each conserve and reimagine the political order, enacting the dialectical pull between the paired concepts of ideology and utopia.

In this way, Stacey is offering an alternative account of the people and their relationship, a new politics rather than a radically new political order. This relates to what exclusionary populisms have also deployed, though as I have noted these can come with consolidations of political power through eroding other parts of the political order and infrastructure, hidden in their ideological claim to legitimacy. As Ricœur has observed, the difficulty arises in that the very nature of political language as rhetorical. It is inherently fragile because the operation of rhetoric is partly sophistic as well as reasoned, a persuasive measure that may or may

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

not relate to concrete realities. It is can thus operate to distort as well as inspire, at all levels of political discourse – deliberation on specific action and policy, on the ends of good government and the very character of the good life, lived well (Ricoeur 1987). Most fundamentally though, these levels all include many differing visions of how to live together well, even disagreement as to the nature of membership of the community about which political language seeks to deliberate. Thus what underlies all these levels is an "insurmountable plurality [which] aggravates the fragility of political language" (Ricœur 1987: 38), which can consequently be misused. This is the fragility that is carried back into the specific rhetorical forms of social imaginary in ideology and utopia.[3]

In various ways, this seems a most unpromising position. Where does that leave us in analysing how Stacey's narrative reframing of political commitment by way of myths of solidarity can contribute? The functioning of the myth of solidarity mirrors that of exclusionary populisms – just as Stacey intended, where myth challenges myth. Yet Stacey's outline of practice concludes in the image of "harmonious bricolage" (2018: 577), perhaps also tending toward the single imaginary, running the same pathological risk as an exclusionary populism. I, therefore, return to consider "the people" as a needed piece of further theorising, albeit perhaps implicit in Stacey's proposal, and increasingly the normative focus of other political theologies.

5. *Political Theologies on "the People"*

"The people" has been a focus point of theological analysis and response to populism. Jonathan Chaplin's account is hesitant on the underlying logic of political authority as situated purely in the will of the people. This is too swift a move for Chaplin and also not reflective of the heritage of Christian political thought. Even where one accepts the people as constitutive of the political community, Chaplin argues that "this constituent power has always been seen as pursuant to a larger purpose, one deriving not from the sovereign will of the people but directing and constraining it" (2022: 236). The legitimacy of political power is in its pursuit of justice.

3 I am grateful to W. David Hall for his response to an earlier, partial version of this paper delivered at the 2021 AAR conference, where he emphasised this fragility in the category of utopia.

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

Here Chaplin introduces normative requirements that govern the exercise of political will and power.

Such a requirement appears implicitly in Stacey's ethnographic account in his insistence on its myths as myths of solidarity. Solidarity names an intersubjective moral responsibility to each other, which gives a reference point nourished by but not wholly dependent on the experiences of mutual support that form the content of the testimonies. Such narratives point toward the moral significance of that support, returning the norms of respect, just action, and shared commitment to the common good as expectations for political participation and representation. Here then is where Stacey's emphasis on the myth being generated in the concrete practices of community organising contrasts with the ethno- or pseudo-cultural myths of exclusionary populisms. Stacey roots the myth as one of mutual commitment, rather than the static forms of people that appear in Chaplin's diagnosis of populisms focused on "culturally distinct community" (2022: 234) or a nation's "historical continuity" (237). Moreover, the types of gatherings that Stacey reconstructs are not final conclusions but rather instances in an ongoing journey, where to be a people means being bound in a shared search for justice. This casts the political character of the people as future-oriented rather than purely historically rooted and crucially, available for critique with respect to justice and the common good.

The same commitments emerge in other recent theological responses and do so while supplementing the meaning of myth itself: in the papal encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis's conception of the people as "mythic" was deployed (2019: § 158), suggesting that the meaning of the people cannot be described once and for all but continually retold. Strikingly, for Francis, this is itself a form of populism, but a populism that is not an abstraction but constituted in concrete practices, like those to which Stacey turns. As Anna Rowlands explains "a healthy populism is key to cultural renewal… attention must be paid to the narrative, place-based, event-based character of societies, out of which real social relationship and meanings are fashioned" (2021: 167).

To examine this more closely, it seems that while culture remains the reference point for Francis's argument to reclaim populism as a form of a political project, crucially he is evoking the more inclusive Latin American models that appear in Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's comparison: "while identity does play a role in contemporary Latin American populist movements… overall they are still primarily involved in materialist politics" (2013: 167). Francis has himself observed the regional difference when speaking of "'populism'… you know I had to relearn this word in Europe

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

because in Latin America it has a different meaning" (2017b). The Latin American meaning is seen perhaps in the figures that Francis prioritises – the itinerant worker, the landless, and the workless. Speaking at the World Meeting of Popular Movements, his own initiative, he greeted the gathering:

> Among you here are waste-collectors, recyclers, peddlers, seamstresses or tailors, artisans, fishermen, farmworkers, builders, miners, workers in previously abandoned enterprises, members of all kinds of cooperatives and workers in grassroots jobs who are excluded from labour rights, who are denied the possibility of unionizing, whose income is neither adequate nor stable. (2014)

When Francis speaks of culture it comes to bear on questions of material justice and relationship. He addresses the "desiring, affective dimensions of a society", where material concerns such as "distribution and labour emerge as its external signs" (Rowlands 2021: 168). The influence of Ricœur can be suggested here, where the cultural milieu entangles the work of self-understanding, co-constituted with the other, and establishing the relationship to others as always already a moral encounter (Ricœur 1994; Daughton 2022).

The culturally situated character of Francis's understanding of the people does not collapse into monism by virtue of being "open-ended. A living and dynamic people, a people with a future, is one constantly open to a new synthesis through its ability to welcome differences" (2020: § 160). Rowlands describes this as an open populism, which

> embraces the need to form external cultural bonds, to accept and form new practices of social belonging, but practices these with an openness to those who do not yet belong – the new arrival, the next generation and so forth. Renewal comes in an antonymous way – from who or what is not yet present (Rowlands 2021: 212).

Here Francis's focus is on practices that reveal and produce encounters and generate relationships – which mirror those which Stacey has considered.

By contrast, Stacey does not articulate either the practices of community organising or their mythic narrative significance as forms of populism. He is following the analysis of the European manifestations of closed populisms. Yet the practices he examines are certainly a set of community practices situated in the local population without being tied to particular artefacts of one tradition or culture. Stacey himself emphasises that they gather together different community groups and individuals, and certainly affirms the importance of political participation to nourish expectations

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

of the political process as for solidarity amongst the people. It may be then that Francis's call not to cede the banner of populism to its demagogic form in exclusionary narratives needs further consideration. For now, though, this prompts a change in emphasis to Stacey's own analysis. The mythic narrative meaning of testimony, gathering, and so on, is not in establishing "shared beliefs" (Stacey 2018: 575) as such, which risks leave his argument as another contribution amongst others of the ideological-utopian dialectic of all political rhetoric. Rather it is in recognising the significance of concrete performances of solidarity as *exchanges* across plural perspectives: exchanges across difference.

The myths of solidarity that Stacey suggests the Citizens events establish are not singular – one type of support, one type of participant – but dialogical. They are made manifest through public testimony, offered within events that are the fruit of long discussion and shared planning. In its long heritage since the originating work of Saul Alinsky (including forms across Europe), community organising operates on the coming together of interest. Many theologians have critiqued the emphasis on self-interest as a manifestation and a driver of neo-liberal political thought, but community organising operates by building relationships that allow investing in each others' interests. While under a shared banner of care for the local community – communities of destiny and choice – there are plural needs, desires, and reasons in operation.

This reinforces the character of the people, which I have drawn out as implicit in Stacey's analysis, as a fundamentally plural gathering in. I would also argue that the recognition of plural interests here also rescues Stacey's project from too swift a move to sameness and harmony – the plurality is inherent to its character as dialogical, and consequently can continue to encompass disagreement or conflict. Rather than shared belief built by *bricolage* these practices bear more relation to the understanding that people are engaged in "*co-creating* the *public* space through their encounter… that presupposes real difference in basic orientations" (Junker-Kenny 2014: 163).

I suggest that what Stacey reconstructs here is an answer to Ricœur's call for a "new ethos" by way of the crises of Europe in exclusionary populisms. Stacey is pointing to the concrete operation of civil society, the same level at which Ricœur suggested a European ethos needed to be nourished. Of Ricœur's lenses of translation, exchange of memory, and forgiveness, Stacey's description of the sharing of testimony seems a form of the exchange of memory, both of experiences of solidarity and its failures, in a spirit of potential renewal. Translation always governs the logic of such exchanges as people of differing experiences and value systems seek

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

to make their communication meaningful to each other. As Francis has observed, again the influence of Ricœur perhaps at play, "The European Union was born as a *unity of differences* and a *unity in differences*. What is distinctive should not be a reason for fear, nor should it be thought that *unity is preserved by uniformity*. Unity is instead *harmony* within a community" (2017a)[4].

There is an unfortunate irony in considering these ideas for a European political theology since Stacey's ethnographic work has uncovered this regenerating ethos in examples of CitizensUK, while the UK has departed from the formal project of the European Union. Nevertheless, the reasons for cooperation and exchange have not departed, and the importance of real encounter across differences that has been explored in this essay speaks to local, national, and supranational concerns in the face of exclusionary populisms and the real crises of material and participatory injustices.

The claims and practice that Stacey advocates are not wholly divorced from the operation of populisms more broadly. Yet a distinction is offered in rejecting the pathologies of utopia by normative requirements for inter-subjectivity – and disagreement – whilst also avoiding the pathologies of ideology by nourishing the mediating institutions of civil society as well as seeking the legitimate operation of political power as representative of its plural people. The myths of solidarity are generated in narrative practices of exchange but are available for critique and response across many traditions. What the practices represent is the performance of political imagination of the people that is porous, attentive to difference, to moral responsibility for each other "in imagination and in sympathy" (Ricœur 1995a: 6-7). In doing so it represents a meaningful alternative to the disenfranchisement fuelling exclusionary populisms by working from a theological and philosophical understanding of "the people" as agents of change. A new ethos for Europe is shown to be an ethos that can be practised, by the people ourselves.

4 Emphasis original and evoking the fuller expression of these sentiments delivered in Francis's visit to the Parliament in Strasbourg in 2014. Francis would later suggest that he had given his view on Europe repeatedly and, perhaps with some irony, that the 2017 remarks were offered "without nuance" (2017b).

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

Bibliography

Caiani, Manuela/Graziano, Paolo: Understanding Varieties of Populism in Times of Crises, in: West European Politics, 42:6 (2019), 1141-1158. doi: 10.1080/01402382.2019.1598062

Canovan, Margaret: Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy in: Political Studies 47(1) (1999), 2-16. doi:10.1111/1467-9248.00184

Chaplin, Jonathan: A Political Theology of 'The People': Enlisting Classical Concepts for Contemporary Critique in: Ulrich Schmiedel/Joshua Ralston (Eds.) The Spirit of Populism. Political Theologies in Polarized Times. Leiden/Boston 2022, 329-243.

Daughton, Amy: Paul Ricœur and Fratelli tutti: Neighbor, People, Institution. Journal of Catholic Social Thought, 19(1) (2022), 1-18.

Fieschi, Catherine: Introduction in: Journal of Political Ideologies, 9:3 (2004), 235-240, doi: 10.1080/1356931042000263492

Francis: Address to the Heads of State and Government of the European Union. Vatican City 2017a [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/march/documents/papa-francesco_20170324_capi-unione-europea.html#_ftnref14] Last accessed 16/01/22.

Francis: Return Flight Press Conference. Apostolic Journey to Egypt, 2017b. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/april/documents/papa-francesco_20170429_egitto-volo.html] Last accessed 16/01/22.

Francis: Fratelli tutti, Vatican City 2020.

Freeden, Michael: Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach, Oxford 1996.

Freeden, Michael: After the Brexit Referendum: Revisiting Populism as an Ideology in: Journal of Political Ideologies, 22:1 (2017), 1-11, doi: 10.1080/13569317.2016.1260813

Johnson, Pauline: In Search of a Leftist Democratic Imaginary: What Can Theories of Populism Tell Us? in: Journal of Political Ideologies, 22:1 (2017), 74-91, doi: 10.1080/13569317.2016.1255467

Junker-Kenny, Maureen: Religion and Public Reason: A Comparison of the Positions of John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas and Paul Ricœur, Berlin 2014.

Kristensson Uggla, Bengt: Ricœur, Hermeneutics and Globalization, London 2010.

Laclau, Ernesto: Populism: What's in a Name? in: Francisco Panizza (Ed.), Populism and the Mirror of Democracy, London 2005, 32–49.

Moyaert, Marianne: Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality, Amsterdam/New York 2011.

Mudde, Cas: The Populist Zeitgeist in: Government and Opposition, 39(4) (2004), 541-563, doi: 10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x

Mudde, Cas and Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristobal: Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America in: Government and Opposition, 48(2), (2013), 147-174. doi:10.1017/gov.2012.11

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-SA

Müller, Jan-Werner: What is Populism? Philadelphia, PA 2016.

Ricœur, Paul: History and Truth, tr. C. A. Kelbley. Evanson, IL 1965.

Ricœur, Paul: Freedom in the Light of Hope, in: his own and Don Idhe (Ed.) The Conflict of Interpretations, Chicago 1974.

Ricœur, Paul: Ideology and Utopia as Cultural Imagination in: Philosophic Exchange 7(1) (1976), 17-28.

Ricœur, Paul: The Fragility of Political Language, in: Philosophy Today 31(1) (1987), 35-44. doi: 10.5840/philtoday198731117

Ricœur, Paul: Oneself as Another, tr. Kathleen Blamey. Chicago 1994.

Ricœur, Paul: Reflections on a new ethos for Europe, tr. Eileen Brennan, in: Philosophy & Social Criticism, 21(5–6) (1995a), 3–13. doi: 10.1177/0191453795021005-602.

Ricœur, Paul: Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems in: his own and Mark Wallace (Ed.) Figuring the Sacred. Religion, Narrative, and Imagination, Minneapolis, MN 1995b. (Originally published in 1970 in the Proceedings of the American Catholic Society).

Ricœur, Paul: Memory, History, Forgetting, tr. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago 2005.

Rooduijn, Matthijs/van Kessel, Stijn/Froio, Caterina/Pirro, Andrea/de Lange, Sarah/Halikiopoulou, Daphne/ Lewis, Paul/Mudde, Cas/Taggart, Paul: The PopuList: An Overview of Populist, Far Right, Far Left and Eurosceptic Parties in Europe (2019) www.popu-list.org (last accessed 16/01/22).

Rowlands, Anna: Towards a Politics of Communion. Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times, London etc. 2021.

Ruzza, Carlo/Sanchez Salgado, Rosa: The Populist Turn in EU Politics and the Intermediary Role of Civil Society Organisations in: European Politics and Society, 22:4 (2021), 471-485, doi: 10.1080/23745118.2020.1801180

Stacey, Timothy: Imagining Solidarity in the Twenty-First Century: Towards a Performative Postsecularism in: Religion, State & Society, 45(2) (2017), 141-158, doi: 10.1080/09637494.2017.1299905.

Stacey, Timothy: Beyond Populist Politics: why conventional politics needs to conjure myths of its own and why it struggles to do so in: Global Discourse 8(4) (2018), 573–588. doi: 10.1080/23269995.2018.1524208

Wuthnow, Robert: American Mythos: Why Our Best Efforts to Be a Better Nation Fall Short, Princeton, NJ 2006.

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748928645-127 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - CC BY-SA