

MONOGRÁFICO II

*NARRATIVES OF POWER:
DEMAGOGUES, POLITICS AND MORALITY
AT THE START OF THE 21ST CENTURY*

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Narrativas del poder: demagogos, política y ética en los albores del siglo XXI

One way of characterising the present political conjuncture – worldwide, not just in Europe and North America – is to point to the rise to power of politicians best described as demagogues. Trump, Duterte, Putin, Modi, as well as the leaders of Europe's neo-fascist racists (Alternative für Deutschland, the ONR in Poland, Fidesz in Hungary, France's Front National) have in common not just certain policies and attitudes, but, significantly, a political style: that of the demagogue. Thinking through that term, 'demagogue', is instructive in helping us to understand this phenomenon, no less historically than politically.

Its root is of course in ancient Greece, where a demagogue was originally 'a leader or orator who espoused the cause of the common people'.¹ And yet here is already a tension that was to keep resurfacing. For while 'ago' means 'to lead', or 'to guide', such leadership and guidance already contains an implicit violence; the roots of 'ago' are rural, and the term describes the leading or guiding of animals by pushing and/or hitting them. So while it was the case that 'the Athenian demagogues had definite and valuable functions within the state',² as simply leaders of the common people ('demos' – 'the people'), the normative neutrality that it appears to incorporate was never in fact what it seemed.

So initially it was not a matter of a demagogue being someone who exploits democracy by 'appealing to the desires and prejudices of ordinary people rather than by using rational argument'³ in order to achieve their own political ends. Rather, the problem was that of the ordinary people's susceptibility to demagoguery and their need to be 'pushed' or even hit if need be: simply because, in brief, they are too stupid to avoid being led, not by 'rational argument', but by a particular agent, the demagogue. The fundamental fault is the people's, not the demagogue's. Socrates's, Plato's and Aristotle's objections to demagogues were rooted primarily in their distrust of democracy *per se*, rather than in their objections to particular demagogues and their practices.

¹ OED. Available at <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/demagogue>. Accessed 5.12.17.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

The illegitimacy of the demagogue lay primarily not in their own readiness to mislead the ordinary people and to exploit them for their own ends, but rather in the inherent inadequacies of the ordinary people; people too limited, even perhaps too stupid, not to choose the right leader but rather to eschew leadership altogether. It was that anti-democratic conviction – that ‘the people’ cannot govern themselves but, unlike the Philosophers, will always be led, and thus inevitably misled – that characterises the shift from ‘simply a leader of the common people’ to “misleader” of the common people. It thus constitutes the thread running through the contributions to this special issue.

Tom Bunyard argues that today’s demagogues can fruitfully be understood in terms of social pathology, whereby the contemporary rise of demagogic politics constitutes a symptom of a pathological failure of collective self-determinacy; and that this failure is brought about by inadequacies within the normative structures in which social activity takes place. Nicola Clewer explores the relationship between ignorance, authority and nationalism in neoliberal thought and practice to argue that, far from signalling its end, the recent rise of the right-wing demagogue is firmly rooted in the sublime core of neoliberalism’s epistemological scepticism and in its need to plaster over its contradictions in the interests of maintaining the status quo. Lars Cornelissen insists that Laclau’s framework of populism – wherein leadership and exclusion are necessary components of popular identification – cannot account for contemporary forms of populist identification. Specifically, a decolonial model of populism that recognises a plurality of forms of identity eschews any reference to demagogic activity as a necessary component of any populism. Ramón Feesntra and Yanina Welp discuss the democratic models available – representative, participative, deliberative, random and monitorised – to propose an “ecology of participation”. They suggest an understanding of the mechanisms for exercising power in a given system as structures of political incentives that foster the formation of consensus or polarisation, control or delegation, an expanded or a restricted public agenda, demagogogy or informed debate. Teresa Marques uncovers some of the underlying linguistic mechanisms at play in demagoguery: derogatory language, code words, figleaves, and perversions of meaning. These features inform her case study of the demagogic discourse of Catalan nationalists, which, she argues, has damaged both public discourse and social relations and institutions in Catalonia. Finally, José Manuel Rivas asks whether populist strategy offers opportunities for, or dangers to, democracy. In this regard, he analyzes the main elements of populist discourse, following the interventions of two European national political leaders, Pablo Iglesias and Marine Le Pen. He concludes that based on this evidence populist strategy *per se* does not necessarily constitute a danger for democracy: rather, this depends on the sorts of social demand articulated, and on the (counter-)hegemonic values that political leaders want to promote.

These are some of the central issues at stake in determining how we understand today's rise to power of demagogues; and in turn, how these causes are understood needs to form the basis both of any analysis of the phenomenon and of what might be done to counter it. The six articles brought together in this special issue all focus on specific elements of this task, a task that needs urgently to be undertaken if we are not to succumb to the demagogues' attempts to destroy both civil society and individual freedom. It is a task that has, to put it bluntly, two basic components: that of understanding the methods and functions of demagoguery in relation to a range of political agendas, not least that of the neoliberalism against which demagogues present themselves as arguing but which they in fact help to sustain; and that of avoiding the easy temptation to readily to identify and understand demagoguery as simply a facet of populism. Our hope is that what is presented here is at least a small step towards its accomplishment.

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