Brexit, YouTube and the Populist Rhetorical Ethos[1]

Introduction

It is neither accident nor coincidence that an explosion of populist politics has happened at the same time as an explosion of political discourse facilitated by digital means of communication. All sorts of ideological entrepreneurs have entered the 'marketplace of ideas' selling their wares to political interests previously too scattered, marginal or extreme to be catered to by the mainstream (Munger and Phillips, 2019). But access is not the only thing that digital social media change. Its platforms and their software are not neutral carriers of content. They also shape its *form*, creating, in direct if unplanned ways, new genres of communication and new kinds of 'rhetorical situation' to which political content adapts. This chapter argues that these forms tend in a 'populist' direction, inducing rhetorics centred on claims about character. Understanding the implications of this requires combining insights from Political Theory and Political Science with those of Digital Media Studies, and above all from Rhetorical Studies, a discipline which is naturally well-placed to illuminate the persuasive forms of argumentation and identification characteristic of digital political culture.

The chapter consists of three distinct but related parts. It begins with a consideration of approaches to the study of Populist ideology within Political Studies. Here I argue that a central but untheorized aspect of these is what rhetoricians understand as ethos, and outline a concept of the populist rhetorical ethos. In the second section I consider how media can enter into and

shape rhetorical occasions, looking in particular at the case of YouTube. Such media, I argue, contribute to an intensification of rhetorics of ethos. In the third section I present an analysis of Brexit rhetoric, looking in detail at a YouTube video titled *The Truth About Brexit*, created by a prominent political YouTuber to promote the "Leave" case in the 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the EU. It is an exemplary instance not only of Brexit rhetoric but of YouTube style and of successful right-wing populist political communication. In the conclusion, drawing together the three parts of the chapter, I argue that digital media platforms encourage political channels which stage intense dramas of dark forces and the brave rebels fighting against them, led by charismatic rhetors revealing secrets and telling truths about what is 'really' going on and what 'they' won't tell you, promising salvation to their heroic followers. It is a form of rhetoric which, increasingly, characterises political rhetoric of all kinds.

Ideology and the Populist Ethos

Within Political Studies analysis of political ideas and ideologies is often concerned with the 'isms' which define political positions and traditions - the arrangements of concepts which make up, say, Conservatism, Liberalism and Socialism. Those arrangements change over time, and as the relationships between concepts changes (some become more prominent, others fade and new ideas emerge) the meaning of key terms is altered (Freeden, 2006; Finlayson, 2012). Within this sort of framework approaches to Populism can be distinguished by the extent to which they consider it a general form that may be taken by any political ideology or a particular ideology in its own right characterised by a distinct arrangement of concepts.

Laclau (2005) is an example of the former. He argues that a populist dimension is inherent to any democratic politics which must, of necessity, constitute a *demos*, a 'people'. From this perspective all democratic demands are seen as sharing an underlying rhetorical structure. Firstly, the claim that there is a gap or blockage between the demand or will of a people and its realisation, something preventing 'the people' from becoming what it 'truly' is, wants or needs to be. Secondly, the giving of a name to the source or cause of that gap (see Laclau, 2014). It may be an institution, a social group or a collection of individuals. It is 'the elite', 'them'. Thirdly, the argument that the movement or party articulating the demand is the vehicle in which the gap can be crossed or the obstacle overcome. Thus, for example, a seemingly non-populist figure such as British 'New Labour' leader Tony Blair can be interpreted as a populist. Blair positioned his political programme of national renewal and modernisation in opposition to what he named 'forces of conservatism' found on both the left (trade unions engaging in defensive politics and resisting technological change) and on the right (traditionalists discriminating against minorities, preventing them from playing their full part in society and economy). New Labour, Blair proposed, would overcome these forces and in so doing renew the nation and bring into being 'a young country' (Blair, 1999; Finlayson, 2003). What makes this a form of populism, it is argued, isn't the content of the political ideas but, rather, the way they are arranged and articulated.

In contrast with Laclau's claim about the 'general' or 'formal' shape of populist ideologies, other scholars emphasise the specific content of the claims and positions taken by populist parties and movements. According to Mudde, for instance, populism is a 'thin' ideology, organised around the concept of 'the people'. Populist parties of the Far-Right are characterised by the combination of such Populism with other concepts such as 'Nativism' (privileging the 'native' people of the nation, agitating for limitations on others) and authoritarianism

(commitment to strong leaders and the punishment of transgressors) (Mudde, 2007: 22). The political discourse of such parties is 'moral' in that it opposes the inherent 'goodness' of the people to the essential 'wickedness' of elites (see also Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013; Stanley, 2008).

Another approach identifies Populism as a 'style', a particular 'repertoire' of political performance' (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 387; Moffitt, 2016). Here Populism is a way of doing or representing a politics, the central features of which are an appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite', 'bad manners' (breaches of established codes of decorum and of polite speech) and regular invocations of crisis, breakdown and threat (Tormey and Moffit, 2014, Moffitt, 2016). In their performances, Moffitt argues, populist leaders combine the appearance of 'ordinariness' (as indicated by informality) with that of 'extraordinariness', of exceptional virility, strength and health. The Populist proposes the existence of a terrible threat to the people against which the leader, and their exceptional body and character, are the last defence.

These three perspectives, in which Populism is, variously, a general structure found across ideologies, a specific political-ideological content and a style of performance, can be put in strong opposition to each other. But they also overlap considerably. Insofar as they show that Populist politics centres on identifying a group of people with each other against an Other, articulates a moral discourse of goodness and wickedness and takes shape as public political performance, these approaches also show that Populism is fundamentally concerned with 'character'. And as we shall see, one of the things which distinguishes Populism is the role of character in its ideological discourse.

For rhetoricians, of course, emphasis on 'character' is understood in terms of *ethos*. It is what a rhetor must establish in order to gain standing, to be listened to, taken seriously and seen as authoritative by those to whom they communicate. Following Moffitt, we can say that in Populist rhetoric that character is of one who is outside or beyond the mainstream. Rather than demonstrate their capacity to conform to the rules of discourse expected by political figures Populists strategically break from them. Their political critics sometimes see this as evidence of incapacity, unprofessionalism or even stupidity; they think that the populist doesn't understand the proper rules of political discourse or doesn't know how to inhabit them. But, on the contrary, such 'bad manners' are central to populist rhetoric. They reveal the conventions of political discourse to be, indeed, conventions - a genre which people learn and the rules of which they use to police the boundaries of political dispute and participation. Breaking these rules is an implicit critique of 'establishment' discourse and establishes a warrant to make populist claims. It is also a point of 'stylistic identification' between rhetor and audience. As Burke famously put it, we persuade someone by talking their language, using their 'speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea' and so on (1969: 55) so that they see us as at one with them. Such talk, as Laclau argued, is constitutive of the community or people defined by it (see also Charland, 1987). The populist rhetor doesn't really speak in the 'language of the people' but in a stylised, exaggerated, part of it. It is the language of 'the people' only insofar as it is distinguished from the language of 'them', but it is a language with which people may identify (and through which they may identify with each other). The ethos of the rhetor is thus also a proposition about the ethos of the people and, following Mudde, their moral character. It is, following Laclau, a way of giving the people a 'name', of defining who or what they will be when they accept the invitation to identify.

Political theories of populist ideology point to the centrality of the category of ethos in the establishment of 'a people', the specification of its moral character, and in the performances of

populist leaders. Populist politics takes a form common to all kinds of democratic politics, defining a people by that which prevents them from being fully who they are. It adds specific elements in the form of moralising discourse that brings good and evil to the fore, articulating these in relation to national and cultural identities. It wraps these in a style which ostentatiously breaks from conventions of political speech and centres the performance of leaders. In this respect however, Populism, while often closely related to it, is not a simple cultic authoritarianism. It does not invite direct identification with the Leader but identification as one of the people, the existence and greatness of which the leader affirms and in whose defence they claim to be unrelenting. In populist rhetoric everything is directed at making this invitation and at sustaining its promise once accepted. It thus brings ethos to the fore in a peculiar fashion.

All substantial political claims involve appeals to ethos. That is, they say something about the probity, commitment, solidarity and so forth of the person or group making the argument. They also say something about the character of the addressees of that discourse, about who and what they will be if they agree, if they accept and identify with those claims or, indeed, who they *must* be if the claims are to be intelligible (see Black, 1970). In most political discourse and argument these uses of ethos form part of an attempt to persuade people to accept a specific proposition: to increase or decrease social security for the least well off; to defend the rights of our fellow workers; to commit to war or refrain from retaliating. In such instances ethos appears in combination with other forms of proof and presentation and as a premise of political argument (even though its precise content may in part be retroactively provided by that same argument). In Populist political rhetoric ethos is dominant; the *weight* of political argument is carried by the character of speaker and audience. That ethos is not only a premise of argument. It is also a kind of conclusion.

Political argument often takes the form 'Because we are this kind of people we ought to undertake such-and-such a course of action, it is in accord with our values and character'. Here, as Thomas Farrell has put it, 'the norms and conventions of a culture find themselves employed as premises of both recognition and inference' (Farrell 1993: 76). But in Populist rhetorics the implicit form of argument is 'Because we have been prevented from being the kinds of people we truly are, we must undertake such-and-such a course of action and prove that we really are that kind of people'. Here, ethos is, as it were, both cause and effect of a proposed course of action. Thus – and importantly - while it provides a basis for making specific claims about policy areas such as immigration, policing or membership of the European Union, for Populism these are primarily stages upon which populist ethos may be performed and demonstrated, mythical dramas enacted, and people invited to identify the part they must play (see also McGee, 1975; Alexander, 2010). Consequently, populist rhetoricians eschew the practical, future-oriented genres of deliberative political rhetoric for epideictic rhetorics. All arguments are occasions for praise and blame, and for focusing attention on the putative enhancement, protection or restoration of the character of a people.

Media and Populist Rhetoric

Analysis of populist rhetoric can take the form of rhetorical criticism showing how rhetors define the people, to whom or to what they are opposed, the claims about authority or legitimacy they make and how stylistic features create discursive space for 'the people' to inhabit. It must also be concerned with analysis of the contexts within and through which such populist rhetoric is manifested. Audiences cannot come into existence if there is no occasion to gather them, putting them in the presence of a rhetor and a rhetorical genre. A fundamental fact about most such occasions today is that they are mediated and, in the case of Populist

rhetorics, often online. And as we shall see the ways in which media shape rhetorical actions and experiences tends to favour, and perhaps to induce, populist uses of ethos.

Bitzer (1968), famously, identified three constituents of a 'rhetorical situation' prior to the creation of any discourse or its dissemination: the exigence, the audience and the constraints. That model is today considered too mechanical and static not least because it presumes that key elements are given before a rhetorical situation and not themselves created rhetorically (Vatz, 1973; Consigny, 1974). Rhetorical situations may be better understood, in Edbauer's words, as 'a mixture of processes and encounters', taking shape within the unstable networks and flows of a wider 'ecology' (2005), a reconceptualization especially significant for the theory and analysis of mediated rhetorics. Media are not 'containers' for rhetorical situations but complex, dynamic environments of interacting elements which blur the boundaries of what were once distinct genres of public communication. For example, in the latter half of the twentieth century the ubiquity and dominance of television was such that political actors, to be successful, had to adapt to its styles. A domestic medium, characterised by 'talking heads' addressing the audience of families in their living room, television demanded intimacy and personality (Ellis, 1982; Williams, 1973). Consequently, in the UK for instance, political rhetoric on television became more informal and conversational (Pearce, 2005). Public addresses began to emphasise the 'ordinariness' of political leaders and adopted forms of anecdotal argument made popular by genres such as the talk-show (Atkins and Finlayson, 2012). Evidence also suggests that public judgements of politicians came to focus on their perceived 'normality', how much they are 'like us' (Clarke et al., 2018: Chapter 8). Broadcast audio-visual media redirected the flow of the elements of rhetoric. In ways which have had complex and profound effects, they brought together the worlds of politics and celebrity (Street, 2004; Corner and Pels, 2003) foregrounding performances of particular sorts of ethos.

It is with this in mind that we should take note of Moffitt's observation that 'many of the attributes of media logic are roughly analogous with (or at least complementary to) the features of populism as a political style' (2016:76), and also of the fact that a large number of politically successful contemporary populists have a background in broadcast media entertainment such as game shows and wrestling (see O'Brien, 2020).

Today, however, broadcast television is no longer the dominant form of media. Populism and the populist ethos flourish with yet greater intensity because of what Gries calls (2015, in words which echo Bitzer's formulation) the 'built-in constraints in social media'. Indeed, media theorist and analyst Paolo Gerbaudo (2018) argues that there is an 'elective affinity' between populism and social media which fragment mass audiences yet also enable widely dispersed individuals to swarm around particular issues, filtering the information they receive, hiding people from each other while intensifying involvement with an 'in-group'. Furthermore, as Boyle et al. note, 'the digital is no longer conditional on particular devices but has become a multisensory, embodied condition through which most of our basic processes operate' (Boyle et al. 2018: 252). The situation of viewers, looking at the world through a computer screen tapping away at a keyboard or swiping on a phone, makes engagement bodily (tactile, perhaps adrenalin and dopamine fuelled) yet distanced from other bodies. That makes it all too easy to experience the thrill of transgression without the risk of being disturbed by seeing or experiencing its effects on others. Also importantly, since its inception, social media has been associated with the idea that it is disruptive, empowering and outside the mainstream giving voice to the voiceless. All of these features create a terrain, a structure of a situation, conducive to populist forms of communication.

As well as these general 'constraints' on the complex rhetorical situations created by digital media the 'affordances' of particular platforms (see Boyd, 2010; Bucher and Helmond, 2018) dispose 'content creators' towards particular modes of persuasion and intensify of focus on ethos. An important and instructive example of this is the blog. Miller and Shepherd (2004) have shown how blogs emerged in an established 'kairos of confession, celebrity and commercialisation', in which the boundary between public and private was breaking down. They enabled and invited writing which emphasised personal expression in situations in which this was also a proof that the text was beyond or outside the 'mainstream media' and therefore 'authentic'. The software, the underlying code which structured the appearance of blogs and the way in which they could be used by writers and readers, intensified this. Dated and time-stamped entries, organised in a reverse chronology, encouraged readers (and writers) to expect updates and to think of the blog as an unfolding narrative of personal, real-time responses to ongoing events but which also (through the hyperlink for example) folded in on itself to communicate a whole person. Miller and Shepherd also argue that the combination of wider exigence and the distinct affordances of the blog, interacting with the 'modelling of forms and topoi offered by antecedent genres' gave rise to a new genre which was also a form of social action oriented at the construction of a self, understood as 'an ongoing event' (Miller and Shepherd, 2009). That project of the self could connect with other such projects, establishing 'affective attachments' and forming 'affective communities' which in turn affirm the selves of which they are composed (see also Dean, 2010).

The blog is now an outdated form. But it was a template for social media which exploded thanks to the easy means of self-disclosure and its circulation created by Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. These maintain some features of the blog identified by Miller and Shepherd: the time-stamp and the feeling of the permanently immediate, the 'profile', the performed

persona built up over time. In these ways the design of such platforms induces rhetorical moments and situations in which *ethos* is at stake (a subject of argument), a proof (often the most dominant) and a proposition (or promise) of what one will be if one is able and willing to accept or identify with that persona. Consequently, the genres to which such media give rise have a deep affinity with the rhetorical and ideological form and content of populism. With this in mind we can consider how this plays out on one particular platform.

YouTube Rhetoric

YouTube is an online video-sharing and social media platform. It enables users to upload video very easily, converting it into a format which viewers anywhere can stream on any operating system. Uploaded videos are stored on a user's channel, their own easily branded profile, and show the date of their original upload as well as a title and short description. Viewers can indicate approval or disapproval by clicking a thumbs-up or thumbs-down icon. They can also leave comments beneath the video and engage in debate or conversation there. They can click to share the video, posting a link on other social media platforms or 'embedding' it in their own webpage, 'subscribe' to YouTube channels, receiving notifications of new content or finding it posted onto their personalised YouTube 'front-page'. The page for any particular videos shows the number of subscribers to that channel and the number of views of that video (see also Burgess and Green, 2018; Stokel-Walker, 2019).

The most obvious effect of this platform is that it makes it easy for individuals otherwise without means to present content online and to find audiences that had previously existed only as potential. It also makes it possible for people to earn an income from cultivating such audiences. Videos can include advertising breaks and YouTube shares a proportion of revenue

with producers. The latter may in turn develop sponsorship arrangements, sell subsidiary merchandise and receive donations from subscribers via platforms such as Patreon. These technologies have contributed to the rise of a new kind of 'ideological entrepreneur', making a living from politics but – importantly - without being tied to a party or a media organization and free from their restraints.

Users are, however, constrained by the medium itself, which imposes on communicative form. While the platform hosts all manner of things – including music videos, old films, university lectures – original content possesses a recognisable YouTube style: an amateur 'DIY' appearance (with editing often very visible), vernacular styles of speech communicated by talking heads addressing the viewer directly, often from what seems to be a private, personal, space. There is, then, an implied intimacy to much YouTube content, and an appearance of authenticity derived from the combination of apparent amateurism and the blurring of 'backstage' and 'frontstage'. Like the blogs that Miller and Shepherd studied, on YouTube channels a single video is just one part of an ongoing stream of content which derives meaning from the character of the channel and from its place in its ongoing output which builds up a relationship with subscribers. On political YouTube this shows itself through content which, as Lewis observes, is 'often highly personal' with political ideas communicated 'through subjective storytelling and affective cues . . . over long periods of time' (2018: 18). She describes conservative and far-right YouTube videos as '*ideological testimonials*' likening them to advertising testimonials. Political 'influencers' she suggests, 'display the way they live their politics as an aspirational brand' (Lewis, 2018: 28).

This personalisation of political content is matched by the individualisation of its consumption, often of course via a smartphone designed for use by a single individual. Viewers will watch

YouTube content as part of a media 'flow' (Williams, 1973) unique to them and in that sense participatory at the most basic level. Each user's front-page on signing into YouTube will be different. Functions, topics and media forms are jumbled together and genres like comedy, entertainment, education, gaming, music, sports and so on, compete for attention (Uricchio, 2009). The medium thus blurs the boundaries of these forms. They ebb and flow in and out of one another. Sport appears in a political feed. Politics appears as part of entertainment. And users might be anywhere, consuming anything at any time. Political content which can be watched on the bus, in the bath, at the back of a lecture-hall is part of an 'infotainment' continuum alongside compilations of football highlights, music, exercise tips and so on, and it loses the character of a distinct discursive, public and collective activity. In this way, a medium such as YouTube can give rise to new ways of categorising, organising and formalising social behaviours. That may in turn affect how we perceive, experience and distinguish political from other activities, leading to new kinds of micropolitical relations (see also Stiegler, 2009).

YouTube, then, gives rise to communication channels hungry for attention which needs to be won and held. It encourages a micro-celebrity-culture of 'parasocial' relationships, in which users feel a bond or affinity with a producer they never directly meet (Rasmussen, 2018). Channels address viewers directly - 'like and subscribe', they will insist - and encourage participation in the form of comments, suggestions for future videos, sharing and so on. Such participation may extend to other platforms where videos and related issues can be discussed, larger affective communities take shape (Papacharissi, 2015) and subsidiary content - such as new videos highlighting the best moments of a channel – is created and circulated. Viewers are invited to imagine that they are part of a community. Such relationships between YouTubers and followers, turn, paradoxically, on the YouTuber being both extraordinary in some way – able to deliver insights about make-up, movies, fitness or whatever the channel may be about

– yet also ordinary, on the same level with us, speaking from their bedroom to ours, as it were, and not part of the mainstream official media system. The medium sets up a series of relations that are similar in form to the populist relationship in politics which, as we have seen, was itself already similar to relationships between celebrities and fans. To see what happens when populist politics meets a populist platform we turn to an example.

A Case-Study in YouTube Populism: The 'Truth' About Brexit

My case-study is a YouTube video released during the campaign over the referendum concerning the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union. *The Truth About Brexit* was released on 5th June 2016 (three weeks before the referendum itself) and at the time of writing has been viewed approximately nine-hundred and thirty-five thousand times.[2] It was published on the channel of the British-based political YouTuber Paul Joseph Watson. He has a significant presence on political social media with 1.2m followers on Twitter and 1.86m subscribers on YouTube. His most watched video has been seen 12m times and most significant online intervention was to release a video during the 2016 US Presidential election campaign claiming Hilary Clinton had a brain disease. In 2019 then President Donald Trump tweeted his support for Watson when the latter's content was being regulated by Facebook.

But before we look in detail at Watson, his channel and *The Truth About Brexit* we need to take a brief detour and familiarise ourselves with the wider rhetorical situation of this text: the rhetorical culture around British membership of the EU and the distinct *topoi* which emerged clearly during the referendum campaign. This is a large topic but here we can highlight just three aspects. Firstly, since joining the EU in 1973 British discourse about its membership has tended to be distinctly transactional. That is, membership is justified and promoted (or

[2] The video can be viewed on Watson's YouTube Channel here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNJ05NfM-4Y

criticised and rejected) in terms of a balance sheet showing what the UK gets from the bloc, and in particular whether it gets more or less than it puts in (e.g. Wodak, 2018; Grube, 2017). A second and clearly related theme has been the geographical and ideological/cultural distance between the UK and the EU, which, combined with claims about the particularity and peculiarity of British history, sets limits on how far the UK can ever be fully involved in the EU (Daddow, 2013; Spiering, 2015; Wodak, 2018; Finlayson, 2018). Arguments about the EU were always, in this sense, arguments about British identity (Wenzl, 2019) and ethos. Thirdly, the more directly 'Eurosceptic' discourses emphasise an aspect of the first two: that what distinguishes the UK from the EU is a particular approach to liberty linked with hard-headed scepticism about the capacity and legitimacy of regulatory authority. From this perspective, 'ever closer union', especially after the Lisbon Treaty, could only be conceived of as a threat to British autonomy, even part of a deliberate programme to contain the nation, shackling what would otherwise be a great economic and political power (e.g. Hawkins, 2015; O'Toole, 2018).

The 2016 referendum took place within this discursive context. The official Remain campaign concentrated on the transactional dimension, emphasising the losses that would be incurred on withdrawal. The Leave side also employed this frame but concentrated on the failure of EU membership to satisfy the interests of particular groups explaining economic decline not with reference to the fiscal austerity imposed after the 2008 Global Financial Crash, nor to the industrial restructuring and globalisation of the nineteen-eighties but to membership of the EU since 1973. However, and significantly, in so doing it moved the discourse beyond transactional calculations. Because EU bureaucracy and regulations were presented as hindering the country from seizing opportunities, Brexit could be presented as an opening onto a boundless utopian future. In the influential *Brexit: The Movie* released online during the

campaign and showing 1.5 million views by the day of the vote, the Conservative politician David Davis argued that 'We have huge scope, huge scope for creating vast numbers of new jobs' while conservative journalist Matt Ridley claimed that 'Outside Europe we could have prosperity on a level that we can't even imagine now'.[3]

As the discourse developed from one of transactional costs and benefits to the promise of political and economic transformation so did the discourse of freedom become more prominent. Examining a large corpus Douglas (2021) found that 'freedom' was prominent within the Leave campaign's discourse, often collocated with 'independence', 'liberty' and 'sovereignty'. Freedom understood as possession of the power to act both effectively and without necessary regard to others, thus underpinned the slogan 'Vote Leave, Take Back Control' which became, as Zappettini and Krzyżanowski (2019) put it, a **'floating signifier'** referring simultaneously to '*global deceleration'* (a rejection of neoliberal austerity) and *acceleration* (greater liberalisation and free trade) both being connected to the argument that to achieve either requires liberation from EU rules. It is significant, then, that, as Buckledee finds, the Remain and Leave campaigns differed in linguistic modality. The former tended to hedge, making arguments about what 'would' or 'could' happen if Leave won, while the latter was direct and strident in claiming that the UK 'will' be free to make laws, trade with the world and so on (2018: 31-5). Buckledee also shows how Leave made better use of an inclusive 'we' which, opposed to the establishment in favour of Remain, would be the subject of that freedom. Who was and wasn't part of that 'we' was of course also part of the debate, to which immigration was central particularly in the rhetoric of UKIP (Cap, 2019) but also more generally (Zappetini, 2019).

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[3] At the time of writing it is still on YouTube and has 2.9m views.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTMxfAkxfQ0

The referendum debate, then, took place on a terrain organised by a central pairing of freedom and control. In Leave rhetoric the former organised otherwise diverse demands for both more and less economic liberalisation, promising unimagined riches, while the latter articulated a capacity to determine the future of the nation and could accommodate a range of nationalist, racialised political claims about the character of the nation or 'the people'. For example, a key moment of the referendum campaign came when Nigel Farage, leader of the pro-Leave United Kingdom Independence Party, unveiled a billboard poster bearing a photographic image of migrants crossing the Croatia-Slovenia border in 2015. Showing no white faces the image was captioned 'Breaking Point: The EU has failed us all'. At the foot of the poster, next to the recommendation to Vote Leave, it read 'We must break free of the EU and take back control'. Farage further commented '…the EU has made a fundamental error that risks the security of everybody' (Stewart and Mason, 2016). Five years later, expressing enthusiasm at the final completion of the withdrawal process, the prominent Conservative Party Brexit campaigner Ian Duncan Smith declared 'I just wish I was 21 again…My goodness what prospects lie ahead of us for young people now: to be out there buccaneering, trading, dominating the world again' (Parker, 2021).

Voting Leave could be construed – perhaps experienced – as an act of national liberation and self-determination, bringing into being or enabling expression of an otherwise silenced national identity, awaiting restoration to its former glory. This was linked to a rhetoric centred on timeliness. In *Brexit: The Movie* UKIP leader Nigel Farage said: 'This is the single most important political decision any of us will make in our lifetime'. But it was Boris Johnson, closing the Leave case during a televised debate at the end of the campaign, who encapsulated this appeal. The choice, he said, was between hope and fear, those who believed in the country

and those rubbishing it. Voting leave was 'speaking up for hundreds of millions of people around Europe who agree with us but who currently have no voice' and, to make it clear, 'If we vote Leave and take back control I believe that this Thursday can be our country's Independence Day'. Over the course of the campaign transactional rhetoric which had framed debate about the EU turned into something else. Leave presented its case in terms of transformative possibility, making Brexit into an opening into the unknown which for that very reason could appear enticing and the braver path to choose.

Brexit rhetoric was, then, populist according to more than one of the conceptual definitions we have considered. As Laclau might observe, it proposed the existence of a 'people', prevented from being themselves fully because of an Other, the EU. It proposed a means of overcoming that Other in the process transforming the situation and restoring to the nation its true character - freer, wealthier, more powerful than before. As Mudde might say, it was centred on the Nation while also predominantly moral and, dividing good from evil. And it had elements of the style identified by Moffitt and Tormey, breaking with decorum, combining the ordinary and the extraordinary and seeking to embody them in the nature of the movement and the person of its leading figures.

With this in mind we can now return to YouTuber Paul Joseph Watson. Our interest here is in how this already populist, ethos-centric, Brexit rhetoric combined with the political rhetorical style of the digital platform. Watson himself has a background in conspiracy theory. In a 2003 book, for example, he tried to prove that most of world history was caused by the machinations of a 'power elite' involving bodies such as the UN and the EU. Since working for professional conspiracy theorist Alex Jones (Hines, 2018) Watson has moved outwards and worked with both economic libertarians and far-right activists (see Finlayson 2020). In 2018 – two years after the referendum – he joined UKIP. Over that time his online output has shifted from

explicit conspiracy theory to more mainstream political issues, particularly concerning immigration, gender politics and Islam. In so doing he has developed a particular political style, adapted to and making use of the medium, which is also a way of performing a populist ethos, connected to a moralising rhetoric dividing the world into good and evil, inviting viewers to adopt his political style, to align themselves with good and inhabit the populist Brexit ethos.

The Truth About Brexit came out as the referendum campaign had taken shape. It is 19.36 minutes long with a script of around 3000 words. It primarily consists of Watson talking to camera, delivering what is in effect a political speech, interspersed with still images of news reports and clips from *Brexit: The Movie* which serve as citations from authority, tendentious uses of images and quotations of opponents which serve as evidence against them, and, importantly, footage over which he speaks and which fulfils, as we shall explain later, an important 'enthymematic' function. The video contains numerous inaccurate claims but these are not a direct focus of this chapter. The issue for us is not whether or not Watson's claims should be believed but the kind of belief they invite.

Watson's ethos is constructed through his appearance across many videos. He is a well-groomed, suited but informally dressed young man. His address is less intimate than some YouTube videos, evoking a style of current affairs broadcasting, part news commentator delivering a to-camera editorial and part radio shock-jock. He stands, looking slightly down at us, his face and body active, expressive and very directly addressing us. Behind him, usually, is a world map, connoting news programmes, but perhaps also a military adviser, and a certain seriousness. Watson's enunciation is sharp, aggressive but not out of control, confidently sarcastic. This bearing and appearance establish a form of rhetorical authority. There is no equivocation. The modality is direct. At the same time, the video doesn't hide the jump cuts

that connote authenticity on YouTube. This performance is one of the anchors of a key argument of the video, summed up at the end: 'The Vote Leave campaign is based on sound arguments, facts, logic, statistics; the Vote Remain campaign is based on fear-mongering and hyperbole'. Remain is an 'insult' to our intelligence. 'Their arguments' Watson says, 'are baseless because all they can appeal to is irrational panic'. He mockingly describes them as 'all this Chicken Little, the sky is falling, there will be World War III if Britain leaves the EU, there will be economic catastrophe' concluding, in an example of the 'bad manners' style of populism, that 'it's all total bollocks'.

The argument, then, is that the Remain campaign is manipulative, trying to frighten you and exploit your irrational self, yet itself also frightened and irrational. That may appear contradictory. How can the campaign be both calculatingly manipulative and emotionally driven? But the argument isn't really about Remain. It is that Leave is brave, rational, uncowed, confident like Watson himself whose ethos of self-possession is demonstrated by the bold, decisive way in which he makes these claims. Remain relies on 'the tyranny of the status quo' and people's psychological aversion to change. Its hedging is evidence of weakness and insincerity. The only people who could believe in it, it follows, are people who allow themselves to be manipulated and scared into submission. To accept Watson's argument is to demonstrate one's resolute, strong-willed, independence of mind.

Meyer argues that rhetoric is 'the negotiation of the distance' between subjects in relation to a question or problem (2017: Chapter 11; Turnbull, 2014). Through language we demonstrate and justify where we 'stand' in relation to a matter at hand and so also in relation to others: who is near, who is further away. Watson's rhetoric is evidently concerned with such distance. The EU's behaviour is 'a complete insult to British common law', coming as it does from what

is characterised as a European tradition of regulation and control. Yet EU politicians are people you have no power to remove, 'whose names you don't even know' and whom 'you' cannot even recognize. Through this rhetoric of distance EU interventions become intrusions and migrants a way of forcibly reducing distance while also pulling people away from their own governments. Throughout, the language is of taking and sending and the emphasis on locations in space as, for example, with a reference to the EU 'banning fishermen from operating on their own doorstep'. Remain is distant, 'we' are close, strong and united.

Throughout this speech Watson describes and names his opponents. He attributes to them identity, interests and motives which prove their bad character. Sometimes this involves word choices which negatively characterize both Remain supporters and the EU. 'They' don't simply say things but 'lecture us'; the EU isn't about compromise between nations but 'obliterating' the nation state and building 'their own Byzantine United States of Europe'; it doesn't just have power but is 'seizing raw power'. These amplifications form part of a deeper strategy through which The European Union becomes one of the names of a catastrophe that has already happened and Brexit the name of an act of self-determining salvation. Watson calls the EU 'a state' (rather than an intergovernmental or transnational organisation) claiming:

> 'the EU isn't planning to become a federal super state, accountable only to the bureaucrats who profit from it. It already is one. It already has a central bank, a President, a currency, a criminal justice system, a passport, a flag and anthem. These are all defining characteristics of a nation-state'.

He then defines that state as 'not undemocratic…anti-democratic', a 'tyranny', capping this with a clever flourish (not Watson's coinage): 'if the EU were a country applying to join itself it would be rejected on the grounds of being insufficiently democratic'.

Similarly, the definition of the EU as an economic union is overturned: 'They lied to us from the start. They claimed it was just going to be a free trade zone. It's already a sprawling Empire'. It is also an economic 'basket case' which harms the UK through 'wealth confiscation', giving British money to poorer countries, while restricting fishing and preventing the UK from making trade deals. Rather than an open market it is a closed one characterised by bureaucratic 'overreach', regulating in the interests of big corporations while smaller businesses are 'strangled'. 'Why', he asks, 'would we want to remain part of an institution that's designed to screw over small businesses and the middle class? Why wouldn't we want to leave an institution that jacks up our cost of living by slapping regulations and tariffs on everything that we consume?'

These histrionics are a kind of *paradiastole,* a trope of redescription, re-presenting as vices what might have seemed to be virtues (see Skinner, 2007). The EU's measures to make itself accountable and representative and to manage economic issues are presented as the opposite. While this connects with longstanding transactional Euroscepticism its core is a moral argument about ethos. The naming and the redescription help not only with the establishment of a gulf between 'them' on the EU side and 'us' in the UK, but construe that gap as more than one of opinion or judgement, a disagreement over ways to reach a common goal. The two sides are shown to have radically different goals and the goal of Remainers as fundamentally venal. Supporters of the EU aren't really supporters, just people who benefit from it and who are lying to you: 'Isn't it an amazing coincidence that all the economic, academic, NGO, and arts organizations who were fear-mongering about Britain leaving the EU are being bankrolled by the EU?' asks Watson. Those 'claiming that Brexit will lead to the apocalypse' are 'lying to you because they don't want their slush fund to come to an end'. He then lists claims familiar

to readers of English tabloid newspapers about the 'gravy train', EU expenses accounts, tax breaks for officials and so on.

The rhetoric of *The Truth About Brexit* is a particularly pungent, condensed and intense, version of that which dominated the campaign in general. Some features are, however, particular to the audio-visual form. These include 'citations' of supplementary authorities (via clips from *Brexit: The Movie* featuring prominent Leavers) and still images of newspapers and other texts which appear as sources and proofs of claims (including articles by Watson). Longer clips function as visual enthymemes. Enthymemes work by applying a general and commonly held belief or value to a specific case, identifying a category of something good, for example, showing how the specific proposal we are making is an instance of it and enabling audiences to complete the thought. Here general propositions are affirmed through visual examples. For instance, seven minutes and fifty seconds into the video, in a section focused on the alleged effects of immigration policy, Watson says: '… and thanks to the EU's open-border policy Southern European states simply waved millions of migrants through, knowing that they would head to the northern European welfare states and would become someone else's burden'. These words accompany three visual sequences. The first shows excited (non-white) people running through some gates past a security guard; the second appears to show (non-white) people throwing things and smashing traffic-lights; the third shows a number of excited looking (non-white) younger men close to the camera and running down the street. Where this footage comes from and what is actually happening is not made clear. The commentary makes no direct reference to the images which just accompany the words. Watson says that EU migration policy brings migrants to Northern Europe. The images provide a second proposition about those migrants and viewers are invited to supply the conclusion. In verbal enthymemes 'common sense' is affirmed. Here *doxa* imposes itself on a visual image making something unspecified

into something specific. On the one hand it is a way for Watson to not say what he is clearly saying. On the other hand it is a way for the viewer to be confident that 'seeing is believing' when what they 'see' is, indeed, what they believe.

My argument so far is, firstly, that Watson's video applies, in a dramatic form, the core *topoi* of the Brexit case. There are arguments about the costs and benefits of membership, the distance of EU rule from the ordinary Briton, and a performance of scepticism and suspicion of EU power. However, secondly, Watson intensifies these in ways in line with the political theories of populism we have considered and which particularly centre on ethos. A rhetoric centred on naming heightens the moral opposition between ordinary geographically and culturally located individuals and a distanced, displaced and corrupt elite. There is a performance style, centred on bad manners and claims about crisis, grounded in direct and indirect claims about character - Watson's own, that of Remainers and that of those who, in taking up Watson's position, will become active, critical, self-possessed, honest, rational and moral rather than passive, credulous, manipulated, lying, emotional and immoral.

However, behind, this is a yet more fundamental organising principle. The video is called 'The Truth' about Brexit. The description next to it on the webpage is 'What they're NOT telling you about Britain's vote to leave the EU'. The opening line is unambiguous: 'This is the most important vote you will ever cast in your lifetime. So listen up. They're lying to you about Brexit'. Throughout, Watson employs *topoi* of secrecy and disclosure, of what's 'really' going on, what 'they' don't want you to know, what the media won't tell you, what others don't realize, the order and strategy behind things which he will reveal to you. These commonplaces possess, as Edwin Black has put it, 'uncommon powers of implication and entailment' (1988: 134). And they are not unique to this video. Many of Watson's videos are called 'The Truth

About…' or 'What They're Not Telling You About…' (see Finlayson 2020). It is a trope common on YouTube and in online culture where we are regularly promised we will be told things we never knew, shown things we won't believe and have revealed to us various tricks, techniques and 'life hacks'. In this context, Watson's rhetoric of 'naming' is also a demonstration of possession of a basic power of naming which is also a power of truth-telling, of saying what is 'really' going on by giving things their 'proper' names. The visual nature of such rhetoric adds to this, showing things 'in black and white', the 'reality' of the image serving sometimes to complement Watson's statements, at others to undercut the verbal claims of an opponent. Watson's is, then, an 'ethical' and quasi-epistemological discourse. It locates Brexit within a deeper order defined by an absolute gulf between the self-interested and unprincipled people who support Remain and live with lies, and those who support Leave and who want to see things as they truly are. In form it is congruent with the general structure of Populism identified by Laclau, constituting 'a people' defined by its opposition to a 'them' posited as preventing that people from becoming fully itself. In content it is congruent with populist ideologies which, as Mudde has shown, map that division onto moral distinctions of good and evil. But the rhetoric is not taking a set of general populist positions and applying them to Brexit in order to make a specific policy proposition. Rather, Brexit is a route through which subjects find a general Truth revealed to them on Watson's authority. The rhetoric of secrets, Black writes, promotes their revelation 'in the belief that such exposure will work to the detriment of whatever is revealed - that the secret, which is simultaneously concealed because it is evil and evil because it is concealed, will shrivel in the luminosity of revelation' (Black, 1988). The core proposition concerning Watson's ethos is that he is a truth-teller, someone who can show the otherwise hidden connections between things and reveal – in audio-visual colour - who are your enemies and what is their agenda. The promise is that if you agree with him then you too can expose and destroy evil.

Conclusion

In this chapter, drawing on approaches to the topic from within Political Studies, I have argued that populism consists, in part, of a rhetorical form for which ethos is both origin and destination. I further argued that audio-visual media have intensified this focus on ethos and that digital social media do so even more. Out of their complex, multi-layered and multi-sensory flows, moments of rhetorical exchange crystallise, the constraints of the medium demanding distinct genres of political communication. On a platform such as YouTube a combination of technical and economic incentives and demands, as well as an imposing procedural rhetoric, give rise to genres which emphasise ethos, the benefits and wisdom which a YouTuber can confer, and create a distinct sort of microcelebrity culture characterised by the seeming personalisation and individualisation of content and the inducement to form parasocial relationships.

In his Brexit rhetoric, as we have seen, Paul Joseph Watson drew on established *topoi* centred on harm/benefit, closeness/distance, freedom/control. He amplified these, employing a fully populist style, and represented Brexit as a fundamental contest and part of a larger resistance struggle linked to a claim about 'the Truth'. This rhetoric, bringing together ideological content and form with the genres of YouTube creates a political discourse around a commercial promise of insight and self-transformation. On YouTube Watson's political appeal is individualised and personalised and what he offers, through the revelation of secrets, manifested in visual and other enthymemes (by which viewers 'see' for themselves) is an invitation to accept an 'empowering' form of individual identification.

In his 2003 book *Order Out of Chaos: Elite Sponsored Terrorism and the New World Order* Watson's presentation of the long-standing plot by 'them' against 'us' led not to a clear political demand but to recommendations for self-improvement. Readers were urged to learn how to resist brainwashing, to see 'the agenda' and to help others 'realise they are under attack'. Doing so required protecting oneself from contemporary culture, battling feelings of depression or worthlessness. These sorts of claims are at the heart of most of Watson's YouTube output where the culture from which we should protect ourselves is that of Western Liberalism, of 'social justice' and demands for equality between the sexes, ethnic groups, countries and so on. In his Brexit rhetoric Watson implies that it is not only the will of the people which is being thwarted by the EU but 'you' and your will. You can regain that will, restore an ethos of dignity and sense of purpose, if you are brave and vote Leave (and if you continue to watch Paul Joseph Watson).

As a form of politics this is perhaps best understood with reference to Weber's ideal type of charismatic authority. The YouTuber derives authority not from their place within a formal structure giving them rational-legal or traditional standing. Instead authority is grounded in the ethos of the YouTuber which is represented as founded on their rejection of rational-legal and traditional authorities. Weber finds that charismatic authority relies on personal trust in the revelations the charismatic presents and the goal of which is 'to effect a subjective or internal reorientation born out of suffering, conflicts, or enthusiasm' and 'a completely new orientation of all attitudes toward the different problems of the "world"' (1978: 245). Interestingly, Weber also observes that charismatic authority is 'specifically foreign to economic considerations' in that it rejects 'rational economic conduct' (1978: 244). That's not to say it renounces wealth. Rather, it eschews regular income attained by traditional or rational economic activity. Instead, individual patrons provide the necessary resources 'through honorific gifts, dues and other

voluntary contributions' (1978: 1113) and the closeness which derives from such followership may give them special access to the charismatic perhaps even a share in the esteem (1978: 1119). The structures of social media celebrity reproduce just this relationship. Subscription to a channel is a basic form of membership of a community affording access to an ethos. Deeper in, one can participate in ancillary discussion about the meaning of various pronouncements. Then one can share them and proselytise. Finally, one can set up regular donations in return for which you might get to see videos early, see special videos available only to a few and even meet the person virtually and 'ask them anything'. In this respect we might say that social (digital, participatory and shareable) media tend towards the formation of relationships that are not only parasocial but cultic in nature and that through them political discourse tends to move away from negotiation over differences of interest and become part of a kind of celebrity theodicy, an argument about suffering, sin and a promise of salvation when the demons are destroyed. Today, on all kinds of platforms, online and offline this mode of discourse dominates our politics.

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