**The Emperor’s Nudity:**

**The Media, the Masses, and the Unwritten Law**

If there is one quintessential trait typical of the new breed of authoritarian leaders gaining ground throughout the liberal-democratic world, it is their ability to infringe upon the unwritten rules of the political game. The ascendance of Donald Trump – an extreme example of the abovementioned trend – to the presidency of the United States has particularly stumped scholars and pundits alike. In the hands of this new kind of politician, the violation of norms and conventions that would normally put an abrupt end to a political career, reveals itself, on the contrary, to be the secret to maintaining their elusive power, a mechanism for mobilizing support and legitimization. Even more startling than the infractions themselves is the flagrant and public way in which they are committed. In the present article, I will examine the link between the new political powers’ direct appeal to the obscene and the silent dimension of socio-ethical rules, as well as point out the correlation between ethical and political transformations and changing trends in mass media.

Keywords: political philosophy, media, unwritten rules, Trump, public, Canetti, Freud, Lefort, Groys.

**Introduction**

An ever-increasing number of world leaders who have risen to power in the liberal-democratic world over the past decades expose the need to rethink such fundamental concepts as authority, sovereignty, legitimacy and power in the modern state. The ascendancy of leaders such as Trump, Erdoğan, Netanyahu, and Putin is perceived is a new political phenomenon, one that often stumps and astonishes scholars of political science. It is easy to classify this new kind of political power as an updated version of populism, especially based on its widespread harnessing of resentment towards the elites, among other things, as a source of influence. Nevertheless, it would seem that the concepts formulated by populism studies fall far short of encapsulating the phenomenon. They fail to provide an explanation to the apparently global nature of the emerging trend, and more importantly, they seem unable to account for the new patterns of legitimation, political discourse and authority characteristic of this new kind of politics.

In the pages that follow, I will focus on what seems to be a quintessential trait of new politics, which is its direct appeal to the obscene as a source of power. This characteristic is especially striking when it comes to Trump, Netanyahu, and Berlusconi, as attested to by the spirit of hedonism or even vulgarity that surrounds them, in their ability to say things that are taboo, their disregard for the rules of political discourse, the public use of winks and “dog whistles” (i.e., the positioning of the obscene as the center of the transmitted message), and so on and so forth. No wonder such displays elicit the astonishment and frustration of political scholars and commentators. Patterns of discourse and actions that have traditionally been considered destructive to political figures are turning out to be secret weapons for securing power in the hands of these new leaders. They also pose a theoretical challenge to our ideas about political authority and legitimacy.

A good way to elucidate the theoretical challenge this present paper attempts to address is by referring to Hans Christian Andersen’s story “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” which illustrates a fundamental paradigm of modern thinking on the subject of authority. According to this paradigm, authority is nothing but external attire and all it takes to uncover this fact is to look at it with eyes free of the chains of traditional political culture.[[1]](#endnote-2) If only we can gain enough insight – with the help of critical thinking, rejection of ideology, and recognition of the systems of power – we shall see that underneath the clothes, the people who hold the power are mere flesh and blood, and their nakedness will be exposed to all. And yet, the new authoritarians flaunt their nakedness, in the sense that their patterns of recruitment, legitimation and maintenance of power are in fact based on the exposure and blatancy that they themselves perpetrate.

Still, this focus on the way power presents itself externally will naturally provoke some malaise, especially among critical readers, for the natural critical tendency is to forcibly shift our gaze away from the display in order to examine the covert, in-depth factors behind it: not to look at the image that seeks to captivate our gaze, the shadow-puppet show on the walls of the cave, but rather to locate the thing that image seeks to cover up. For the power of an image to captivate the gaze stems from the fact that it appears in the place of the "full picture," the theoretical – but to all intents and purposes impossible – picture that encompasses reality in its infinite complexity. That is the basic lie of the image. The reason it fascinates us is that it postures as a representation of the whole, the one picture we must look at. The image, the prominent display, positions itself in the center and ostensibly denies access to the deep undercurrents flowing beneath. And yet it is this very image – the flattened depiction of complex tensions – that lends itself to symptomatic analysis. The epistemic character of a symptom is overdetermination, being the result of more than one causal chain.[[2]](#endnote-3) By proposing a symptomatic analysis, there is therefore no intention here of making conjectures about some kind of ultimate cause – a singular infrastructural and decisive cause, or one that encapsulates all the rest – but rather to proceed by taking into account the overdetermination, the volatile intersection of different causal chains in one symptom. In other words, our goal is to see the object of analysis as a focal point where multiple and contradictory trends intersect, and thus as an expression of a complex array of tensions that do not align into a clear and coherent worldview.

The article, as such, is divided into two main parts. In the first part, I will examine the unique characteristics of the “new authoritarianism,” in particular, its direct appeal to obscenity in terms of the relationship between the written and unwritten law and between what is decent and what is obscene. In the second part, I will scrutinize the media conditions in which these recent developments have been unfolding, in particular the new emergent relationship between the “media” and the “masses,” and the changes it has effected in the public space.

**Liberal democracy in crisis and the new populism**

The wave of populism[[3]](#endnote-4) that has washed over liberal democracies around the globe in recent years has brought what Chantal Mouffe termed “the democratic paradox” back into the central discourse of political science.[[4]](#endnote-5) This concept refers to the tension, at the heart of liberal democracy, between the radical egalitarianism denoted by the term “democracy” and the liberal protection of individual rights, a tension that is currently threatening to bring liberal democracy to an end. The combination of these two separate foundations of liberal democracy, Mouffe warns, is not inexorable, but rather a product of historical chance and one that is riddled with tensions and contradictions.

These tensions and contradictions have come to the surface in recent years with the emergence of concrete political phenomena that emphasize the gap and disconnect between the fundamental elements of liberal regimes. In his book *The People vs. Democracy*, Yasha Mounk describes the current crisis through the metaphor of “divorce proceedings” between the democratic-popular pole and the liberal pole.[[5]](#endnote-6) The gradual separation of liberalism from democracy has manifested itself in the phenomena of rights without democracy, on the one hand, and democracy without rights, on the other. The former can be seen in the rise, over the last few decades, of liberal entities that are non-democratic, in other words, institutions that promote liberal values and protect liberal rights through bureaucratic means, without relying in any significant way on popular support, such as the European Union or national and international human rights organizations. The latter is apparent in the adoption of various models of what Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has recently termed “anti-liberal democracy” by a growing number of countries around the world.[[6]](#endnote-7)

1. To borrow the terms of Ernst Kantorowicz’s classic essay, the king’s “attire” is that which distinguishes between his “natural” or mortal body and his immortal body, the body politic which represents the continuity of the nation. The king’s insignia – his “ring, tiara, and purple” – are material objects that signify the transformation of a pretender to the throne into a king, and their removal, conversely, strips him of the king’s dignity and authority, the consequences of which are often dreadful. See Ernst Kantorowic, *The Kings Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1956), 35-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Althusser Overdetermination [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. The term “populism” is of course notoriously ambiguous. See Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (New York: Harcourt, 1981). For a thorough overview of the different approaches and definitions of the term, see Danny Filk, “Populism”, in *Mafteah* [*Key*] 13, 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London-New York: Verso, 2000), 2-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save It*, (Cambridge-London: Harvard University press, 2018), 44-147. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Lately, Orbán has also started employing the term “Christian democracy”. One cannot help but note the dubious honor that Israel can claim in being the first to adopt a regime in which democracy is bundled together with a religious-ethnic identity, the main purpose of which is the disenfranchisement of large segments of the country’s population. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)