

Paradise Lost: Explaining Populism as a Response to the Fragmentary Nature of Time, Space, and the Rapid Pace of Technological Advancement

Dora Vrhoci

UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN

d.vrhoci@student.rug.nl

Received: 07/02/2019

Accepted: 21/09/2019

ABSTRACT

Contemporary societies and technologies are evolving at an ever-swifter pace. Advances in the field of Augmented Reality (AR) and in Computer Science at large have led to games that let us immerse ourselves in worlds stuffed with zombies, robots, or pokémon critters. Globalization is making the world ever more interconnected, and the development of diverse social media platforms is changing the way people engage with politics and culture in their daily lives. Time and space have arguably never been more liquid, fragmentary, and compressed. Against this host of developments, Postmodern ideas on the fragmentation of time and space, the rupture in personal and national identity narratives, as well as the concept of «utopia,» can provide theoretical tools, shedding light on how various agents react to the rapid pace of technological change (such as Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and digitalization), and subsequent alterations in Man's perception of time and space.

This paper reconstructs the key tenets of Postmodern thinking on cultural phenomena, showing how the changing experience of time and space (induced by globalization, and technological advances) bear on the recent successes of populist parties in Europe and beyond. Furthermore, the paper places populists' narrative of and nostalgic mourning for an ideal past in a longer continuum of utopian and dystopian thinking. This is then interpreted as an attempt to build a vision of a homeostatic space that, once conceptualized as a rhetorical tool, serves to forge bonds among '(good) people'.

Keywords: european politics, technological development, populism, utopia, postmodernism.

Corresponding author: Dora Vrhoci. Faculty of Arts. European Literature and Culture - Research Centre Arts in Society (University of Groningen). Oude Kijk in 't Jatstraat 26. 9712 EK Groningen (The Netherlands).

Suggested citation: Vrhoci, D. (2019). Paradise Lost: Explaining Populism as a Response to the Fragmentary Nature of Time, Space, and the Rapid Pace of Technological Advancement. *Debats. Journal on Culture, Power and Society*, 4, 145-159. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.28939/iam.debats-en.2019-12>

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary societies and technologies are evolving at an ever-swifter pace: advances in the field of Augmented Reality (AR) and in Computer Science at large have led to games that let us immerse ourselves in worlds plagued by zombies, robots, and *pokémons*. Globalization is making the world ever more interconnected, and the development of diverse social media platforms is changing the way people engage with politics and culture in their daily lives.

Throughout history, the gathering pace of technological development and growing global integration, have affected human societies in various ways. To give a few examples, the process of modernization¹ can drive a shift from traditional to secular-rational values, and thus facilitate the establishment of democratic political cultures (Inglehart and Welzel, 2009). Likewise, globalization² and advances in ICT (e.g., smart phones, laptops, desktop computers) can influence how we experience time and space. Thus the fact that two people can have a real-time video chat even though, say, one lives in San Francisco (US) and the other in Maastricht (Holland) cuts the ‘distance’ between the two parties. Changes in our perception of time and space may show up later in different spheres of political and cultural life.³

1 In its understanding of ‘modernization,’ the paper uses the following definition from Inglehart and Welzel (2009: 34): “Modernization is a syndrome of social changes linked to industrialization. Once set in motion, it tends to penetrate all aspects of life, bringing occupational specialization, urbanization, rising educational levels, rising life expectancy, and economic growth”.

2 The paper understands globalization in the following way: “A trans-planetary process involving increasing liquidity and growing multi-directional flows as well as the structures they encounter and create” (Ritzer, 2011:2).

3 This paper assumes that globalization and subsequent technological developments, such as the developments in the field of ICT, induce changes in diverse fields of human activity. It should be noted, however, that there are also authors who are more ‘cautious’ about the impact of these developments on our perception of time and space. See Kaufmann (2002/2016), especially Chapter 1, for an insightful summary of some critical voices on globalization and ICTs’ influence on our perception of time and space.

In his philosophy of Postmodernism, David Harvey (1990: 240) coins the term “time-space compression” to describe the effect of processes which “so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves”. We can think of globalization, ICT advances and the recent digital transformation⁴ as processes that “revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time,” given that they may render our experience of them fleeting and fragmentary.⁵

It might be easier to visualize these changes in our perception of time and space (triggered by globalization and technological transformations such as digitalization) by drawing on George Ritzer’s (2011) description of (I) solid epochs, and (II) liquid epochs.

(I) Solid epochs are those predating today’s globalization. They are characterized by a “solidity” of people, things, information, and places (Ritzer, 2011). “Solidity” describes worlds in which “barriers exist and are erected to prevent the free movement of all sorts of things” (Ritzer, 2011: 5). In other words, “solid” worlds are ‘fixed’ to a single geographical place, while the movement of time in these worlds is slow, as is the overall mobility of people, things, and information. The Nation-State is a good example of a political entity that constructs barriers restricting mobility, and remains, as a result, remain ‘frozen’ in time and space. Ritzer observes that Nation-States exude a sense of ‘fixity’ common for “solid,” pre-globalization epochs because they hinder the easy flow of information, people, places, and things.

(II) Liquid epochs are shaped by globalization, and they facilitate the mobility of people, things,

4 By “digital transformation,” the paper primarily refers to the increased use of digital technologies, including social media, online games, and mobile phones, in diverse areas of human activity.

5 The following binary pairs can add more clarity to the paper’s understanding of “ephemeral” and “fragmentary”: ephemeral-permanent, ephemeral-ceaseless; fragmentary-whole, fragmentary-unbroken.

information, and places (Ritzer, 2011: 6). Liquid phenomena, even epochs, are fast-moving and hard to control. Ritzer exemplifies this by pointing to the borderless nature of interaction on social media networks, such as Facebook and Twitter. The key ideas behind Ritzer's notion of liquid phenomena are also encapsulated in what Vincent Kaufmann (2002/2016: 12) refers to as the "fluidification of society," by which he means the "growth of mobility," and the increasing speed of "the movement of goods, information and ideas". Ritzer and Kaufmann's ideas essentially stem from the notion of "liquid modernity," introduced by Zygmunt Bauman in his seminal piece *Liquid Modernity* (2000). Bauman uses the term "liquid modernity" to describe an era characterized by intense disintegration of time and space, in which both become highly elusive. It is an era in which those who are "the most elusive, those free to move without notice" are the ones who rule the roost (Bauman, 2000: 120).

Bearing in mind this distinction between solid and liquid epochs, social and political entities can respond to the processes that "revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time" (e.g., the transition from solid to liquid epochs; globalization, and technological developments), in different ways. They can either adjust to these processes and changes, or they can reject them.

To put this into perspective; according to Ritzer (2011: 4), although the contemporary world is increasingly fluid, it is often the case that demands "for new forms of solidity are the result of increased fluidity". These 'demands for solidity' occur when the symbolic authority of personal and collective national identity narratives (often tied to the spatio-temporal entity of a 'solid' Nation-State) start to diminish. In Harvey's interpretation, the fragmentation of time and space (which both become transitory and diffuse) can disrupt the continuity of personal and group identity narratives. This disruption, in turn, can trigger nationalistic and authoritarian sentiments (i.e., demands for "new forms of solidity").

Besides the loss of stability and continuity in personal and group identity narratives, another reason for new 'demands for solidity' is the greater complexity of life in today's modern, globalized world. This complexity, according to Christopher Bollas (2018: 69), splits the global community into "individuals of wealth, power and influence, who operate empires derived from the increasing use of high-end technology" (those who are "at home with globalization"), and the rest, where the "complexity of modern globalized living has gone beyond the capacity of most people to comprehend it", and who have been unable to identify with the high-tech universe of modernity (Christopher Bollas, 2018: 70). Bollas identifies this split as a trigger for authoritarian, nationalistic sentiments.

Today, the global political playground has seen a revival of nationalistic and authoritarian feelings in the form of populism. Populist political parties and politicians have made themselves felt, and have been enjoying increasing electoral success. To illustrate, in Eastern Europe, populist radical right parties such as *Fidesz* (Hungarian Civic Alliance) and the Polish *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice, PiS) have either gained or consolidated government positions (Rensmann, 2017). The 2008 financial crisis has aided the success of "left-wing, anti-austerity" populist parties in Greece (*Syriza* — Coalition of the Radical Left) and Spain (*Podemos*) (Mudde, 2016: 25). The Western European political scene has seen right-wing populist parties, such as France's *Front National* (National Front, FN), the Dutch *Partij Voor de Vrijheid* (Party for Freedom, PVV), and the German *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, AfD) challenge "mainstream political competitors" and the "very framework of existing constitutional liberal democracies" (Rensmann, 2017: 1). Studies on populism also treat the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States and the Brexit referendum as expressions of populism (Bollas 2018; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018).

Apart from their nationalistic and authoritarian sentiments — as seen, for instance in *Front National's* promise to "return France to the monocultural glory of

its past” in response to mass immigration and growing unemployment (Mudde, 2016: 26) — populist parties and politicians are often characterized by an anti-modernity, anti-pluralism, and anti-cosmopolitan stance. At the same time, they regularly appeal to almost-utopian ‘the good old days’ of a pre-globalized past (e.g., Trump’s endless pledges to “make America great again”), that are lost because of both the transitory nature of modern time and space, and the diminishing symbolic authority of local geographic spaces, and the political entity of the Nation-State. In their rhetoric, populist parties frequently operationalize narratives based on an over-arching idea of a common national identity that connects a homogenous ‘(good) people’.

This paper delves deeper into the links between: globalization; ICTs and digital technology; technologies’ impact on perceptions of time and space; populism. It draws on Ritzer’s, Kaufmann’s and Bauman’s insights into liquid and solid epochs to consider why populist parties have recently enjoyed political success. Components of this analysis include: (1) the scope for a nationalistic, authoritarian backlash; (2) the changing experience of time and space; (3) globalization as a trigger for such changes; (4) the advance of ICTs and digital technologies. The paper also discusses populists’ rhetorical use of the notion of a ‘lost’, almost-utopian ‘glorious past’ and a ‘solid’ Nation-State to fuel their electoral success.

The component parts of the paper’s central argument are numbered below for the sake of clarity. They are:

- (I) that the sheer speed of recent technological advances changes how we experience time and space, rendering both of them ever more liquid, fleeting, and fragmentary. This notion is used as the backbone for the paper’s theoretical framework;
- (II) that time/space fragmentation rips the fabric of national identity narratives. This in turn leads to loss of faith in the notion of a single, coherent, ‘solid’ national identity. Populist parties respond by trying to resurrect the idea of a shared past;

- (III) that the ‘shared past’ enshrines a given spatio-temporal configuration⁶ and is utopian in nature, letting populists use it as a rhetorical tool to marshal support, and:

- (IIIa) helping them appeal to voters by evoking nostalgia;

- (IIIb) employ a binary utopian-dystopian logic that passes off the past as utopian and the present as dystopian, thus creating two binary pairs: utopia-dystopia; past-present;

- (IV) The rhetoric function of aforesaid utopian spatio-temporal configuration fuels populist parties’ success.

Political and Social Sciences literature on the dynamics of populist parties has paid little heed to theories in the Cultural Studies and Humanities fields. Instead, scholarly work on populism has been confined to identifying key actors, party politics, mapping the electoral success of populist parties, characterizing the electorate, and articulating the main features of such parties’ ideology. Yet there has been scant research on the cultural undercurrents fuelling populist parties’ success. A recent exception is Lars Rensmann’s (2017: 124) attempt to argue for a “cultural turn” in studies of contemporary populist politics, in which he uses an interdisciplinary theoretical lens drawing on Political Sociology, Political Psychology, and Media Studies to analyze the contemporary cultural context facilitating the electoral success of populist parties.

This paper draws on insights from Cultural Studies and Political Sciences to build an interdisciplinary theoretical framework to explain the recent electoral success of populist parties in Europe and elsewhere. This framework is built on: a collection of secondary literature covering Postmodernism; Game Studies;

⁶ By “time-space configuration(s)” this paper understands the following: (I) configuration denotes “an arrangement of parts or elements in a particular form, figure or combination” (Oxford English Dictionary [OED], n.d.); (II) “time-space configuration” describes an arrangement of specific temporal and spatial elements in a particular configuration.

AR and digital technologies' ability to alter our perceptions of time and space; Utopian Studies; the functional aspects of the concept of Utopia in the field of rhetoric; insights from the Psychology of Nostalgia. The following sections detail the relevance of these fields to the paper's theoretical framework. Unlike recent studies on populism, the paper takes the changing experience of time and space (from a Postmodernist perspective on cultural phenomena) as a key variable in explaining populist parties' success.

A Postmodernist perspective has been adopted (with time/space experience as a key variable) given its scope for taking a different approach for analyzing how populist parties' build and revive identity narratives. We posit that the rhetoric exploiting these narratives largely explains populist parties' recent electoral wins. There is a great deal of literature on the roles played by nationalist identity-construction in populist politics. Yet scant consideration is given to either (1) changing perceptions of time/space, or (2) time/space compression. Yet, as we shall argue, both constitute a key variable in explaining the formation of collective identities and the rhetorical use made of an imagined utopian past built upon them. The paper ends by drawing together the strands to highlight the links between globalization, technological changes, and populism.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section starts by exploring some key ideas from the philosophy of Postmodernism, such as time-space compression and meta-narratives. It then pairs these ideas with insights on the national identity narratives opened up by technological transformations and globalization. The section ends by seeing how populists appeal to a 'solid,' shared past. The second section focuses on 'Utopia' and its rhetorical function. The overall theoretical framework is applied at this juncture, using further examples from populist politics. Each of the sections starts with a detailed description of its structure to give an overview of the corresponding sub-sections. The conclusions reflect on theoretical and/or methodological issues and the paper's limitations.

THE DISINTEGRATION OF TIME AND SPACE, AND A "QUEST FOR SECURITY" IN THE WAKE OF EPHEMERALITY

Two ideas from the philosophy of Postmodernism are central to this paper's analysis of populism. The first concerns the tension between the singularity and plurality of truth and meaning as reflected in Jean-François Lyotard's notion of meta-narratives, and articulated in his seminal work *The Postmodern Condition* (1979). The second centers on the notion of time-space compression as developed by David Harvey in his book *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990).

This section begins with a discussion of meta-narratives, focusing, in particular, on their application to time and space. The discussion then takes a slightly different direction and re-constructs the key tenets of time-space compression as applied to thinking on globalization and recent technological transformations. The section ends with a discussion on how these ideas bear on the recent surge of negativist sentiments (e.g., anti-modernity, anti-pluralist, anti-cosmopolitan) and the appeal to a common past ('the good old days') so commonly resorted to by populist parties.

The notion of meta-narratives in the context of national identity politics

To begin, the tension between singularity and plurality is a *leitmotif* of Postmodern thinking on culture and arises from different ways of seeing truth and meaning. While 'a singular approach' to truth and meaning takes a one-dimensional stance, stressing their universality, 'the pluralistic approach' (characterizing Postmodernism) stresses their multi-dimensional, subjective nature, and thus takes a relativist stance.

The antagonism between these two approaches to meaning and truth is reflected in Lyotard's notion of meta-narratives. Meta-narratives, or grand narratives⁷,

⁷ Following Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, this paper uses the terms "meta-narratives" and "grand narratives" interchangeably.

are linked to ‘the singular approach’ to meaning and truth. These narratives can be seen as “stories about the world that strive to sum it all up in one account” (Lyotard, 2004: 355). In other words, meta-narratives seek to ‘fit’ everything into a single narrative frame, adopting a Procrustean approach to the bits and pieces of information encountered to bed them down in their narrative schemes, leaving little room for alternative interpretations.

This way of processing and organizing information, as reflected in the notion of meta-narratives, possesses takes on ‘totalizing’ shades in the view of most Postmodern thinkers. In *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Fredric Jameson illustrates this view and emphasizes the ‘totalizing’ nature of meta-narratives by writing that they “obliterate difference” and ultimately create “massive homogeneity” (Section I).

To give an example, in line with Postmodern reasoning, grand philosophical narratives, such as Marxism, have a “totalizing dynamic” that renders the individual’s identity increasingly trivial *vis-à-vis* the ‘authority’ of their schemes (Jameson, 1991, Section I). This “totalizing dynamic” is manifest as the individual becomes incorporated into a narrative framework that processes him/her according to its own rules. In the case of Marxism, this translates into screening and categorizing individuals based on their economic status and class, which, in turn, allows for the construction of two antagonistic camps: ‘The Proletariat’ and ‘The Bourgeoisie’.

A similar dynamic is present in meta-narratives of cultural identities, or narratives of a collective past, associated with nationalistic ideologies based upon recognition of a homogenous *Volk* linked to a particular time/place and enduring until the present. Narratives of a collective past—“national imaginings”—possess a sense of continuity, thus becoming transnational and ‘transhistorical’ (Anderson, 1991: 50). Such national-identity narratives are a common ideational component of populist parties. For example, the German AfD claims to act on behalf of (ordinary) German citizens and

to fight for the sovereignty of the German Nation-State (Caiani and Kröll, 2017). Similarly, the Italian far-right political party *Forza Nuova* (New Force, FN) presents itself as the defender of the Italian people, displaying a “nationalist conception of the people” when it describes it as “the totality of subjects living in the [Italian] homeland” (Caiani and Kröll, 2017: 347).

In sum, the central idea of this section is that Postmodern thinkers revolt against the totalizing nature of meta-narratives. Under a ‘Postmodern perspective,’ for example, a person born in Italy is not necessarily only identified as ‘an Italian’ but can have multiple identities; similarly, the land area of Italy can be identified as being both “Italy,” and as “Europe”. By allowing the co-existence of multiple meanings, Postmodernists essentially destabilize ‘fixed’ or singular meanings.

The meta-narrative of a common past as a spatio-temporal configuration infused with meaning and value

The tension between singularity and plurality, as well as the Postmodern destabilization of a ‘fixed’ meaning helps explain the transformations in our perception of time and space. These perceptual changes stem from globalization and the giant strides made by technology. These in turn reveal the dynamics at work in the cultural and political spheres.

Postmodern insights on meta-narratives, as well as the underlying tension between singularity and plurality can be applied to time and space perceptions. We conceptualize these phenomena and the forms they take as *constructs* shaped by specific social, political, and cultural contexts (Dickens and Fontana, 2002). As cultural constructs, different space/time configurations are imbued with the meanings and values, and shaped by contexts. At the same time, these time-space configurations shape the identity narratives found in their given social, political, and cultural contexts.

To put this into perspective, as cultural constructs, different time/space configurations can acquire different meanings and values for different groups

of individuals. According to Pierre Bourdieu, the meanings and values of different social groups (e.g., social classes and sub-cultures), and different individuals are unendingly projected onto specific spatio-temporal configurations (Bourdieu, as cited in Harvey, 1990). This process of value/meaning assignation, and the subsequent act of recognizing these meanings and values by a given group lets it achieve “social and logical integration” (Bourdieu, as cited in Harvey, 1990: 215).

The collective practice of attributing values and meanings to different spatio-temporal configurations can lead to myth-building. These myths — such as that of “A Thousand-year-old-Austria” (Wodak, 2009: 194) — can be equated with the Postmodern notion of meta-narratives. Here, both the temporal and spatial elements becomes ‘fixed’ as it were within a given configuration, and in the process acquire a meaning and/or value binding them together in a compact whole.

At the same time, the myths stemming from a given spatio-temporal configuration, and the values and meanings imbuing its symbolic matrix foster “the identity of a place — its social structure, its political character” and its “local culture” (Massey, 1994: 120). The spatio-temporal configuration of Saint-Petersburg, Russia, in the time of Peter the Great shows how myths linked to a given spatio-temporal configuration influence the identity of place. After its foundation in 1703, the city became associated with diverse cultural myths that later influenced the identity of its local culture. The city’s foundation had apocalyptic connotations because its role as the new capital was seen as a break with Russian medieval tradition. Yet at the same time, it enshrined hopes that Russia would become part of ‘modern’ Europe (Wachtel and Vinitzky, 2009). Today, Saint-Petersburg is still seen as Russia’s European Capital, and this image of the city is a recurring motif in narratives on Russia’s position *vis-à-vis* Europe.

Two things are given “pre-eminent importance and positive connotations” in the construction of a collective past in modern Austria. One of them is the

Hapsburg monarchy, the other is the Independence Treaty of 1955 (Wodak *et al.*, 2009: 194). According to Wodak *et al.*’s study (2009: 194), Austrian politicians are laying more stress on spatio-temporal configurations of a national past, suggesting that the cultural myth and idea of “A Thousand-year-old Austria” is firmly embedded in the national consciousness. Other periods of Austrian history are fairly neglected when it comes to politicians’ speeches to raise national awareness.

Similar myths of collective pasts allow radical right-wing populist parties to operationalize “*political imaginaries* and different traditions,” and evoke “different nationalist pasts in the form of *identity narratives*,” to problematize diverse issues in contemporary politics, such as immigration or unemployment (Wodak, 2013: 26, emphasis in the original).

All in all, the link between a given geographical space and slice of time can become a national meta-narrative or myth that is endlessly repeated and imbued with culture-specific meanings and values. These myths also help build identities associated with a particular place, as well as its social and/or political character. Thus a ‘solid’ time-space configuration, such as that of “A Thousand-year-old Austria,” can play a central role in national-identity narratives that are then incorporated in the political rhetoric of today’s populist parties.

Time-space compression, the dismantling of time-space configurations, and the loss of continuity

The fixation between spatio-temporal configurations and their meaning and value (as reflected in the notion of meta-narratives and, later on, in myths of national identities) have become destabilized. According to David Harvey’s theory of Postmodernism, this destabilization stems from ICTs and digital technologies, which “revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time” and result in time-space compression.

Globalization can be seen as a narrative, or story, of “temporal progression” and “spatial expansion” (Boym, 2001: 32), as it ‘shrinks’ the distance between

places. Consequently, “solid” realities become increasingly “liquid” (Ritzer, 2011: 5) as the transfer of information, cultural goods, and people flow more freely across borders. Rapid technological transformations (the soaring use of online chats, video conferences, and so on) make communication ever faster and more efficient. These advances in communication compress our experience of time and space and, in so doing can ‘unfix’ our attachment to local communities.

Recent developments in digital and computer technologies (such as, the introduction of Augmented Reality (AR) settings in mobile games and similar platforms) show how novel technological developments fragment our experience of time and space, as understood in ‘Postmodern terms’.

The AR mobile game *Pokémon Go*, developed by Niantic in 2016, lets players simultaneously acquire a sense of presence in several spatio-temporal dimensions: the immediate surroundings of the city streets and the virtual simulation of these streets on their smart-phones. This virtual setting is inhabited by creatures called *pokémon*. Through the virtual simulation of our immediate surroundings, *Pokémon Go* extends players’ spatial experience, and remaps “our lived space into places of play” (Hanson, 2018: 195). In a similar fashion, the visual novel video game *Steins Gate*, developed by 5pb and Nitroplus, lets players enter a multi-verse in which several time-space configurations co-exist. The players follow the protagonist Okabe Rintarō⁸ as he travels through time and space and manipulates events in different spatio-temporal configurations.

According to Hanson (2018: 196), *Pokémon Go*, *Steins Gate* and similar games, change our experience of time and space. This is because the game gives players ways to manipulate time and space by pausing, saving, deleting saved data, and replaying specific game sequences. Thus the games have “the capacity to

alter the lived experiences of players, transforming the spaces and times that they inhabit”. With these examples in mind, the changes in the way we engage with the real world via digital technology can break our attachment to our immediate, local surroundings as we spend ever more time in virtual spaces, instead of in the world around us. The same logic can be applied to online social networks, as we may spend more time chatting to someone on the other side of the world and engage less with the locals.

Similarly, the dynamic exchange of cultural goods makes our everyday lives increasingly transcultural (ranging from Libby’s famous *pumpkin pie mix* around the world to the incorporation of elements of Russian culture and language into Narita Ryōgo’s Japanese light novel series *Durarara!* (2004-2014)). As a result, our sense of spatio-temporal distance across the globe diminishes. As Doreen Massey (1994: 120) observes, the global and the local are becoming increasingly intertwined: “The global is in the local in the very process of the formation of the local”. Our experience of time and space, in short, is becoming increasingly ‘compressed’.

Harvey (1990: 284) notes that time-space compression can have a “disorienting and disruptive impact” on how we experience these dimensions. In his view, this “disorientation” stems from a diminishing sense of “absolute space” and the predominance of experiencing space as a fragmentary phenomenon, or as “relative space”. In other words, “relative space” begins replacing “absolute space”. In turn, this substitution challenges the “power,” or symbolic value, embedded in ‘solid’ spatio-temporal categories and their associated meta-narratives as it creates a ‘dismantling effect’ in which temporal and spatial elements of a given configuration become ‘unfixed’ (Harvey, 1990: 257). The ‘dismantling’ of spatio-temporal configurations therefore weakens the symbolic power and/or authority of these configurations (which, one should recall, are built through collective practices). Thus, time-space compression renders the individual incapable of linking “signifiers together meaningfully” and he

8 Japanese names are written in their proper order, with family name preceding given name.

or she subsequently loses “a sense of temporal continuity,” and is “condemned to experience a world as a series of unrelated presents in time” (Dickens and Fontana, 2002, pp. 393-394). Time-space compression ends up destabilizing a fixed identity linked with a specific spatio-temporal configuration.

In Massey’s view, time-space compression threatens personal identities by undermining the stability individuals derive from focusing on a single spatio-temporal category (Massey, 1994: 123). Consequently, the time/space compression in tandem with globalization and technological advances may drive individuals to build singular spatio-temporal dimensions serving as “a source of authenticity and stability” (cf. Ritzer’s demands “for new forms of stability”) (Massey, 1994: 122). This recourse is seen in populists’ pledges to recover lost pasts and traditions. For example, the Italian *Forza Nuova* stated that it works for “the regeneration of the people’s traditions” (Caiani and Kröll, 2017: 346).

In short, globalization and recent strides in technology (such as AR video games) can fragment our experience of time, and diminish our sense of belonging to a local community. These processes can destabilize ‘solid’ spatio-temporal configurations (such as the Nation-State), leading individuals to feel disoriented, insecure, and bereft of their identities as the world ‘liquefies’ around them. Such feelings can lead to demands for the rebuilding of a stable, ‘solid’ spatio-temporal configuration, such as the Nation-State.

A present-day “quest for security”

It is within this dialectic of ephemerality (induced by globalization and the subsequent recourse to a common past as a source of stability) that nationalistic sentiments and a growing re-affirmation of the local find its roots. This dialectic is found in populist parties across the political spectrum. In her inspiring study, *The Future of Nostalgia* (2008: 38), Svetlana Boym writes that the “rapid pace of industrialization and modernization increased the intensity of people’s longing for the slower rhythms of the past, for continuity, social cohesion, and tradition”.

In other words, the increasingly ephemeral nature of time and space both boosts the need to ‘re-establish’ a static spatio-temporal configuration bounded by precise borders, such as those offered by a clearly-defined idea of a nation.

Harvey (1990: 306) observes that the rise of nationalism and the subsequent revitalization of the past are tantamount to a “quest for the security that place always offers in the midst of all the shifting that flexible accumulation implies”. The present fragmentation and multiplication of virtual time-space versus ‘real’ time-space makes people seek re-affirmation of a nation’s borders. This is a counter-reaction to the Postmodern destabilization of ‘traditional’ spatio-temporal categories and the sense of continuity they provide: “on the one side there are the dominant groups who evolve in a mobile space [i.e., ‘the cosmopolitan elite’], and on the other are the excluded who evolve in a fixed space [i.e., ‘the people’], chained to localism through circumstances” (Kaufmann, 2002/2016: 14). Against this background, the anti-globalization, anti-pluralistic, and anti-modernization sentiments expressed by diverse populist parties stem from the changes induced by globalization and time-space compression.

To wrap up, this section’s three main propositions were: (I) spatio-temporal configurations can be imbued with the meanings and values of various groups of individuals, consequently acquiring the role of a perpetual meta-narrative which helps build group identity; (II) the ephemeral nature of Postmodernity can destabilize the sense of a continuous identity associated with a specific spatio-temporal configuration; (III) the nationalistic, authoritarian, negative sentiments that characterize populists’ ideological stance can be seen as a counter-reaction to the ephemeral nature of Postmodernity, manifesting themselves in populists’ endless appeal to a common past.

REVIVING LOST UTOPIAS

Bearing the previous section’s three central assumptions in mind, this section develops the argument that

populism's tendency to revive the past (appealing to a meta-narrative of a common cultural identity) has utopian connotations. This construct of a 'utopian past' as a single, coherent spatio-temporal configuration (versus ephemeral Postmodernity) is a strong tool for mobilizing the masses. It fosters support for populist parties by triggering nostalgia and using a binary utopian-dystopian logic.

This section begins with a brief discussion of the concept of "utopia" and focuses on utopias' ability to trigger reflection on possible or alternative worlds. Within the theoretical framework of this paper, we discuss how dissatisfaction with the ephemeral nature of Postmodernity undermines coherent identities. The disorientation identified by Harvey triggers populists' nostalgic appeal to the past. The section ends with a discussion of the rhetorical power of such utopian constructs.

National past as a utopian meta-narrative

According to Gregory Claeys (2011: 9), the concept of utopia in every age is "some variation on an ideal past, and an ideal future," and the relationship between the two and the present. The term was initially coined by Thomas More who used it as the title of his book *Utopia* (1516/2014) as the name of an unknown, isolated island in the story. In the fullness of time, the term came to take on various meanings. It can denote "imaginary, paradisaical places," or a specific narrative associated with utopian literature (Vieira, 2010: 4). Etymologically, utopia is "a place which is a non-place, simultaneously constituted by a movement of affirmation and denial" (Vieira, 2010: 4). This contradictory dynamic of "affirmation and denial" is simultaneously manifested in the (I) *affirmation* of the idea of a utopian ideal, and (II) *denial* of its 'actual,' physical existence.

The concept of utopia often takes a mythical or imaginary hue. The ancient Greek myth of The Golden Age is an example of a constructed, utopian spatio-temporal configuration which serves as a container of all those aspects of life that the Greeks considered to be ideal (Claeys, 2011). At the same time, such myths can be seen as meta-narratives that help build a continuous

cultural identity for a given community. They reflect meanings and values that are collectively projected on other spatio-temporal configurations

The notion of utopia is essentially founded on the consideration of "alternative solutions to reality" (Vieira, 2010: 5). It contains the image of 'the good place' (Vieira, 2010: 6) and it reflects "visions of improvement" (Claeys, 2011: 12). Within this context, utopia can also be seen as a "reaction to an undesirable present and an aspiration to overcome all difficulties by the imagination of possible alternatives"⁹ (Vieira, 2010: 7). These alternatives can also result from remembrance: discontent with the present can trigger a revitalization of the past, either a fictional one, or a real one. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), an account of the angelic rebellion, for example, can be seen as a narrative appealing to a lost, utopian place. The narrative conceptualizes Paradise as an ideal, utopian realm, and nostalgically mourns for its loss after Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden — an act which created a 'dystopian' present (Claeys, 2011).

The aforementioned discontent with the present lets populists revitalize the construct of an ideal past as an answer to an imperfect present. The previous section has already discussed how globalization and technological progress are rendering time/space ephemeral, compressing time/space, and creating disorientation by supplanting "absolute space" with relative space" (Harvey, 1990: 284). Time-space compression thus "threatens" individual and collective identities. This occurs because the phenomenon may fracture a sense of stability based on a single, coherent spatio-temporal configuration that functions as "a source of authenticity" (Massey, 1994: 123). It is precisely this fracture in the continuity of traditional, 'fixed' identities that is leading populist parties to revive the notion of a homogenous one based on a common meta-narrative of a utopian past.

9 This paper will primarily use "utopia" as a concept denoting "imaginary, paradisaical places," as well as its propensity to trigger reflection on "possible alternatives". Its literary functions are left aside.

The nostalgic appeal of shared pasts

In her influential study on nostalgia, Boym (2001: 30) writes the following:

Modern nostalgia is mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the endemic unity of time and space before entry into history.

Her description of nostalgia as “a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values, and for the “endemic unity of time and space,” parallels Postmodern ideas of a loss of the continuity of meta-narratives of a national past, as well as the disintegration of the unity of time and space.

This aspect of nostalgia — the mourning for the loss of “clear borders and values” — is also discussed by Clay Routledge (2015: 34). He writes that “self-discontinuity,” or “a sense of disruption or disjointedness between one’s past and present self,” triggers nostalgic sentiments, thus facilitating populists’ appeal to ‘the good old days’. Nostalgia essentially occurs when individuals or groups attempt to “regain a sense of identity and continuity through recognizing and redefining a shared past” (Milligan, 2003: 381). Nostalgic sentiments inspired by the revitalization of the past contribute to people’s “efforts to meet belongingness needs” which are disturbed by the liquidity and ephemerality of globalization (Routledge, 2015: 51).

These nostalgic sentiments, which echo the idea of mourning for a ‘paradise lost,’ are discussed in a number of recent studies on populism.

In his analysis of nationalism, populism, and the sociological factors that led to Brexit, Craig Calhoun (2017: 57) writes that the Brexit vote was not only a vote against the EU but also a vote for “the good old days,” motivated by discontent with Britain’s multicultural, globalized British present. Calhoun describes the Brexit

vote as an expression of English nationalism that yearns “for Britain to be Great again” and a renewal of its decades-old identity. The Brexit vote essentially channeled “frustration, rage, resentment, and insult — as well as a hope that a vanishing way of life could be saved and a proud national identity celebrated” (Calhoun, 2017: 58).

A comparable example comes from Poland. Szymon Wróbel (2011: 445) observes that Polish populism is characterized by “disappointment” over recent socio-political transformations, such as “democratization, Europeanization, and *globalization*” (emphasis added). In his study on populism in Eastern Europe, Juraj Buzalka (2008: 757) identifies the “politicization of the rural past” as a common trait of Polish populism and coins the term “post-peasant populism” to describe “a type of modern, populist political culture based on a non-urban social structure and imagined rurality” (Buzalka, 2008: 763). Furthermore, the rhetoric of Polish populists draws heavily on yesteryear and mobilizes support by appealing “to continuity with moral times in the past, the safeguarding of an essentially Christian tradition” (Buzalka, 2008: 757).

Forza Nuova’s earlier-mentioned claim that the political party works for “the regeneration of the people’s tradition” (Caiani and Kröll, 2017: 346), *Front National*’s promise to return France to “the monocultural glory of its past” in response to mass immigration and growing unemployment (Mudde, 2016: 26), as well as Victor Orbán’s (*Fidesz*) acquiescence in and encouragement of nostalgia for the era of Miklós Horthy (Hann, 2015: 103), Hungarian admiral and statesmen who served as Regent of the Kingdom of Hungary between the two world wars, also exemplify how populists have been revitalizing national pasts, and ‘mourning’ for the loss of ‘the good old days’.

Similarly, in his recent paper on the cultural conditions of populist politics in Europe, Lars Rensmann (2017: 125) observes that the “implicitly anti-universalistic, anti-pluralistic notion of ‘the good people’ as a homogenous identity also automatically carries

cultural weight” and “presupposes the defense of a cultural identity” against the pluralistic character of liberal-democratic societies. Under the present paper’s theoretical perspective, Rensmann’s thought can be extended into the idea that the “defense of a cultural identity” also stems from the waning symbolic power of authoritative spatio-temporal configurations linked to these cultural identities and stemming from growing detachment from local communities.

Populists’ appeal to the past can be seen through the lens of nostalgia. Under this perspective, the breakdown of time-space configurations and the loss of continuity in national identities lead to a nostalgic mourning for ‘the good old days’. At the same time, dissatisfaction with globalization allows populists’ to treat the past as a utopian construct and use it to put the present in a bad light.

The rhetorical power of utopia

The utopian dimension of populists’ appeal to a common past comes to the fore once we pair the metaphor of “imagined communities” (Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983)) or of *Imagined States* (Luisa del Giudice and Gerald Porter (2001)) with insights from the utopian studies discussed in the previous section.

“Imagined Communities” and “Imagined States” result from processes by which Mankind “constructs and locates itself in [...] worlds, places and territories of the mind” (Giudice and Porter, 2001: 1). These imagined communities, or States, provide “alternate and parallel possible worlds” (Giudice and Porter, 2001: 2) and, as visualizations of alternate or possible worlds, acquire a utopian hue, paralleling Vieira’s description of utopia as a concept grounded on “alternative solutions to reality”.

Creating imagined states or communities can also be seen as a process of ‘fixing’ a cultural identity to a specific point in time and space; serving as a vision of an alternative world that interlinks members of the community who are seen as belonging to

that world. The meta-narrative of a common past interlinking ‘the good people’ can thus be seen as a spatio-temporal configuration which projects an alternative solution in the wake of dissatisfaction with the present. Populists’ nostalgic appeals to meta-narratives of a ‘utopian past’ function as a rhetorical tool to mobilize the masses. This helps explain the recent electoral gains made by populist parties.

Rhetorical theory suggests that the construction of an “imagined” or “better world existing in the minds of both speaker (*rhetor*) and audience” is a strong means of persuasion (Portolano, 2012: 114). Throughout history, speakers have used the concept of utopia, based on characteristics “drawn from the audience’s collective character,” to create an empathetic link between them and their listeners (Portolano, 2012: 114). The speaker, consequently, can use this link to mobilize the audience. The utopian appeal to the past, in particular, by drawing on nostalgia, is an effective tool for eliciting strong emotional reactions (Routledge, 2015). Along these lines, the act of “restructuring,” “displaying new connections” can function as strong identity claims and inspire public enthusiasm (Van Stokkom, 2012, PART ONE: Emotion, Antagonism, and Deliberation).

Utopias’ dualistic mode of reasoning helps mobilize and inter-link members of a perceived community. According to Claeys (2011: 32), utopian discourse has always been characterized by a certain dualism of thought given that a utopia is always accompanied by a dystopia.

This dualistic approach typifying the utopian tradition becomes important once we place it within the wider frame of populist thought. Just as utopian discourse has a dualistic hue, so too does the ideological stance of populist parties in their construction of a perceived in-group and an out-group. Specifically, a central component of populist ideology is a tendency to divide people into two “homogenous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupted elite’” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 6). Here, “the pure people” category (linked by a common meta-narrative of a utopian past) matches the ‘utopian side’ of

the binary, “the corrupted elite” category (often characterized as ‘the globalized winners’¹⁰) (Rensmann and Miller, 2015: 15) matches the ‘dystopian side’.

Donald Trump, for instance, tends to use terms that set the stage for a binary conceptualization of “the good people” and the “the corrupted elite”: “Typical examples are ‘stupid’, ‘mess’, ‘terrible’, ‘mistakes’, ‘not good’, ‘lousy’, ‘bad’, ‘flawed’, ‘losing’, ‘failing’, ‘ineffective’, ‘loser’, ‘horrible’, ‘weakness’, ‘not strong enough’, ‘too much emotion’, ‘unsuccessful’, ‘disruptive,’” which create “a clear binary between tough, successful, hard-working winners and weak, unsuccessful, lazy losers” (Fuchs, 2018: 185). A similar dualism in thought — the binary of “anti-elitism,” or “anti-pluralist dichotomy” — is part and parcel of populist ideology on a wider scale (Rensmann, 2017: 125).

In a nutshell, populists’ appeal to a common past — ‘the good old days’ — seen through the prism of utopian studies, can be interpreted as a result of dissatisfaction with the present. Specifically, the revitalization of a single, coherent spatio-temporal configuration of the past gives ‘the people’ a sense of continuity *vis-à-vis* the ephemeral nature of time and space induced by globalization.

Meta-narratives of the common past enable populist parties to single out an identity narrative from the Postmodern chaos of the coexistence of multiple identities, and the inherently pluralistic nature of liquid, globalized epochs. Within this context, the past becomes a homeostatic, utopian realm; a ‘Paradise Lost’ that forges links among ‘the people’ and which, through its nostalgic, rhetorical appeal, fosters support for populist parties.

¹⁰ Ritzer’s (2011) insights on globalization can also be used in conjunction with populists’ dichotomies of the winners and losers of globalization. In Ritzer’s view, the elite members of any society can travel and participate in the exchange and flows of information and goods with greater ease, thus profiting from the advances made in transport and communication technology, whereas less prosperous members of society tend to be at a disadvantage and this respect.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has sought to construct an interdisciplinary theoretical lens offering a new way of looking at the recent electoral gains racked up by populist parties, such as Hungary’s *Fidesz*, France’s *Front National*, or Germany’s *Alternative für Deutschland*. In contrast to recent studies in the field of political sciences, this paper took the changing experience of time and space as a key variable to explain populists’ appeal to ‘the good old days’ and the votes this elicits.

The rapid pace of technological development and change are manifested in globalization and parallel technological transformations (such as ICT and digital technologies). These changes in our experience of time and space lead to the disintegration of authoritative spatio-temporal configurations. This in turn ruptures national identity narratives, destabilizing collective and personal identities. Populists appeal to a common, immutable national past. This links a homogenous ‘(good) people’, mends the rift, and unleashes a nostalgic, quasi-utopian mourning for a pre-modern, pre-global past. The utopian nature of this spatio-temporal construct makes it a strong rhetorical tool for boosting support for populist parties.

Although this paper has sought to provide an interdisciplinary theoretical lens for examining the recent populist surge, it only explains one aspect of populists’ recent electoral successes (albeit one largely neglected in studies on the subject). That said, this paper has not dealt with economic factors, such as the 2008 economic and financial crisis, which prominently features in the discourses of populist parties in Southern Europe. The same applies to factors falling within the Political Sciences field, for example, the influence and role of the European Union. Furthermore, the mosaic of theories and areas touched upon in this paper is a rich one and may have occasionally led us off our argumental path.

Yet setting these limitations aside, this paper extends theoretical scholarship on populism by adding a new angle, and, in doing so, crosses disciplinary boundaries between cultural and political studies. The

paper brings to the fore the effects of globalization and technological transformations on contemporary populist politics, and highlights the rhetorical power

of the concept of 'utopia,' thus offering a new explanation for populists' quest to regain 'Paradise Lost'.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bollas, C. (2018). *Meaning and melancholia: life in the age of bewilderment*. Routledge.
- Boym, S. (2001). *The future of nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Buzalka, J. (2008). Europeanization and post-peasant populism in Eastern Europe. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60(5), 757-771.
- Caiani, M. and Kröll, P. (2017). Nationalism and populism in radical right discourses in Italy and Germany. *Javnost—The Public: Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture*, 24(4). 336-354.
- Calhoun, C. (2017). Populism, nationalism and Brexit. W. Outhwaite (Ed.), *Brexit: Sociological responses* (pp. 57-76). London: Anthem Press.
- Claeys, G. (2011). *Searching for utopia: The history of an idea*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Configuration [Def 1]. (n.d.). In *English Oxford living dictionaries*. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/configuration>, access 23 July 2018.
- del Giudice, L. and Porter, G. (2001). Introduction. L. del Giudice and G. Porter (Eds.), *Imagined states* (pp. 1-7). Logan: Utah State University.
- Dickens, D. R. and Fontana, A. (2002). Time and Postmodernism. *Symbolic Interaction*, 25(3), 389-396.
- Fuchs, C. (2018). *Trumpology: Donald Trump's ideology: Digital demagogue*. London: Pluto Press.
- Hann, C. (2015). Why post-imperial trumps post-socialist: Crying back to national past in Hungary. O. Angé and D. Berliner (Eds.), *Anthropology and Nostalgia* (pp. 96-122). Berghahn Books.
- Hanson, C. (2018). *Game time: Understanding temporality in video games*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Harvey, D. (1990). *The condition of postmodernity: An enquiry into the origins of cultural change*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Inglehart, R. and Welzel, C. (2009). How development leads to democracy: What we know about modernization. *Foreign Affairs*, 88(2), 33-48.
- Jameson, F. (1991) *Postmodernism or, the cultural logic of late capitalism* (on line). <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/jameson.htm>, access 19 June 2018.
- Kaufmann, V. (2002/2016). *Re-Thinking mobility: Contemporary sociology*. New York: Routledge.
- Liotard, J. (2004). The postmodern condition. J. Rivkin, and M. Ryan (Eds.), *Literary theory: An anthology* (355-364). Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Massey, D. (1994). *Space, place, and gender*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Milligan, M. J. (2003). Displacement and identity discontinuity: The role of nostalgia in establishing new identity categories. *Symbolic Interaction*, 26 (3), 381-403.
- More, T. (1516/2014). *Utopia* (2nd ed.). Clarence H. Miller, and Jerry Harp (Eds.). Yale University Press.
- Mudde, C. (2016). Europe's populist surge: A long time in the making. *Foreign Affairs*, 95(6). 25-30.
- Mudde, C. and Kaltwasser C. R. (2017). *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mudde, C. and Kaltwasser C. R. (2018). Studying populism in comparative perspective: Reflections on the contemporary and future research agenda. *Comparative Political Studies*, 51(13), 1667-1693.
- Portolano, M. (2012). The rhetorical function of utopia: An exploration of the concept of utopia in rhetorical theory. *Utopian Studies*, 23 (1), 113-141.

- Rensmann, L. (2017). The noisy counter-revolution: Understanding the cultural conditions and dynamics of populist politics in Europe in the digital age. *Politics and Governance*, 5(4), 123-135.
- Rensmann, L. and Miller, J. (2015). Xenophobia and anti-immigrant politics. *The International Studies Encyclopedia*, 1-22.
- Ritzer, G. (2011). *Globalization: The essentials*. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.
- Routledge, C. (2015). *Nostalgia: A psychological resource*. New York: Routledge.
- Van Stokkom, B. (2012). Deliberative rituals: Emotional energy and enthusiasm in debating landscape renewal. S. Thompson, and P. Hoggett (Eds.), *Politics and the emotions: The affective turn in contemporary political studies* (PART ONE: Emotion, Antagonism, and Deliberation). London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Vieira, F. (2010). The concept of utopia. Gregory C. (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to utopian literature* (pp. 3-27). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wachtel, A. B. and Vinitzky, I. (2009). *Russian literature*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Wodak, R. (2013). "Anything goes!"—The Haiderization of Europe. R. Wodak, M. Khosravini, and B. Mral (Eds.), *Right-wing populism in Europe: Politics and discourse* (pp. 23-38). London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Wodak, R., De Cillia, R., Reisigl, M. and Leibhart, K. (2009). *The discursive construction of national identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Wróbel, S. (2011). Mourning populism: The case of Poland. *Polish Sociological Review*, 176, 437-456.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Dora Vrhoci studies European languages, literature, and politics at the University of Groningen, where she began her bachelor degree at the programme European Languages and Cultures in 2016. Her main areas of interest within the programme include the politics of social movements, transculturalism, popular culture, and Russian literature.

