Similarities and Differences between the French and the American Identity Construction in Populist Political Discourse

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ABSTRACT: Taking into account the current political landscapes both at the national and international levels, one might be tempted to assert that Aristotle's dictum "man is a political animal" is even more relevant today than perhaps at any other time in history. Indeed, even Aristotle realized that the gift of speech—inherent to all—could have a positive or negative impact upon the life of an individual and/or community. We intend to analyze the manner in which populist political discourse came to be constructed and used within two particular instances, namely in the United States of America and France. Focusing on the aspect of identity construction, we will set forth a comparative theoretical framework highlighting the commonalities and distinctions between the two approaches, while also illustrating how these had been carried out at a discursive level.

KEYWORDS: populism, discourse theory, identity construction, Donald Trump, Marine le Pen

Introduction

The art of political persuasion lies in the skillful process of putting words together in an order that will have the biggest impact on an audience. While being constantly bombarded by different types of messages as we go through our lives, we sometimes neglect to realize the influence certain words have on ourselves, our perception of reality and the world around us. The impact of political discourse is especially significant during times of distress—such as economic hardship, war, etc.—, when due to the general instability of society people tend to be more easily drawn to words that call for action and change. In such unstable times, it is enough for one man to speak out against the existing regime or system, to put into words all the things people are thinking, for he will probably become the voice of an ever-increasing crowd of concerned citizens.

Still, in a democracy, politics revolves around getting the vote, and sometimes seducing the masses is just the way to do it. In the context of populist discourse, often times not even the truth but the political actor's power of persuasion is the most important aspect to take into account. The goal is to use a type of rhetoric that pleases the people, the masses. In the 21st century, when political actors use every means available to them to pursues their ambitions and the world is connected to a never-ending global news-cycle that has the ability to play the same footage over and over again in different time zones and on different continents, it is no wonder that politicians themselves have changed the rules of the game. When faced with continuous public exposure and scrutiny, they have adjusted their discourse to fit into sound bites, feeding the media machine and turning news into sensationalist entertainment. In this context, the messages conveyed in such political discourses seep into the public arena, as specific words or phrases get stuck in the public consciousness. This is the reason why we should be vigilant in identifying the elements that make up political discourses, for they might have a bigger impact on our perception of reality than we may think, nudging us in a direction we might not be tempted to pursue otherwise.

In the following pages we will attempt to depict how identity construction is carried out in political discourse, mainly in the case of Rick Santorum, Marine le Pen and Donald Trump. Our methodology is based on the selection of three criteria crucial to populist identity construction that will be used as a basis for comparison. These are: a) the words used to represent the people; b) the values and symbols represented; c) how the process of association between the leader and the people is made through discourse.

While the comparative approach might not need 3 actors analyzed to ascertain the elements used in this discursive way, we believe, that Donald Trump's speeches veer off the norm, hence, it would not be representative of American populist discourse to analyze only his speeches in contrast with Marine le Pen's. This is why we have chosen to add Rick Santorum and his 2012 speech to the mixt, representing the baseline for comparison in the American context.

Our theoretical framework is based on the combination of two approaches. First, the five-point approach to Discourse Theory formulated by Jacob Torfing (Howarth and Torfing 2005, 14-17), and second, on the discursive categories set forth by Oana-Raluca Crăciun (Mişcoiu, Colopelnic and Crăciun 2008, 44). The speeches that will be analyzed are Rick Santorum's speech given on August 28, 2012, at the Republican National Convention and Marine le Pen's speech presented on the 13th of March, 2012, in which she announced her intention to run for president of France, alongside Donald Trump's presidential announcement on June 16, 2015.

Torfing's approach is based on five distinct assumptions and processes that outline how identity is constructed:

1. **Discourse is very much linked to context.** Since it has a historical background, discourse connects the past to the future, since all notions, concepts and words used within a discourse gained their meaning in specific socio-historical settings. Also, since discourse is continuously employed, the meaning is constantly changing and evolving according to usage and context.

2. **Discourse and hegemonic struggles go hand in hand.** Discourse is constructed through hegemonic struggles meant to create a "political and moral-intellectual leadership" by way of "articulating meaning and identity" (Howarth and Torfing 2005, 14-17). In other words, discourse bears a close relationship with those who make political decisions, since those actors who establish meaning do so by offering a credible (re)interpretation of past and present events, and offer future solutions all part of a narrative and in a manner in which it is appealing to the public.

3. **The *Self–Other* dichotomy construction.** Social antagonism is crucial to the hegemonic articulation of meaning and identity, since the '*us vs. them*' approach creates the fertile grounds from which a truly persuasive discourse can be constructed. Hence, it is not only useful to simplify events, problems, political issues and the like to a simplistic 'black or white' approach, but also, by using this type of an approach, those people who hold the discourse can effortlessly convince the audience of the fact that they are indeed 'in the same boat', so to say, with the members of the audience, conveying a sense of solidarity that is highly appealing to anyone present. At the same time, anyone who is not "with us", therefore, any element that is identified with the "Other", is automatically perceived to be a threat. This continuous comparing and contrasting made with regards to the "other" is the process by which identity is created.

4. **The dislocation of discourse takes place.** A discursive system is dislocated when it stops being credible with regards to current events. This usually happens when another discursive system is attempting to take is place in terms of credibility.

5. **The "split subject" emerges.** The dislocation of the discursive system is connected to the emergence of the 'split subject', the failure to fully integrate into a community, hence, making the "other" to be the 'evil' that is always responsible for the individual not acquiring his/her full identity.

The discursive strategies highlighted by Crăciun are:

1. **Referential strategies** that are employed to construct and oppose two different camps, the *in-group* and the *out-group*. The *in-group* is positively represented while the *out-group* is portrayed in negative terms. The most important semantic structure manifesting a referential strategy is the pronoun. When referring to the *in-group* actors it is used the first person plural (e.g. we, us, our), whereas, the out-group actors are referred to the third person plural (e.g. they, them, their).

2. **Semantic moves** are usually encountered in discourses about immigrants, for instance, in the form of disclaimers. They illustrate the possible contradiction between positive self-presentation and negative Other-presentation.

3. **Argumentation** is frequently used in political discourses because it helps politicians to persuade the public and to gain adherence and votes. However, sometimes argumentation is misused by politicians. They intentionally break the rules of accurate argumentation and employ fallacies that appeal to common sense. Usually, fallacies are employed to delegitimate the opponents by oversimplifying and exaggerating their intentions and actions, by appealing to pity and by launching personal attacks.

4. **Rhetoric**, as a form of argumentation, is used in political discourses because it carries out a persuasive function. Also, it plays an important role in ideological manipulation because political actors use rhetorical means such as metaphors, hyperboles, euphemisms, rhetorical questions to manipulate the meaning of the social representation of in-group and out-group.

5. **Topoi** are socially shared beliefs linked to traditions or authoritative sources such as religious texts used as argumentative tools by politicians because they have increased persuasion powers (e.g. religious texts).

6. **Narrative stories** are widely shared, often unspoken explanations, the majority of its elements being unawarely taken for granted.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of selected criteria

	„Us"			„Them"		
Criteria	Rick Santorum	Marine le Pen	Donald Trump	Rick Santorum	Marine le Pen	Donald Trump
How the people are represented	we, our, America, Americans, Mitt Romney, Paul Ryan, farmers, ranchers, working man, soldiers	nous, les français, les française,	thousands, there's been no crowd like this, the best, fellow Republicans, lovely people, we have tremendous people, we have people that aren't working, people that have no incentive to work	President Obama, he	les politiques de gauche et de droit, la gauche affairiste, la gauche trotskiste, les immigrés, les aveugles et sourde	they didn't know the air conditioning didn't work, they sweated like dogs, they didn't know the room was too big, they're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime, they're rapists, they've become rich, they've built a hotel in Syria, our enemies are getting stronger and stronger, they don't know what they're doing, Obamacare, politicians all talk, no action, Obama is going to be out playing golf, politicians not very good, [Obama] is not a leader, he is a negative force, they take ourjobs, they take our money, they loan us back the money, how stupid are out leaders? How stupid are these politicians? people negotiating don't have a clue, our president doesn't have a clue, he is a bad negociator, no-good traitor, they are trying to kill us, not really talented people, people that are stupid,

						are controlled by special interests, their leaders are much smarter than our leaders, our leaders don't understand the game, losers, morally corrupt
Values/ symbols represented	American Dream, Freedom, opportunity, dreams, resposibility, marriage, family, education, hard work, sacrifice, life (born and unborn), liberty, dignity, God	éspoir, sacrifice, amour pour la France, sécurité, ordre, tranquilité, les libertés individuelles, l'honnêté, liberté, prospérité, droiture, de loyauté, fierté, dignité		Government handouts, dependency, unrealized dreams, debt, poverty, asssault on marriage and the family, weakened education system, welfare, weak immigration laws	les séctarismes, l'agression, mensonge, la dictature (de l'Euripe et des minorités), les assistaits,	moral corruption
How the association between the people and the leader is made?	1st generation American, grandson of a coalminer → man of the people	je suis une femme, une mere comme toutes les meres, une Française parmi les Français	I beat China all the time → great businessman, negotiator, truly great leader, cheerleader, somebody that can take the brand of the United States and make it great again, I will be the greatest jobs president that God ever created, I'll bring back our jobs, I'll bring back our money, I'm using my own money, I'm not using the lobbyists. I'm not using donors. I don't care. I'm really rich. I am a nice person, People that know me, like me I am a nice person, I give a lot of money away to charities, I'm actually a very nice person I'm a private company, I started off in a small office with my father, I am really proud of my success, I've employed tens of thousands of people over my lifetime, I have assets	-	-	

Results and discussions

In the table above, one can easily notice the similarities of constructing identity through populist discourse in the case of Rick Santorum and Marine le Pen. When building the two 'opposing sides', they both use personal pronouns, (we, us, Americans/francais), also naming their opponents (Obama, he/le droite, le gauche, etc.). In contrast, however, for Donald Trump the in-group/out-group

references are not merely referring to the opposing political party/parties, but all of the political establishment, also including other countries, citizens of other countries, lobbyists, workers, so-called criminals, everyone who is not associated with him. Here, the *us vs. them* dichotomy takes on a hyperbolic proportion, especially when describing the in-group, those who are righteously supporting the future candidate Donald Trump (thousands, no crowd like this, tremendous people, etc.). The disproportionate referencing of the *out-group*, in contrast with the *in-group*, enhances the supposed threat they bear, and subsequently lift the speaker to an almost Messianic stance in comparison.

Interestingly, when talking about values and symbols they represent, the first two speakers seem to again be in unison when evoking the values and concepts that are characteristic for each country's legacy and history. We have on one hand Rick Santorum mentioning ideals such as: the American Dream, freedom, opportunity, dreams, responsibility, and other elements that portray the American image of self-reliance, while on the other hand he witness Marine le Pen evoking the ideas of éspoir, sacrifice, amour pour la France, sécurité, ordre, (hope, sacrifice, love for France, security, order), etc. As we can clearly observe, Donald Trump's discursive approach deviates from the others by not really talking about concepts, but rather choosing to portray most ideas within shorter or longer narratives, placing the American voter in a context of having to choose his allegiance either to the USA or foreign countries/interests. As Crăciun aptly notes, using narratives for building identity proves to be a highly effective tool of political persuasion.

We believe the third standpoint, that of relating the leader to the people is where Donald Trump most stands out in his discourse. Whereas Rick Santorum and Marine le Pen chose to appear one of the people, a common individual (1st generation American, grandson of a coalminer + je suis une femme, une mere comme toutes les meres, une Française parmi les Français – I am a woman, a mother like all mothers, a Frenchwoman among the French), Donald Trump portrays himself above the American voter, as an all-powerful, all knowing figure, who has arrived to save America from the political establishment.

Conclusions

Based on the above-detailed analysis, we assess that the identity construction carried out in populist political discourse in the USA and France is quite similar, the political actors using more or less the same discursive tools to achieve the delineation from their opponents and their voters. Also, in what has represented a whirlwind of change both at a policy and discursive level, Donald Trump's speech(es) veer off the beaten path of discursive structure and method, portraying himself as the only one truly belonging to the in-group. Thus, he maintains his flexibility to add anyone who does not adhere to his proposals to the 'they' column at any time he wishes, an approach demonstrated throughout his first term time and time again.

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