**Political Authenticity: Villains or the Virtuous?**

**By**

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**The rise of Populist Right Political Parties and Movements and calls for greater Political Authenticity - politics and leaders which are "real" and "genuine" - are part of the same emergent historical trend. There are multiple reasons, for the search for authenticity. One cause is an increasing mistrust in government. Mass publics left behind by the forces economic neo-liberalism are responding to the appeals of charismatic political figures offering up back to the future visions of a less pessimistic present which will salve their ill tempers from the back of a battle bus in the same way that snake-oil salesmen offered tincture to salve aches and pains from the back of a wagon. The trick is to convince the public that "what you see is what you get" even when quite palpably it is not.**

**Theories of charismatic authority are based on the notion that leadership is derived from the charisma of the leader. Max Weber defined charismatic authority (Charismatische Herrschaft) as "resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him".**

**The concept has gone out of favour with political scientists because it is difficult to operationalise. Indeed one can argue that it never found favour in the first place. What is charismatic behaviour for one person can easily be regarded as the worst kind of charlatanism - behaviour which is repellent, deeply repugnant and clearly attributable evidence of repulsive behaviour - by another. What you feel literally depends on which side of the political fence you stand.**

**Charismatic authority is incapable of formal proof or being epistemologically verified. It is what Q B Gallie dubbed an "essentially contested concept". Why is charismatic authority so hard to verify? According to Weber, charismatic authority is a, "certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader". The man/superman dichotomy surely ultimately rests on the historical legacy bequeathed by mere mortals acting in the guise of historians, hack journalists, pulp fiction biographers, journeyman political scientists and syndicated columnists. Therein lies the problem: at what point does man become myth? How do we measure the transcendence from human being to hero? In an era allegedly dominated by "fake news" it depends on who is setting the agenda or should that be funding media access? Is it really a case that authenticity is a narrative treatment prescribed by those in control of the copy received by the public? Or does the so called cult of personality transcend media attempts to shape it? In other words you need to born with charisma - it is not simply something the media can create. If that is the case what exceptional personal qualities of leadership or extraordinary insight and accomplishment does a charismatic leader need to possess in order to inspire loyalty and obedience from their followers in order to convince them that they are authentic?**

**Leadership is the power to diffuse a positive energy and offer a vision which can be communicated to people so that they believe in. This is ultimately down to public perception. For Weber this ultimately rested on the relationship between the leader and his followers. In turn this rests as much on hype and the message that is being spun. In other words take Boris out of the Battle bus and would his ability to reach out to the public have been lessened? Would the Brexit message have been diminished? Would it have somehow been less authentic? Like the waggon before allowing the medicine man the platform to communicate over the heads of his audience selling the benefits of his snake oil which delivered no tangible benefits whatsoever context was everything. Having the waggon and having the Battle bus somehow made the message more authentic.**

**Because charismatic authority challenges the boundaries set by traditional authority it becomes doubly authentic because an alternative vision is being offered which is ultimately believable even if one is unable to authenticate some of the claims being made under its banner. In that sense the charismatic leader becomes even more authentic still. It is a logic which is incredibly difficult to disaggregate.**

**It is deeply ironic however therefore hat charismatic leaders have in the contemporary context "emerged" from the established authority structures. They are "counter elite" figures as identified by Samuel Finer who seize the opportunity at times of crisis of the political system to take advantage of events to influence the direction of political change or should that be in their own political advantage?**

**According to Max Weber, two of the primary methods of elite replacement or emergence of charismatic leaders are: hereditary or inherited charisma, and charisma of the office holder. The first which is ultimately a product of being part of the political establishment and/or established political structures is much easier to define than the vagaries of the second. What is clear however is that there are various ways in which an individual and a society can contrive to maintain the unique energy and nature of a charismatic and authentic leader or leaders? In the former sense some leaders are able to select themselves because of what and who they are and the uniquely privileged position they occupy in society. In the latter sense they are selected by society less because of who they are and more because of who and what they can become. The charismatic leader possesses some genuinely authentic qualities which sets them apart from lesser mortals which fit them for the position of overriding authority. The intriguing aspect of this selection process is that it ultimately rests upon some degree of establishment mandate. The permanency of institutions is maintained by the transition of power in a form which undergirds the evolution of those institutions, preserves their structural function whilst at the same time permitting their gradual evolution. Authentic voice therefore is as much about providing reassurance that political and constitutional change when it takes place will deliver change which will benefit the greatest number. Such a utilitarian approach can only be led by someone possessing charismatic authority because it is as important to reassure potential losers that the impact upon them will to the benefit of the greater good as much as it is to potential winners who will clearly benefit from change. We are all in it together. It is when data to the contrary is starkly evident that the message quickly becomes inauthentic and the public shits its attention to what it regards as more authentic voices as it did during the referendum.**

**That is why the Charisma of the Officeholder is so important and why it is such an elusive concept. Max Weber holds his hands up and admits that it is necessary to dissociate charisma from the character of a particular individual, making it what he dubbed, "an objective, transferable entity." In the same way therefore must we dissociate the authenticity of voice from the authenticity of background of the charismatic leader? It is at this point that I would like to argue that there is a fundamental dichotomy between strong authenticity ( Boris Johnson) and weak authenticity ( Jeremy Corbyn). The key variable is their ability to translate the authenticity of their political personality and political message into political power. In that sense political authenticity is not a neutral concept. It is a bridging concept which offers a way of understanding the contiguity between political movements and political institutions and the ability of the former to shove and shape changes in the latter. If either the message or the personality of charismatic leaders is unable to deliver the latter then surely the judgement of historians must be that either the message or their personality must be regarded as inauthentic.**

**In that sense Weber’s logic is flawed. Although the behaviour of Charismatic leaders is unpredictable and they are certainly not bound by accepted tradition or rules of behaviour, the authenticity of their message has proud implications for their chance of success of delivering a positive political outcome. In that sense some charismatic leaders are certainly more authentic than others.**

**Whether charismatic leaders are narcissists and the authenticity of their message narcissistic is somewhat of a red herring. Charismatic leaders display an extraordinary amount of energy, accompanied by an inner clarity of thought unhindered by the anxieties and guilt that afflict more ordinary people because they are able to cut through the political morass and understand how that message needs to cleave through the existing political debate and appeal to the narcissistic prejudices of the general public.**

**Marshall Berman in his book The Politics of Authenticity offers an insight into why authenticity has an impact on the construction of radical or should that be orthodox or hegemonic schools of political thought. In seeking wholesale political transformation of institutions individuals must be able to perceive their alienation from the dominant political narratives which underpin the political system in which they live. They must recognise how that political narrative operates to their disadvantage. In Neo-Marxist terms they must perceive their own alienation. The authenticity of the alternative narrative therefore must be doubly authentic and highly nuanced allowing them to perceive clearly not only their alienated position within the political system but also how their perceiving their alienation allows them to think through the validity of alternative narratives and whether they offer an authentic way out of their perceived predicament. Bergman dubs this a reflexive theory of self-alienation. Berman offers a critique of the hegemonic narrative of neo-liberal economics and the marginalisation of individual as economic actors within this. Berman's account of inequality and market society draws on a Marxist structural critique of modernity. Authenticity therefore is an issue which is fundamentally bound up with human identity. Barman however is optimistic about the way humans through what he calls "the dialectic of authenticity" are struggling and succeeding in asserting their identity - the struggle "always to be at one with oneself". Bermann argues that the problem of individual identity is best expressed through community. He believes very strongly that there is a vast reserve of political power amongst a mass of ordinary people searching for authentic experience, an authentic experience which can be articulated through charismatic leadership, particularly that reservoir that is inchoate and directionless. All it requires is an "awakening of human imagination".**

**The big question is what initially prompts this search for authenticity? Authenticity is regarded as an antidote to the political cynicism especially about the class of current leadership that many people share. The problem is that authenticity whilst it "sells" in the media it does not necessarily guarantee good policy outcomes. A charismatic leader may be authentic, but that doesn't offer any guarantees that they will solve the problems that he or she claims will be fixed. The political solution on offer may indeed be genuinely authentic but it may be authentically wrong. Thus, opting for the most authentic leader may not be the best choice and other and additional ways of judging their suitability is required. But how are we able to make this judgement especially when we know that there are politicians who pretend to be authentic for political gain. The greater the level of public scrutiny that is applied the bigger the disconnect that emerges between the public and private persona. But how does one differentiate between the rhetoric and the reality? We, as voters, will need to pay very careful attention to both the messenger and the message; there is a very real danger that we will be fooled by either one or the other. As we are such a jaded and suspicious audience explaining why we are prepared to take a risk on charismatic leaders who are so obviously outside of the political class we occupy is a very real question.**

**The literature on marketing offers us a number of clues as to how we might resolve this problem. Politicians are ultimately brands, but brands that have to make themselves relatable on a very human level. This involves intense engagement with all forms of media, from newspaper ads and editorials, to talk show appearances, television interviews and a burgeoning presence on social media. Politicians possessing charismatic authority tend to be celebrities and we expect celebrities to be media stars with a lot of panache. Is the trigger simply that in the end we are attracted to celebrity? Celebrity culture has certainly become more pervasive but are we really suggesting that the voting public is unable to distinguish between what is real and genuinely authentic and what is make believe and inauthentic?**

**It is increasingly the case however that political authenticity is coming increasingly to be based on persuasive requires PR. Political campaigns are built on building a deliberately calculated image of authenticity. Are we really so susceptible to such overt media manipulation? Is politics really such a cynical exercise? Politics is however is ultimately about strategy, knowing what to say when, in what way, and to whom. A typical politician knows how to please disparate audiences, and tries to be all things to all people so as to make them electable as a candidate Successful politicians manage to give people hope through agendas that they know they cannot achieve. However although politics in even the most democratic countries is fraught with this kind of dishonesty and deceit it does not automatically follow that populists political parties have discovered the key to make politics more authentic. Clearly however they have discovered how to use rhetoric information so that it appears to serve the masses whilst benefitting their narrow interests. At the same time one should be aware that their motives are not based on a higher form of truth. Nothing limits them to compromises beneficial to their voters as in the end they are still seekers after power. Because they are politicians they still put their own interests above those of their constituents whilst giving the impression of being motivated by lofty principles and the common good.**

**All politicians desire electability. To gain and then hang on to power, they must satisfy the demands of a whole range of organised interests and special lobbying groups. Achieving success requires tailoring their rhetoric to the needs of lobbies. This requires them to suppress their own prejudices in order to give voice to a message which sounds authentic to their supporters. This may or may not embrace a distorted version of reality convincing and authentic enough to appear compatible with the common good.**

**This is why as voters we are sometimes unable to separate a truly authentic message from fiction. The question is: when does sincere advocacy become contrived pleading? The problem is that we cannot identify what specific facts politicians are hiding, which are inauthentic and when they are deliberately exaggerating in order to make the rhetoric sound more plausible and authentic. It is not so much deliberate falsehood but the bottom line is that with the exception of a few very rare cases it is impossible for a politician to succeed whilst staying true to themselves. In other words you simply can't be genuinely authentic.**

**That is why voters are turning in increasing numbers voters to candidates who refuse to play by the rules. It is why Donald Trump voiced anti-immigrant sentiments so strongly and unapologetically. Disavowing political correctness, he insulted individuals and groups that up until then mainstream politicians treated with affection and respect, His use of language deliberately sought to distinguish himself from career politicians and to shock the political establishment. Trump was critical of the Republican Party he sought to represent, taking a position that party leaders considered harmful to his electability, giving him the appearance of being refreshingly honest.**

**Trumps successes is viewed as the triumph of authenticity over politics as usual. It is an independence of mind which allowed him to report what he saw and to speak his mind. His success to a degree rested on making the political class seem dishonest and inauthentic. The question is however was authenticity just a clever mask that he wore in order to outsmart his opponents?**

**We need to remember what we said earlier about authenticity and media personalities or should that be media theatrics? Trump is ultimately a showman and a very good one at that whose trademark has been to exaggerate aspects of his personality unleashing his egocentric nature on an unexpectant or should that be expectant public that he is playing up to? It is the authenticity of inauthenticity. The problem in very simple terms is that politicians cannot reach the height of power by being themselves. It is unsurprising, then, that we consider political systems so deficient in authenticity particularly when outlandish politicians appear able to to animate millions of voters; through the use of equally outlandish rhetoric. This makes politicians less rather than more outlandish and less virtuous and thus far more cunning and certainly far more villainous than the trend in favour of authenticity appears to indicate.**

**What it further points to is an authenticity deficit or gap which is opening up in politics. This is a very real problem. As long as politicians like Trump (and I use the term loosely) resonate with huge blocs of voters it is likely that the authentic politics of dialogue and finding equitable solutions will become increasingly fraught. We should not conflate political incorrectness with authenticity. True authenticity means having an actual and realistic plan to execute and deliver on political promises. It means taking a long-term view and having a strategy for how to get something done for constituents and communities. Unfortunately many politicians are not being authentic about promises being made. Unrealistic solutions are being offered when they have enough knowledge to know better. More deliberate approaches to problem-solving are getting overshadowed by bluster and bombast. This is leading to inauthentic promises being made by leaders in an effort to appease voters. The great irony is that, in our rush for real-ness, our thirst for sincerity and get at something earnest, we have lost sight of what real authenticity is all about. The world faces unprecedented challenges for which only true authenticity offers a cure. Some will argue that one can be authentic by truly believing in your words, even if those words do not provide a realistic and long term solution to a problem. To cure our political ills however demands more than hollow words.**

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