

Anxiety and the biographical *Gestalt* of political leaders

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I am grateful for the invitation to respond to Bahar Rumelili's stimulating essay (Rumelili 2021) and will use this opportunity to share some thoughts on reading anxiety as a public mood and on Rumelili's reference to charismatic leadership. I do so from a perspective that links anxiety and temporal conceptions of identity – themes I have discussed in more detail elsewhere – and I contemplate the symbolic role of political leaders in this constellation. Anxiety, in my reading, is a sentiment emerging from the human inability to control the future and it is intertwined with questions of being in the world. This understanding is based on an existentialist reading of humans as temporal beings unable to grasp themselves as whole because there is always something we are *not yet*, because we cannot know for certain who, what or where we will be tomorrow. Specifically, with Heidegger we might say that anxiety resides in our inability to have an experience of death, that is, in the unknowability of death and how it will 'happen'. This uncertainty of what our future will be like, awareness of the contingency and instability of our being in the world, is a source of anxiety. We cannot escape this anxiety; it is a constant feature of the human condition.

The IR literature on ontological security drawing on Giddens (1991) assumes that anxiety is something humans seek to control by putting in place mechanisms that make being in the world and, especially, the future, more 'knowable'.¹ One way of doing so is by giving the future meaning through the formulation and pursuit of visions, which may be positive (utopias) or negative (dystopias), that allow us to grasp that future and to plan and invest accordingly (Berenskoetter 2011). Which vision we become attached to depends, in part, on the stock of meaningful knowledge available at the moment in which a heightened state of anxiety is felt. It must also resonate with our experience, enabling us to connect our historical being and our future being. One common vehicle of forging this connection is a biographical narrative that effectively intertwines past and future in a convincing story. By providing a sense of a meaningful being in time, a biographical narrative functions as a powerful anxiety controlling mechanism and, thus, a source of epistemological peace (Steele 2008; Berenskoetter 2014).² Conversely, when the contingency of memories and visions is revealed and the biographical narrative is destabilised, it loses its power and increases anxiety among those who identify with it.

Understanding anxiety as a mood makes sense and is useful for conceptualising the feeling of ontological security as well. An important question Rumelili does not discuss, however, is how anxiety as a public mood interacts with anxiety felt on the individual level. How do private moods feed into public moods, and vice versa? Put differently, does a heightened sense of collective anxiety emerge out of a critical mass of individuals feeling anxious, or is it generated at a social level and then envelopes all individuals that see themselves as part of a particular social group? Erik Ringmar, from whom Rumelili borrows the concept of a public mood, both makes a distinction between private and public moods and notes their intertwined nature (Ringmar 2018). As good social theorists, we may consider all moods intersubjective phenomena, which renders the separation between ‘public’ and ‘private’ problematic. Yet, there is value in distinguishing between collective and individual levels, especially if the former is considered more than the sum of its parts, and in exploring the interaction between them in generating and controlling anxiety.

Research in social psychology has shown that individual cognitive and emotional needs are satisfied to an important degree on the societal level, complemented by prominent voices in social theory and scholars of nationalism who have argued that humans seek to inscribe themselves into temporal structures of meaning that are held collectively (Giddens 1991; Anderson 1999; see also Bloom 1990). A ‘public’ biographical narrative, in particular the collective memories and visions it contains, is such a structure. It gives meaning to a social group’s collective being in time and helps to control private anxieties by allowing individuals to be part of something larger that appears to be durable and easy to grasp. In thinking about the nature of this inscription, or attachment, we may take a Foucauldian approach and read it as a decentralised configuration of everyday practices. However, I think we need to add more agency (and, thus, responsibility) to the picture and recognise the ability to offer an anxiety controlling mechanism as a considerable source of political power. This power may partly be derived from the ability to set the agenda in formal and informal institutions that shape the discourse of memories and visions. While governments or a ‘leading social group’ (Deutsch 1966: 101f.) can have such structural power, it is difficult to claim that they hold complete control over the institutions through which a collective biographical narrative is disseminated and maintained. Yet, Rumelili’s point about the power of charismatic leadership is an important reminder that individuals can matter for reasons other than their position in an institutional structure. Without discarding the importance of the latter, the following contemplates that the most potent carrier and amplifier of a collective biographical narrative may indeed be a single person.

Leaders as personifications of collective biographies

My basic assumption here is that people do not identify simply with an abstract, free-floating narrative but seek to associate it with a concrete material object and tangible practices. Institutions and rituals can and do provide such materiality, however I suggest that it often falls to a single individual – to political leaders – to bundle and represent a collective biographical narrative, to ‘bring it to life’, so to speak. To understand how political leaders³ can serve as an important anxiety controlling mechanisms in this way, we need to grasp their power not simply from their structural position, but from their ability to function as symbols. Research has shown that foreign national leaders often serve as stereotypical shortcuts that shape perceptions and evaluations of the states/people they represent (Balmas 2018). Brent Steele even suggests that heads of government/state not only ‘represent *their* state, [they] “*are the state*”’ (Steele 2008: 18, emphasis added). This ontological merger of the state

and the individual directs attention to the sense in which a president or a prime minister becomes a *representative* of the state. Rather than understood in terms of ‘policymakers’ or ‘executives’, they seem to represent a people not only in a formal or legal sense, but also their character, histories and hopes. In short, I suggest they are carriers and representatives of a collective biographical narrative. The question is how we conceive of this representation ontologically.

Let us approach this by taking a step back. Literature in the field of foreign policy analysis, drawing on political psychology, points to the influence of leaders’ personality traits and cognitive frames, or worldviews, in decision-making (Hudson 2014, Ch. 2; Jervis 2017). While some of these studies discuss the importance and use of memories and visions, they are rarely linked to the person’s biography. Yet, this link is hard to miss when one reads the (auto)biographies of political leaders. It also underpins attempts by intelligence analysts to establish psycho-biographies of foreign leaders, which is premised on the view that their biographies shape their ‘character’ and influence how they see the world and, ultimately, how they act (McDermott 2004, Ch. 7). If we accept that individual biographies influence worldviews and action, the question we need to ask is how the biographies of political leaders connect with the collective biographical narrative of the state/society they represent. When taking office, does a leader identify with a pre-existing collective narrative and become assimilated by it, or at the very least adopt and uphold it like a caretaker? Or does she come to represent ‘the state’ by inserting her own personal biography into the collective narrative and, thereby, shape the latter and make it her own? IR scholars grappling with the anthropomorphism question tend to adopt the first angle. Jennifer Mitzen’s (2006: 352) note that states provide self-images to which its members become attached also applies to individuals in government. Steele’s (2008: 19) notion of ‘agents as states’ assumes that leaders are committed to uphold the ‘self-identity’ of the state they serve, driven by their (private?) anxiety over the state’s place in the world. I am not suggesting to discard this reading. But if we just assume that political actors become socialised into a pre-existing master narrative, which they then protect and reproduce, we put too much emphasis on structure and discard the relevance of the leaders’ personal biographies. Rather than having the latter drop out of the picture, we must pay closer attention to how the two merge.

I propose a reading of representation not simply as reproduction but as *personification*, which highlights the individual’s ability to appear as a credible example of a biographical narrative that others can identify with. Leaders (often) function as a crucial reference point of collective identification. After all, one reason why they gather a following is their ability to offer something that appeals; not simply a position on a particular issue, but a political project that people can or want to relate to and a person(ality) that makes this project credible. In his book *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, Murray Edelman notes that political leaders become ‘signs of competence, evil, nationalism, future promise, and other virtues and vices and so help introduce meaning to a confusing political world’ (Edelman 1988: 37). This meaning-making function is central to Max Weber’s well-known notion of charismatic leadership; a form of leadership that derives authority not from legal-bureaucratic rules or tradition, but from the individual’s ability to provide hope, to promise a better future, through appearing as both exceptional and exemplary (Weber 1992: 151–66). In a similar vein, I suggest to read leaders as symbols, as personifications of a collective biography. They gain this symbolic function not simply through formally occupying a high position in government, but through their ability to fill that position with a biography that resonates with society, that is, to *embody* a collective narrative. They give a public narrative a concrete, particular content and bodily form through their personal life story, with their words and deeds ‘looked upon as part of a wider oral

biography, or as a sort of sophisticated mnemotechnical device' (Loofs 1974: 10). In the words of Ringmar (2018: 461), a political leader can be seen as 'the body of the actor in the play with whom we identify ... an avatar of our individual self'. In such a configuration the collective and the individual narrative become difficult to separate.

It is useful to think of this embodiment/personification of the collective biographical narrative as a form of symbolic representation that merges the state and the individual leader in a single *Gestalt*.⁴ Attachment to this *Gestalt* across society is not only cognitive. Echoing Weber's point that personal affection is central to charismatic authority, Edelman (1988: 37) notes that by personifying 'a range of fears and hopes' leaders generate strong affect among those identifying with them. By providing 'vital psychological gratifications' (Edelman 1988: 39) on the cognitive, moral and emotional level, such a *Gestalt* effectively controls anxiety.

Individuals who want to claim this *Gestalt* need to understand the mood of a society, grasp the basic contours of a dominant narrative or the demand for a new one, and then offer themselves as a credible example that resonates with their audience and adds the all-important personal texture to that collective biography. Doing so successfully provides charismatic authority and enables leaders to position themselves 'above mundane politics' (Edelman 1988: 38), a capacity that facilitates populism. However, that does not mean they 'own' the biographical narrative and the promises for being in the future it entails. As a merger of individual and collective, the *Gestalt* embodying the biographical narrative is shaped by both the individual representing it *and* by others identifying with it. This co-authorship is difficult to disentangle and not simply about a political leader's private life becoming a public good. Indeed, we might say that, like all symbols, a leader who comes to personify a biographical narrative is 'not the source of information of what it represents' (Pitkin 1972: 99). Edelman (1988: 37) speaks of spectators assigning meanings to leaders. Much like celebrities in popular culture, political leaders provide a bodily surface onto which memories and dreams are projected. In that sense, one might say 'followers create leaders rather than the converse' (Edelman 1988: 38). Yet, again, it would be wrong to cede authorship of the *Gestalt* wholly to the public, or to external parties, and reduce political leaders to passive objects. They are not. In the US, for instance, it has become common for candidates running for political office to strategically communicate biographical details about their personal lives to potential voters (Goggin 2016). To be effective, these details need to feed into a *Gestalt* that is both sufficiently concrete and sufficiently vague to resonate with a vast number of individual histories and visions. In this configuration there is always space for leaders to shift and shape the content of the collective narrative, either gradually through institutions or actually through symbolic performances (Strauss 2021).

If biographical narratives are an integral part of forming a sense of collective being in time and space we should expect their symbolic personifications to be a common phenomenon and be attentive to varieties in expression and impact. It is worth exploring, for instance, whether the biographical *Gestalt* embodied by populist leaders has distinctive traits, and how it affects, or interacts with, collective moods in particular ways. Meaning systems and their disruptions vary, and we are likely to find differences not only in the inter-national realm but also *within* societies and *across* them. The spectacle that was the Trump presidency is a case in point. Rumelili suggests that Donald Trump's leadership was marked by arbitrariness and unpredictability and, hence, that Trump was a producer of anxiety, which he then exploited. Yet, it may be more helpful to read Trump as a symbol that simultaneously controlled and produced anxiety amongst different audiences, domestically and

internationally. He embodied a particular biographical narrative of America in sharp contrast to the *Gestalt* represented by Barack Obama; so for those who identify with the America Obama stood for, the Trump presidency appeared ‘strange’ (Berenskötter and Nymalm 2021) and was a time of heightened anxiety. At the same time, Trump’s *Gestalt* did, and continues to, provide ontological security to millions who felt unsettled by what (they thought) Obama embodied. And again millions of others do not see their being in the world significantly affected by the person occupying the White House. Thus, perhaps we should speak of spaces, rather than ages, of (heightened) anxiety and try to understand the formation and contestation, the rise and fall of biographical *Gestalten* in each of these spaces.

Notes

- ¹ Rumelili rightly points out that this assumption rests on shaky grounds. Accounts going back to Kierkegaard note that humans may also be drawn to situations of heightened anxiety (see also Berenskötter 2020).
- ² Focusing on narratives as carriers of meaning is not to downplay the importance of practices that constitute material investments in memories and visions and the political project(s) they support.
- ³ The category of political leader is not limited to individuals holding a formal office, and the representative function discussed here can also be attributed to dead subjects or statues. Similarly, the collective narrative does not need to be attached to a ‘state’, but can also be tied to a city, a region, a political party - whatever is the salient political unit an individual feels part of and gains ontological security from.
- ⁴ The notion of *Gestalt* was coined by a group of psychologists drawing on phenomenology and existential philosophy in the early twentieth century, developing a theory of perception that explores how humans generate ‘wholes’ out of disparate/numerous parts (King and Wertheimer 2005; Köhler 1947/1992). The principles of *Gestalt* psychology hold that the human brain likes clear patterns and groups together similar, proximate and continuous elements in an attempt to reduce reality to its ‘simplest form’ and fill in gaps to create a meaningful whole where there is missing information. As such, it feeds into the contemporary notion of cognitive bias. Combining holism and ‘field theory’, *Gestalt* theory directs attention to the question how a figure takes shape in a particular context.

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