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DESIGNING IDENTITIES  
THE POLITICS OF ARTIFICIALITY AND AUTHENTICITY  
IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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## 1. The predicament of culture

When we look at the ways in which present-day politics, on a national as well as an international level, is developing, two striking and seemingly contradictory tendencies immediately come to the fore. Until the 80s of the twentieth century politics in the Western, developed world predominantly dealt with developing or sustaining the post-War welfare state, framing civil and social rights, and with a gradual democratization of national political relations, whereas in the developing world nation-building and social struggles dominated the political domain. Since the eighties, and since the rise to power of Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK and the subsequent rise and global distribution of a neoliberal political regime, politics or political conflicts were increasingly expressed in either strictly economical or in dominantly cultural terms. The economic framing of politics must be seen as the product of a shift in power relations, or to be more specific: of a loss of effective power of nation-

of national governments thanks to the growing power of multinational or global business conglomerates and supranational institutions dealing primarily with finance and economics, like the World Bank or the IMF.

On the other hand actual political conflicts and debates, from local or national to even global levels, tended to take on a cultural form, or be framed in cultural terms, i.e. in those of (local, regional, national, religious or ethnic) collective identities. This leads to a rather schizophrenic picture of present-day politics: whereas politics nowadays is overshadowed or swallowed up by economic power, i.e. by global financial and commercial corporations, or by 'the market', actual political struggle and debate is all about culture and identity, also when economic issues and interests are at stake. In social and political theory this schizophrenia often tends to be read as an opposition between reality or power on the one hand, and imagination or impotence on the other, economy or the market being of course the domain that it is really all about (in politics), whereas culture and identity are relegated to the domain of fiction, or of atavistic illusions. So Manuel Castells, for instance, constructed a famous opposition in his seminal study 'The Information Age' (Castells 1996-98) between what he called a 'space of flows' and a 'space of places'. Power (economic and political as well as informational) resided in (or actually moved through) the space of flows (the networks of finance, information and trade), while identities were locked up in a powerless space of localized communities without access to the de-territorialized universe of the network society. Underlying this picture of a divided global world is the presupposition that a *realist* view on politics takes economic interests and power relations as the dominant substance of politics, be it on a national or transnational level, whereas those who defend the importance of cultural or identity issues in politics are dismissed as backward, regressing to past political realities, or even accused of playing with dangerous toys (race, religion, ethnoses, *Blut und Boden*).

The problem with this picture of present-day politics is that it prevents us from posing two crucial questions: first, the question of *why* so many still approach politics in cultural terms, putting ethnic, regional, religious or other identities on the agenda, when Bill Clinton has already warned us: *it's the economy, stupid!* The second question would be: *how* did nation-

states gradually lose control over their own political domain, and could supranational corporations and institutions take over, at least to a certain extent? Although the latter question deserves our serious attention, given for instance the growing economic *and* political crisis of the EU, in this article I will concentrate on the former. The reason for concentrating on what I like to describe as a ‘cultural turn’ in politics, or as a ‘culturalization’ of politics, is that I think it is possible to interpret it as a direct reaction to the growing dominance of global economic power, and to the corresponding weakening of national governments and their ability to influence global or international developments in a decisive manner. To address this issue, let me start with a short historical detour.

## Designing politics

I think two parallel developments may be seen to be responsible for the culturalization of politics. The first development was signalled early on, i.e. in the 1960s, by the American cultural critic Daniel Bell, who spoke of an end to all ideologies in modern democratic welfare states (Bell, 2000). This ‘end of ideology’ was dramatized by several continental philosophers (Jean-Francois Lyotard, Gianni Vattimo for example) in the 70s and 80s, by referring to an end of modernity, or the modern project, and the rise of postmodernism. Quoting Nietzsche, Vattimo spoke of the death of God, as well as of the death of Truth, or the growing suspicion of transcendental foundations, that made way for a growing immanence: truth is practical and historical. Instead of looking for epistemological or ideological foundations or origins we should study the historical development or genealogy of our political, social or scientific institutions and practices and their effects on everyday life, and so try to evaluate these effects within their present-day constellations (Vattimo 1988).

The political counterpart of this philosophical postmodernism was the collapse of religious and ideological foundations as the cornerstones of modern politics, and the celebration of pragmatism and pluralism as essential dimensions of present-day democratic political relations since the 70s and 80s of the twentieth century. This pragmatic turn in politics as

well as philosophy was accompanied and strengthened by a growing awareness of what Vattimo, following Nietzsche again, called the *fictional* or *imaginary* character of social reality (Vattimo 1998, 17-28). In other words: social relations are no longer seen as the expression of an underlying, foundational reality (for instance, that of divine providence or of economic structures or laws), but as historically contingent constructions, held together by specific discourses, rituals and institutions, and constantly open to change, i.e. reconstruction. This is of course not the same as claiming that society does not exist (as Margaret Thatcher would have it), but it reflects the growing difficulty to theorize, or speak of and develop politics towards society in terms of a universal truth, an encompassing ideology or belief system.

There are interesting parallels between the growing social and political awareness of the fictionality of social reality on the one hand, and the growing importance of the notion of culturalization or cultural construction of social relations in academic research on the other. In the humanities and the social sciences the prominence of a socio-economic approach in, for instance, the study of history, or a sociological macro-perspective, has been replaced by historical research into ‘cultures’ or ‘mentalities’ and by a cultural anthropological perspective, both highlighting social relations as cultural constructions and the importance of practices of imagination as crucial building-blocks of society.

In the world of politics the ‘end of ideology’, and of ‘meta-narratives’, actually produced two contrasting developments. On the one hand it led to a radical ideological neutralization of politics, or better: a reduction of politics to a *technique* of policy or administration, supported by an older notion of politics as *management*. This was evident in the success of ‘New Labour’ under Tony Blair and in the ideologically neutral ‘purple coalition’ in the Netherlands, which was possible after the Social Democrats threw off their ‘ideological feathers’. It is evident again in the rise of governments of ‘technocrats’ in several European countries in the slipstream of the economic crisis, like the Monti government in Italy. Vattimo (Vattimo & Zabala 2009) describes this ideological neutralization as a neutralization of politics as such: in fact political deliberation or political conflict is denied by these interventions by ‘specialists’ or ‘managers’, and puts de-

mocracy in danger, while democracy may be the only (and rather modest) ideology that remains after the ‘end of ideology’, expressing the plurality of cultural perspectives that makes up society.

On the other hand the ‘end of ideology’ evoked the general culturalization of politics that is at stake here. It is important to stress the (relative) differences between ideologies and cultures here. Whereas ideologies depend on a claim to universal truth (like Christianity, Scientism or Communism) cultures generally depend on particularistic or perspectivist views on social reality, ranging from narrow-minded group-thinking to open-minded pluralism. Both narrow-minded group-thinking and open-minded pluralism oppose by definition the old world of universal or all-encompassing ideologies *and* the neutralization of politics by managerial expertise. This implies that practices and views of xenophobic nationalism are closer to practices and views of open-minded pluralism than to older, ‘closed’ and universalising ideologies, or to recent examples of ‘neutral’ managerial, so-called evidence-based, politics. Whereas the first two address politics as a battlefield, as a confrontation of contradicting views and perspectives on crucial social affairs – and also as attempts to ‘find’ (or ‘construct’) a public that supports these views – universalising ideologies as well as neutral, managerial politics both in fact deny politics as struggle, as a confrontation of opposing positions, as a *public affair*. This means that the culturalization of politics, other than most liberal-minded and deliberationist political philosophers and theorists think, represents a return to what we might call ‘real politics’ – after years of managerialism, neoliberal anti-statism and New Public Management. That is why more agonistic and ‘republican’ political theorists, as well as all kinds of constructivist, actor-network theorists, tend to applaud the culturalization of politics and to interpret the rise of populist and/or nationalist movements as a ‘return to politics’ or a ‘return to democracy’ (see a.o. Marres 2005, Pels 2005 and 2011, Laclau 2005, Schinkel 2012, Oudenampsen 2010). However, it is one thing to applaud politics as public debate and struggle, or as ‘constructing new publics’, or to defend a ‘fact-free politics’ against neutralization and technological reduction of politics, but it is something entirely different to come up with a serious critical assessment of the programs, positions or goals of all these new forms of identity-politics, nationalism or populism.

This critical assessment has always been one of the main tasks of the tradition of ‘critical theory’: to not only come up with accurate descriptions of social or political developments, but also and at the same time develop a convincing critique (positive or negative) of these developments, and to provide a convincing and self-critical account of the relation between these developments and the role and position of the critical theorist himself. Here the contextualist and pragmatist attitude of the new constructivists in political theory seems to be at odds with the universalist overtones in the analyses of traditional critical theory, especially those of the Frankfurt School. These analyses expressed a strong indebtedness to a Hegelian and Marxist totalizing view on world history and societal development, in which ‘Das Ware (Unwahre) ist das Ganze’, or to put it more simply (and in terms of a traditional folk song): ‘the world has gone wrong’. It must be seen as the most important challenge of contemporary critical political theory to develop a *critical* perspective on present-day politics without falling back into the traditional universalizing dialectics of true and false, or of alienation versus emancipation, or of authenticity versus artificiality. But the only way to develop a *critical* perspective on present-day politics implies at the same time that it should take very seriously the fact that this politics itself constantly evokes images of authenticity (versus artificiality).

Where Karl Marx based his critique of political economy and of capitalism on the analysis of the ever-growing role of exchange value compared to the use value of the products of capitalist production and distribution, then critical theory nowadays has to make a *cultural turn* by focussing on the growing role of *symbolic* or *imaginary* value in the production and reproduction of social relations and practices. Traditional critical theory, especially that of the Frankfurt School, had already made the shift from the classical Marxist emphasis on exchange value to the role of social imagination, and especially to the ways by which that imagination was produced and distributed. But like Marx, who saw exchange value as standing at the root of what he called *alienation*, i.e. ‘false consciousness’ of the ‘reality’ of existing social relations, the theorists of the Frankfurt School also based their criticism on the absolute opposition between the social imagination produced by what they called a ‘culture industry’ on the one hand and social truth on the other.

## Imagining communities

Thanks to the linguistic turn in philosophy and social and cultural theory this opposition could be left behind and replaced by the Nietzschean notion of the *fictionality of truth*, and more importantly, of the *truth (or truth effects) of fiction*. Or to rephrase this in the way Vattimo read Nietzsche: the fictional character of the truth-claims attributed to our everyday views of social reality cannot be contrasted with or replaced by a pure, fictionless truth. Nietzsche's famous perspectivist conception of truth might be seen as the prehistory of the linguistic turn and of the rise of a conception of language as performative and constructive. And maybe Benedict Anderson's study of the rise of nationalism and the nation-state, *Imagined Communities*, can be seen as the most important product of this new, constructivist conception of truth and fiction (Anderson 1983). Here the nation-state is analysed and described as the combined result of several practices, rituals and media that succeed in producing, partly consciously and partly spontaneously, a collective cultural framework, a fictional community of people who never had met and never will meet, and yet are able to identify with each other. Anderson begins his study with an indictment of political theorists for their neglect of the crucial political role of nationalism in the development of modern democracies. Nationalism is dominantly described as a sad remnant of a past full of prejudice and superstition. It will wither away, according to the majority of political theorists, and that explains why 'nationalism has never produced its own grand thinkers: no Hobbeses, Tocquevilles, Marxes, or Webers'. (Anderson 2000 (1983), 5). Nationalism and the nation-state remained *Fremdkörper* in contemporary political theory – the view being that they shouldn't be there.

It cannot come as a surprise then that many political theorists were stupefied or simply absent when the impossible happened: the *return* of nationalism at the end of the twentieth century, even in its most cruel and blatant guise, that of populism, xenophobia, and even racism. The implicit evolutionary naturalism and enlightened liberal optimism of dominant strands of political science seemed to forbid such atavistic reappearances of doomed figures from a distant past. Aggressive nationalism was associated with early modern stages of the state and of politics, with the times of co-

colonialism and imperialism, not with the post-War modern welfare state. Or it was associated with the struggle of colonized people against their Western colonizers, and in that case seen as a temporary phase after which more balanced forms of national deliberative democracy could arise. The return of nationalism puzzled political theorists, because it was now often related to the rise of supra- or transnational institutions and communities, or to be more precise: to the growing influence of supranational organisations like the EU, the IMF or the World Bank on the one hand and on the other to the growth and permanence of labour migration and the emergence of transnational communities in the urban areas of Europe and the US, and in fact all over the world nowadays.

Thanks to Anderson we can now leave the naturalist or essentialist view of nationalism behind and study the different types of nationalism as specific historical constructions, as effective fictions or imaginations that can be traced back to the specific historical constellations of their coming into being *and* to the instruments or media that produced and supported these effective fictions. Some interesting new characteristics of present-day nationalism immediately stand out: whereas early European nationalism was an offensive ideology related to a process of nation-building by leading political elites, and whereas anti-colonialist nationalism was related to the liberation struggles of oppressed people in the colonial empires, there present-day nationalism is a defensive (be it sometimes violent) ideology related to the fears and anxieties of lower class or middle class people confronted with the unpredictabilities and incomprehensibilities of a new global economy and culture. Depending on the specific political and economic conditions and power relations this nationalism can take on different shapes: from the 'soft' forms of defending the national welfare state against supranational interference (see for instance the Dutch Socialist Party) to extreme xenophobic and racist forms like those of the Greek neo-Nazi's, or to intermediary forms like those of the 'Real Fins' or the Flemish N-VA.

The interesting common characteristic of all these new forms of nationalism is that they all depend on the construction of two related oppositions: that between the nation and the outside world (global economy, EU, immigration) on the one hand, and the opposition between authen-

ticity and artificiality on the other – most notably in the construction of an opposition between an authentic voice of the nation and the people, and the artificial discourses or narratives or practices of the national political elite. These practices and narratives are discredited for many possible reasons, for instance because they betray national interests by displaying a superficial cosmopolitanism, or because the narratives of national power are almost inherently experienced as ‘fake’ or ‘false theatre’, or as expressions of elitist disdain for ordinary feelings of national pride.

A simple discourse analysis of the ways in which this dialectics of authenticity and artificiality is operating in the narratives and practices of the new nationalism will already be very helpful in understanding the historical significance of these movements, and can also help to say something more about the directions it may take. But to be able to develop a critical theoretical perspective on these movements and the historical constellation by which they are produced, much more is needed. And when we want to avoid the traditional pitfall of Critical Theory that inevitably seems to fall back on a simple Enlightenment naturalism and humanism and always creates the one or other absolute opposition between truth and illusion, then we will have to develop a theoretical perspective that takes what we might call the truth effects of this new nationalism seriously. Moreover: we will have to be able to develop a critical historical view on the ways in which the dialectics of authenticity and artificiality itself came into being and developed itself in the course of modern history.

## Culturalization as growing artificiality

Let’s go back now to the idea of an encompassing culturalization of contemporary social life and politics. This culturalization might be reconstructed as the product of a rapid increase of the artificiality of social life and relations. This can be reinterpreted as the experience of the growing complexity of social relations due to institutional, scientific and technological forces that have deeply penetrated everyday living conditions. The

interesting thing is that this increase of artificiality went hand-in-hand with a parallel increase of the importance of the value of authenticity in everyday life. Traditionally this resulted in a critical theoretical opposition between the alienating power of technology and the importance of authentic human experience, whereas now, thanks to the linguistic and constructivist turn, we can study the ways in which different technologies and media enable specific constructions of identity and authenticity. Postmodernist versions of constructivism celebrated or criticized the total loss of identity or authenticity, but this was nothing more or better than the simple reversal of the traditional dialectics of truth and illusion of Critical Theory. So, to give just two examples of this postmodernist attitude, in the 1980s Jean Baudrillard described the mediatised consumer society (artificiality!) as a *hyper-reality* by exaggerating the illusory dimensions of consumerism and of the imagery of modern mass media (Baudrillard 1983). And likewise a decade later architect and theorist Rem Koolhaas celebrated the complete artificiality of global urban development by comparing it with the studio lots of a Hollywood movie (Koolhaas & Mau 1995, 1250). Both positions easily ended up with the diagnosis of the impossibility or superfluousness of criticism, in the case of Baudrillard because criticism had become impossible in a completely hyper-real reality, and in the case of Koolhaas because criticism unnecessarily called for something redundant like having an identity.

The desperate fatalism of Baudrillard and the cynical opportunism of Koolhaas are two sides of the same coin: they both reflect a postmodern nihilism that is parasitical of the correct acknowledgement of the growing artificiality of social life and relations, but they both ignore the fact that the growing search for identity and authenticity is itself a product of this artificiality, or overlook the fact that everything in society and culture seems to be the product of conscious design and technological manipulation. In fact what they do is essentialize the notion of construction and of constructability. They both suggest that it is possible to construct a society, a city or a collective identity at will, and by doing this they simply repeat the *grands récits*, the meta-narratives or ideologies of modernity; in the case of Baudrillard the ideology of a totally administered society (Das Ganze ist das Unwahre), in the case of Koolhaas the ideology of the *invisible hand*, or of the liberating and creative power of the free market,

which can produce and destroy identities at will.

Instead of celebrating or dismissing the consequences of this growing artificiality, we'd better study the different ways in which politics, science, technology or commerce have succeeded in constructing or designing our individual and collective identities, and how by doing so have created or recreated the claims we can make on authenticity – *and* to come up with a provisional description of what authenticity is about. This provisional description of authenticity might be that authenticity always refers to a desire and a specific image of being really what we are or want to be, of feeling self-confident or in tune with our environment and community. This provisional description explicitly claims *not* to be a definition of authenticity, but collects several recurrent themes and notions that surface in discourses defending authenticity against what is experienced or perceived as (too) artificial in politics, society or culture. And it is important to note that discourses defending or asking for authenticity can be found abundantly in political and commercial, as well as cultural or artistic, circles. So, the 'Real Fins' defend a supposedly authentic Finish identity, the Italian Slow Food Movement defends 'authentic' food (local, ecologically trustworthy, based on small-scale production), several so-called independent music scenes defend 'authentic' musical styles, most of the time referring to local or regional traditions, but without denying modern technology or electric instruments, whereas commercial advertising of large malls present several of their products as 'authentic' (olive oil, bread, meat, etc.), suggesting that these products are 'hand-made' or 'without fake ingredients'. These examples testify to the fact that authenticity has many faces *and* that it plays a rather dominant role in contemporary political, commercial and cultural discourses. And thirdly, this shows that claims of authenticity can be related to extremely 'artificial' practices like industrial production and large-scale commercial distribution, and can actually be produced by them.

This leads to three preliminary conclusions. First of all, although the essentialist picture of an absolute opposition between authenticity and artificiality can no longer be convincing, authenticity itself (as value, as image, as 'real fiction') remains at the heart of our contemporary cultural reality. Second, the constructivist 'deconstruction' of absolutist concep-

tions of truth, reality or authenticity, although correct, will not be very helpful in understanding why and how the quest for authenticity (or 'realness', or 'trustfulness') has become a core issue more than ever before. Third, any attempt to critically assess the ways in which the desire for authenticity works will in the long run be confronted with the question of *how authentic* it itself actually is. Theory, if effective and trustworthy, *and* (self)critical, cannot avoid addressing this question. I'll turn to the dialectics of authenticity and artificiality now, and connect it to the issue of culturalization and the rise of populist nationalism afterwards.

## Artificial authenticity versus authentic artificiality

The first thing we must be able to understand is why artificiality in fact generates authenticity. Artificiality can be represented as a chain of related practices all referring to the fact that they are consciously performed, that they embody specialized knowledge, and finally that they change, translate or manipulate former practices that lack most of these characteristics and therefore are experienced or remembered as more or less 'spontaneous' or 'natural'. Here we dispose of a huge body of historical and anthropological knowledge that bears witness to a long chain of dialectical encounters between artificiality and authenticity. To give just a few relevant examples: in a series of novels and essays the British author John Berger documented the final stages of what he called 'a whole way of life', referring to the decay and disappearance of traditional farming and country life in France at the end of the twentieth century (Berger 1987). The way he documented this disappearance was not nostalgic in any way, but wanted to be a testimony of exactly that: a disappearance of a whole way of life, and with that a whole collective identity. By doing so he in fact facilitated the possibility of a comparison, and that comparison inevitably evoked the dialectics of authenticity and artificiality. The same happens in the work of anthropologist Marc Augé on what he called 'supermodernity' (Augé 1995). Supermodernity refers to technological developments in the second half of the twentieth century that according to Augé created a new spatial reality, that of so-called 'non-places', by which he refers to high-tech environments that are designed to enable and enhance mo-

bility, transfer and speed, especially airports, railway stations, highways, parking lots, et cetera. By using the concept of ‘non-places’ Augé deliberately evokes the dialectics of artificiality (non-places) and authenticity (places), and provokes a debate on the specific characteristics of these spaces.

Both examples at the same time clarify one of the most important aspects of the dialectics of authenticity and artificiality: they articulate a certain balance or imbalance between continuity and change. Since identity as a concept presupposes what the French philosopher Henri Bergson called *durée*, i.e. a certain durability in the midst of historical changes and transformations, we can now formulate a provisional normative criterion by which we can evaluate the dialectics of authenticity and artificiality. This can be exemplified by referring to the case of plastic surgery. Plastic surgery has become an almost everyday practice for fighting the effects of ageing or to correct physical defects or abnormalities, especially facial defects. In fighting the effects of ageing plastic surgery tries to realize the continuity of a specific facial and therefore individual identity. At the same time it risks disrupting the continuous process of ageing. While artificially trying to maintain what is seen as an authentic identity, the authenticity of the ageing of that same identity is disrupted, its ‘*durée*’ is broken. Without theorizing we all know why the face of Cher is so uncanny, but we know at the same time that plastic surgery may help people to feel more self-confident, and therefore act more authentically. So artificiality sometimes can support or even enhance authenticity, i.e. when it supports self-confidence. It can also destroy self-confidence, when it reduces the individual to a non-identity, just like Augé’s non-places. This is all yet too simple, but when we apply these provisional conclusions to the case of new forms of nationalism, we can probably come up with some interesting new perspectives.

Without claiming to be able to come up with an encompassing and wholly satisfying theoretical account of authenticity, we at least can relate our sense of authenticity to the impact of artificial interventions on the *durée* or on the continuity of our everyday experience. It is important to realize that ‘*durée*’ does not imply unchanging, invariable experience, but presupposes the heterogeneity of our experience; only through heteroge-

neity is a sense of identity and of ‘really lived time’ – of an uninterrupted flow of past, present and future – possible. Continuity (and identity) is experienced *through* discontinuities. In that sense artificial interventions in the *durée* cannot be absolute; they may destroy certain specific durabilities, but cannot destroy durability per se. Koolhaas can compare high modern high-rise urban architecture with the fleeting and fake character of a film set, but only because even a film set – or maybe: especially a film set – is reminiscent of ‘authentic’ architecture. To celebrate *fake* while at the same time ridiculing the quest for an ‘authentic’ identity in fact dismisses the conceptual connectedness of authenticity and artificiality: not only is the growing need for authenticity directly related to the increase of ‘artificial’ interventions in social life, but next to that the promise of (a return to) authenticity also presupposes a certain belief or hope that a *better* design of that life, *another* artificial intervention, might restore our authentic self as a collective or as an individual. After World War II the radical politics of modernization of society and culture, that changed the western world at unprecedented speed, hardly met with complaints of people who saw their identity threatened, simply because many could *identify* with the new world of change and speed, or in other words: because many could adopt a *modernist* identity (See a.o. Berman 1982).

Often (not always) this radical modernization was presented as *re-*constructing, *re-*building society, the nation, et cetera. In the Netherlands the early post-war period (the 1950s) is referred to as the era of ‘Wederopbouw’ (rebuilding); modernization did not just mean radical change, it also integrated the politics of change in a vocabulary and imagery of a formerly united nation, which could be re-united thanks to modernization. This may also explain why present-day nationalist populism often evokes images and notions from that era as representing what ‘we, the people’ or ‘we, the nation’ really stand for. This also testifies to the problem of present-day nationalist populism: it remains purely defensive, without being able to integrate the imagery of authentic nationhood represented by the 1950s into a future-oriented discourse that can tackle the new threats of globalization; globalization presents itself as the latest issue of modernization, but it fails to address the issue of continuity, of durability in a convincing way, it cannot integrate the everyday continuity of existing local or national identities into a new and hopeful discourse, or it

does so only in a very poor or defective manner. The most striking example here may be India: in the early post-war and post-colonial period Nehru and his party succeeded to a considerable extent in uniting the Indians into a new democratic nation-state, *while* at the same time giving India an important new role in world politics as one of the proponents of the so-called Non-Aligned Movement (of countries that were not part of one of the two ideological blocs of western capitalism or Soviet communism). Nowadays, in the era of globalization, national politics in India taps into the challenges of the neoliberal ‘free market’ discourse by promoting India as a crucial part of the new and successful BRIC-countries, but without being able to distribute this success nationwide. As a reaction to this failure the nationalist Hindu party (Bharatiya Janata Party) could successfully develop a nationalist identity-politics based on the imagery of India as a purely Hindu nation (*against* the role and presence of Muslims in India). One may dismiss Hindu nationalism as defensive, xenophobic and sometimes even racist (which is certainly correct), but one could also try to analyse how and why this nationalism could successfully construct the imagined community of Hindus as the authentic core of Indian nationhood, while at the same time critically assessing the way in which this nationalism tends to endanger the fragile continuity of the Indian nation-state. Instead of simply repeating the dialectics of authenticity and artificiality, we then can compare the different claims that are made to (in this case Indian) authenticity, relate them to the *durée* (the heterogeneous continuity) of the Indian nation-state, and develop a critical assessment of the claims of populist nationalism. Perhaps we can then even come up with alternative forms of populism and/or nationalism that take into account the serious problem of the way Indian policy taps into, and at the same time is affected by, neoliberal global market policies.

## Towards a critical populism

Populist nationalism in many different guises is one of the strongest political movements worldwide at the moment, from the Tea Party in the USA to the aforementioned aggressive Hindu nationalism in India, and from the Front National in France to the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) in

the Netherlands. They all claim to defend an authentic nation-state, sometimes based on a mix of ethnic and religious arguments, (like the Hindu party in India), sometimes on a mixture of constitutional pride and religion, as in the case of the Tea Party. They all see the nation-state as threatened by forces emanating from outside, something that resembles earlier forms of populist nationalism. But unprecedentedly these feelings are strengthened by a growing sense of complexity and unintelligibility of global political and economic relations, exemplified by a growing distrust of national governments – on the one hand because their powerlessness has become all too evident, and on the other because they seem to represent both a superficial cosmopolitanism and an isolated oligarchic elitism at the same time. At the moment when normally elected governments are replaced by technocrats and bankers to manage an economic crisis, this perception of an artificial power neglecting the authentic nation-state becomes all the more acute. And that can explain why politics and social relations have been culturalized to such an enormous extent, with the dialectics of authenticity and artificiality as a driving force: populist nationalism defends what it feels to be a genuine continuity of authentic nationhood against the powers of a culture of artificiality: the EU, global finance, foreign labour, et cetera. Of course it is easy to dismiss these claims to an authentic national identity, but such a dismissal misses the fact that claims like these are not based on ideological or intellectual positions and programs, but on the fragile continuity of specific ways of doing and living that normally remain unrepresented simply because they are generally experienced as self-evident and sometimes even pre-discursive. Self-evident of course not in the naturalistic sense, but as the product of everyday practices, traditions and rituals that tend to remain under the level of ideological explicitness. This is exactly the reason why Anderson proposes to treat nationalism ‘as if it belonged with “kinship” and “religion”, rather than with (ideologies like, RB) “liberalism” or “fascism”’ (Anderson, 2000, 5). Here again the subtleties of ethnographic research may be needed to unravel the peculiarities of these ways of doing, without which our populist nationalist politicians would be nowhere. That is why too much stress on the performative and constructive efforts of populist politics itself somewhat misses the point; of course, the people they refer to do not exist, they only come into being as a result of populist framing. But this framing only works if it is able to put forward, isolate and



strengthen already existing feelings of cultural isolation, negligence and powerlessness, i.e. those of an already existing fragility of the *durability* of everyday cultural practices and collective identity.

The fact that everything is culturalized, i.e. that almost all social and political issues are addressed in a cultural form nowadays, as issues of identity, nationhood or authenticity, does not automatically mean that we should take these cultural claims at face value. That something is claimed to be authentic should not seduce us into accepting this claim as legitimate, but all the more it should not invite us to dismiss it as naïve essentialism. In a culture completely based on technological artificiality being authentic has lost its Romantic aura of simplicity, but it has maintained and even strengthened its relation with self-confidence and individual or collective autonomy.

## The art(ificiality) of authenticity

The inaugural speech of Barack Obama; the confession of Lance Armstrong on the couch with Oprah: *mediatised* (artificial) expressions of authenticity have become part and parcel of our everyday cultural experience; we sometimes can enjoy extreme performances of artificiality as extremely authentic. Millions loved the *fake authenticity* of Pim Fortuyn. Modern culture in the early twenty-first century is completely at home with the idea of *the making (the fictionality)* of an authentic identity, and seems to be very able to evaluate its successes and failures. But it is also still haunted by the spectres of absolutist identities it itself produced (fascism, national socialism and Stalinism), and therefore cannot really cope with the ‘fundamentalists’ of present-day politics, be they Muslims or orthodox Christians and Jews, or radical nationalists. There seems to exist an unbridgeable gap between the belief that you can become (*make yourself to be*) real or authentic, and the belief that you (and only you) *are* real or authentic. But this gap, or at least its unbridgeability, is questioned time and again by the way all these so-called fundamentalists participate in the same global, commercial and artificial practices and enterprises that we take for granted. To be ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ (or should I now say ‘cool?’)

seems to be definitive of being able to participate and feel self-confident in the twenty-first century world, its politics and culture. Depending on your initial position, becoming ‘authentic’ may imply a maximum of artificiality or the complete opposite. Authenticity and artificiality are the extreme poles within a continuum. But at the same time they can no longer be constructed as absolute opposites.

Being a nationalist, operating as a populist advocating notions of a serious national tradition, opposing complex transnational or supranational institutions *just because* you don’t understand what they represent: that, in a sense, sums up what our present collective condition is all about, notwithstanding what our specialists and scholars (especially our economists or medical doctors) have to say about it all. Moreover, this means our present condition is constantly haunted by that fateful dialectics generated by authenticity and artificiality. We should not *study* that dialectics, or to be more specific: we should not *just* study that dialectics, we should also take a stance in it – and attempt to become artists of authenticity.

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