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Personalisation and the Libertarian Roots of Populism

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Abstract: This article seeks to lay bare the connection between personalisation in digital media and populism. Underpinning both the technology and the political ideology is a shared promise. They offer similar answers to the epistemological and methodological questions: "what is the true will of (the) people?", and "how to tap into it?". Both personalisation and populism assume that modern, reflexive, critical subjectivity has veiled this authentic will, and both offer alternative routes to salvage it and bring it to the fore of individual and political life. Theoretically, I follow the seminal work of Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, highlighting the link between two seemingly autonomous discourses: technical/scientific, on the other hand, and political, in the other hand. The justification for one, they show, resonates the other. Empirically, I focus on the discourse of personalisation in the cultural field, and show how it promises to democratise Culture (capital C) – as a unified, hierarchical, to-down, elitist, and shared social field – by giving users the technological means to tap into their real wants and desires. The promise encapsulated in personalisation – a technological assemblage of digital platforms, big data, and algorithms – echoes the anti-elitist sentiment of populist ideology.

Keywords: personalisation, digital media, algorithms, populism, tech oligarchy

1. Spot the Difference: Trump and the Tech-Oligarchs

The second inauguration of President Donald Trump in January 2025 featured quite an unusual group of invitees. At the very front raw of the stage, next to the incoming president, stood the elite of the global hi-tech industry: Elon Musk (Tesla), Mark Zuckerberg (Meta), Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Shou Zi Chew (Tiktok), Tim Cook (Apple), Sam Altman (OpenAI), and Sunder Pichai (Alphabet). Each also contributed U$1 million to the celebration. Uber and Microsoft made the same contribution, although their CEOs did not attend the event.

What were these tech giants doing there besides Trump? Presumably, it's hard to imagine a more striking contrast between the worldview of this incoming administration and this technological elite. Trump is arguably the quintessential symbol of contemporary populism. A partial list of the terms used in the American and global public sphere to refer to Trump include: incompetent, arrogant, idiot, egotistical, ignorant, racist, asshole, narcissistic[1], dark[2], fascist[3], hypocrite[4], and pathological liar[5]. Trump not only embodies an anti-scientific, anti-intellectual populist worldview, mired with misogyny, bullying, and xenophobia. His policies, already in his first term,

[1] https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/incompetent-strong-egotistical-words-people-describe-trump/story?id=50178088&utm_source=chatgpt.com
[2] https://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/trump-convention-speech-media-226010?utm_source=chatgpt.com
[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Trump_and_fascism?utm_source=chatgpt.com
[4] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/mar/04/trump-hypocrisy?utm_source=chatgpt.com
[5] https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/06/donald-trump-brings-back-the-default-talk/488270/

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and much more forcefully in the first months of his second term, have underscored his commitment to reshape America and the world in his own image.

The digital elite represents in many respect the complete opposite of Trump. It is socially and culturally liberal, committed to promoting science and knowledge, it is pro-choice and pro-LGBTQ, multi-cultural, and many of its employees – including at highest echelons – are immigrants. It is located – historically, symbolically, and to a large extent practically – in San Francisco, California, the crucible of our digital age, and one of the epitomes of liberal ideology. California and San Francisco are consistently ranked as the most liberal state and city in the United States[6].

In light of this contrast, the above question becomes even more poignant: what the hell were they doing there next to Trump? One possible answer is that these bleeding-heart liberals have just lost their mind, or actually really converted: they realised that the values of equality, openness, and tolerance have failed and are now loyal believers in Trump's MAGA-ideology.

Another, perhaps more plausible hypothesis is that these people are cold-blooded and cynical. As businessmen, after all, they are committed to the financial interest of their shareholders, not the wellbeing of society at large. Their support for Trump is superficial, calculated, and self-interested. In other words, they know which side their bread is buttered on. There is a third possibility, which I'd like to propose: that these people, or the social group of which they are part, are the ones that have been buttering that side of the bread for decades.

In this short essay I'd like to call attention to the roots of contemporary populism and its articulation in technological discourse. I suggest that Californian libertarianism (Barbrook and Cameron 1996) – the fertile ideological grounds on which the Internet was imagined as a utopia, and which oriented its social and material construction (Turner 2006) – bare the seeds for the populist fruits we are now reaping in global politics. My argument, however, is neither causal nor historical. Instead, I'd like to put forth a psycho-social argument concerning populism not as a form of governance, but as a cultural form and a structure of feelings, and connect it to digital technology. As such, I focus on one characteristic of populism: its anti-elitist, anti-hierarchical, and anti-establishment streak, as well as its anti-critical sentiment and its relations to the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al. 1950/2019). This sentiment, or ideological streak, is epitomised in one of the central promises of digital media: personalisation. I am refering to "promises", since technology is first and foremost ideological, promising to free us from pain, misery, death, and more mundane troubles, and make our life better. To be compelling and draw legitimacy and resources, technology needs to make a convincing case for its promise to soothe social ills.

2. Ways of Knowing in Science and Politics

My argument connects two systems of knowledge. On the one hand, a techno-scientific system for deciphering the will of people, comprised of big data and algorithms. It is conceived, built, operated, and culturally promoted by the tech industry, data scientists, programmers, engineers, and tech-gurus. On the other hand, a political

[6] https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/most-liberal-states ; https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2014/08/08/chart-of-the-week-the-most-liberal-and-conservative-big-cities/?gad_source=1&gbraid=0AAAAA-ddO9FFlGZWc-2cm7teAOZKfVo1T&gclid=Cj0KCQjw8cHABhC-ARIsAJnY12yyr45Tza2WvGw56spiAeFkt1fd74bxIO8Km6_XRPJf_w-UIfxcfW4aAm1VEALw_wcB

ideology, upheld and promoted by political parties and leader, pundits, journalists, and citizens. The last few decades have seen science and technology studies problematising the modernist claim à la Weber that these social sphere – science/technology and politics – developed their own autonomous rationality, and uncovered the intricate relations between them. Such a critique has received one its most eloquent articulations in the work of Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, especially the book *Leviathan and the Air-Pump* (Shapin and Schaffer 1985). Shapin and Schaffer demonstrate how the seemingly technical debate between Boyle and Hobbes about air-pump experiments was deeply intertwined with their divergent political philosophies. At the heart of this debate are epistemological questions concerning what makes a scientific fact, with Boyle taking an empiricist approach while Hobbes upholding idealism. But as Shapin and Schaffer argue, their divergent scientific epistemology closely echoed their political disposition.

Boyle's experimental approach embraced three principles that aligned with constitutional monarchy. First is the idea that authority is distributed. Boyle advocated for a community of witnesses and experimenters who collectively verified knowledge claims. This mirrored the distributed power in constitutional governance where authority is shared among different institutions. Second is the notion that knowledge is not absolute but based on agreement. Boyle accepted that experimental knowledge was probabilistic and required ongoing validation by the scientific community. This paralleled the compromise-oriented nature of constitutional politics. Third, Boyle upheld the idea that a scientific community should operate on principles of voluntary association and gentlemanly codes of conduct, not centralised authority. Similar to how constitutional governance manages disagreement, members of such an association could disagree while maintaining civility.

In contrast to these principles of distributed authority, probabilistic knowledge, and voluntary association as foundations of science and politics, Hobbes's approach reflected his absolutist political philosophy. First, Hobbes distrusted knowledge claims that couldn't be derived from first principles using deductive reasoning. He feared that experimental knowledge, dependent on witnesses and consensus, would lead to social disorder – just as he believed divided political authority led to civil war. Second, Hobbes sought absolute, indisputable knowledge that wouldn't be subject to debate. This mirrored his political vision where the sovereign's authority must be absolute and unquestioned. Third, Hobbes rejected invisible causes that couldn't be directly observed (such as Boyle's claims about vacuum and air pressure). Similarly, he rejected appealing to invisible authorities (like divine right) in politics.

What appears to be a technical disagreement about air-pumps and scientific evidence, then, was actually embedded in fundamentally different visions of social and political order. "Solutions to the problem of knowledge", they conclude, "are solutions to the problem of social order" (Shapin and Schaffer 1985, 332). The experimental method that eventually triumphed – that advocated by Boyle – wasn't just a scientific advancement but represented a particular social arrangement that aligned with the emerging political order in Restoration England.

A similar conclusion concerning the link between two seemingly disparate discourses is intimated by Otto Mayr (1986). His work (incidentally, published just one year after Shapin and Schaffer's), concerns the affinity between a presumably objective, practical, and technical technology discourse (rather than a purely scientific one), and a political discourse, focused on social order. Mayr examines the discourse on the mechanical clock (and other automata) in 17th through 19th centuries Europe, and the role that it played as a metaphor in the political discourse of the day, a

"projection" (Heffernan 2000) through which social and political transformations were deliberated (Sturken and Thomas 2004). The clock came to serve as a metaphor for two conflicting political doctrines. In the European continent, the mechanical structure and operation of the clock confirmed, in the eyes of politically conservatives, the neutrality and superiority of an authoritarian conception of order. Political order, like the regularities and order produced by the clock, was superior because it had a (watch) maker. The watch maker served as a metaphor for God as the ultimate source of authority and confirmed the advantage of an authoritarian sovereign.

In contrast, across the Canal, the metaphor of the clock as a vindication for authority was forcefully rejected. In England, where liberalism was experimented with in political life, the clock came to play a central role in affirming the liberal idea of a spontaneous, self-regulated social order. Key liberal thinkers, such as Adam Smith and David Hume, found in the automatic, self-regulated operation of the clock the material affirmation for the spontaneous and distributed operation of the market, which they could only have envisioned in the abstract (Mayr 1986, chapter 10). For both Smith and Hume, it was liberty, supported by spontaneous order, not authority, that was affirmed by the clocks.

Drawing on this perspective, I would like to lay bare the affinity between personalisation as a socio-technical assemblage, and the political ideology of populism. Compared with the seminal work I mentioned above, my aim here is much more modest, and limited in two important ways. First, I focus on populism and only go very briefly over the affinity of personalisation with the liberal ideals of individualisation and democratisation, as this affinity has always been and still is expressively overt. And second, I do not explore populism in general, but focus merely on one of its ideological strands: it's anti-intellectual, anti-elitist impulse.

3. Personalisation and Populism

Personalisation is the populist promise *par excellence*, and it is double: to give (the) people what they want (as individuals and as a collective), and to provide the tools with which to automatically gauge the wants of (the) people – continuously, dynamically, and in real-time. Personalisation is the idea and practice of customising the ecosystem (of material, informational, and service artifacts) to each individual. It is carried out through media platforms that monitor the data created advertently and inadvertently by users, rendering these data into knowledge about users' wants with the help of algorithmic systems, and orient their actions accordingly. Such assemblage is tantamount to a cybernetic system, where input constantly changes its output.

At the overt level, the discourse on personalisation perpetuates the core promise of the Internet since its inception to decentralise and network social structures, thus de-hierarchising and democratising social relations. No wonder, then, that the discourse on personalisation, as ends and as means, starts to pick up in the mid-1990s, in connection with the rise of the Internet[7]. Applied to the cultural field, for example, personalisation promises to undo Culture as such – a singular system comprised of hierarchies and of power differentials between producers and consumers; a system where intermediaries, curators, and editors are king. In its place, personalisation seeks to constitute a field which is individualised and distributed to such an extent that it would be hard to speak of Culture as a singular social institution. Put more concretely:

[7] An Ngram search for "personalisation" sees the terms shoots up five-fold from 1995 to 2020. https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=personalization&year_start=1800&year_end=2022&corpus=en&smoothing=3.

personalisation promises to dismantle the power of elites to decide for the people what to watch on TV, and what news are fit to print in the paper. This resonates the anti-elitist critique in populist ideology, which challenges the notion that the elite holds an epistemic superiority over the people, and can therefor decree what the appropriate Culture is, in a way that minimises the worth of the people, even scorns it.

This populist sentiment emerged also in the left critique of the media. As the culture industry was reaching its apex at the second half of the 20th century – with television, movies, and magazines becoming the hallmarks of popular culture – emerges also its most radical critique. Notable signposts being the Frankfurt School (particularly the work of Adorno on the culture industry) and the British school of Cultural Studies (particularly the work of Stuart Hall at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies). The argument was more of less this: The mass media is characterised by a uni-directional, hierarchical structure; the production of content is highly concentrated, and then distributed (or broadcasted) to the masses. Contrary to what the term "popular culture" suggests – culture arising bottom-up, created from the lifeworld of the populace – it is in fact engineered by a capitalist elite which strives to mould the populace. Culture is a vehicle for control of the elite over the people.

This populist critique at one and the same time constructs the audience of the culture industry as passive and docile, duped by the culture industry, and seeks to reassert the audience as an active, creative subject. It is an interpretive subject, able to not only charge cultural artifacts with new meanings, which were not designated by their producers, but also subvert these designated meanings, and offer complete opposite interpretations. Even more, it could become an active cultural agent and create artifacts by using technologies such as still cameras, camcorders, and take recorders, and with the aid of conceptual tools such as pastiche, collages, and bricolage. Increasingly, the barrier for participating in culture is distribution. And this is where the Internet emerges with populist promises of flattening hierarchies, de-mediation, and prosumption (productive consumption).

Web 1.0, as it would be called retrospectively, was first and foremost a promise for choice. No longer consuming cultural artifacts shoved down our throats but having a personal power to decide what to watch. In that sense, the Internet expanded quantitatively the trend of multi-channel electronic media. This promise makes a quantum leap with Web 2.0 with the ability of regular people, literally of "the people", to become cultural producers.

All that is happening at the overt level of the discourse. But there is a more covert, psycho-social level which I wish to highlight. However we might feel about the notion of having a technology that gives each and every one what she wants, this fantasy brings up some very disturbing questions: What does it mean "to want"? Where can we locate human want? And how can we gauge it? In order to uncover the answers to these questions in the dominant digital discourse (Fisher 2010), and perhaps tap the psycho-social substrata of the promise for personalisation, I'd like to use a statement by Reed Hastings, the CEO of Netflix. In a Las Vegas consumer-electronics show in 2016, Hastings announced: "One day we hope to get so good at suggestions that we're able to show you exactly the right film or TV show for your mood when you turn on Netflix" (The Economist 2017). Being at the position he holds, and speaking publicly, Hastings is not just pondering but seeks to resonate some deep desire of consumers. But what is this desire? Why might his promise be attractive? Or, in other words, what is The Political Unconscious (Jameson 1982) that Hastings seeks to invoke when promising people that they would not need to decide which movie to watch, but yield

to a machine which would know what they would have wanted had they bothered wanting.

At the technical, superficial level, Hastings seems to offer a solution to the problem of excessive information, what Mark Andrejevic (2013) calls “infoglut”. Where in the past we had a cabinet of one hundred vinyl records, we now have access to virtually every music ever recorded and distributed. And where we used to read a newspaper with clear boundaries, which signalled “that is all the news you need to read today” (and even organised news items according to importance), we now have access to an ocean of news information from virtually endless sources. Navigating these deep waters requires the use of algorithmic devices that would help us pick the content which suits our interests and wants, from recommendation engines to algorithmic curation.

But this technological solutionism does not account for the whole gamut of meaning underlined in Hastings’ statement. Beyond it, I would like to propose, lies also a populist undertone which Hastings resonates: a desire to undo hierarchical institutions, social institutions and norms, and return to a purer, rawer conception of “the will of the people” – decision-making without justification, carried out by machines. Hastings’ promise resonates a desire to eliminate the space between wanting as simple, given, impulsive, immediate and debased, located between Eros and Thanatos, and wanting as the culmination of a cognitive, reflexive, mediated, and reasoned activity, where simple wants are critiqued and judged by reason before translated into decision and action. The distinction between these two understandings of human wants is historical, and has widened with the Enlightenment. To a large extent, the project of the Enlightenment has been cultivating the latter, more refined and elaborate, form of want by way of developing reason.

We might read Hastings’ statement, then, as a promise to unwind the stress of the liberal subject through personalisation, a fantasy to arrive at the heart of human want via a route that bypasses reason; to help people get what they want without the burden of needing to arriving at this want and articulating it. Being a liberal subject is indeed burdensome: a self in charge of knowing herself, articulating her wants, and accepting responsibility for her decisions. Liberal ideology sees in the will of the individual the ultimate justification for private actions and the basis for social order. Indeed, the private will underlines the most cherished institutions of liberalism: the capitalist market, democracy, even interpersonal relations. Indeed, the “will of the people” is ultimately the aggregated will of individuals.

At the same time, this notion of individual will as true, authentic, and free, has been, from its very inception, scrutinised and critiqued. Indeed, the very Enlightenment which sought to freedom as an ideal, also helped uncover the extent to which individual will can be a product of coercion coming from both external and internal forces, rather than the articulation of freedom.

In fact, this problematisation of individual will – which grew out of the Enlightenment – was precisely among the catalysts that opened up a new space within the self, where even our will became subject to reflection and critique. This puts yet another burden and stress on the individual. Not only does its actions and very being needed to be reasoned, but they were also continuously subject to self-critique with the purpose of self-correction and self-improvement. In both the discourse on personalisation and that of populism this burden is deemed to be despicable, a manifestation of inhibition and a bleeding-heart mentality, which are to be rid of. One of the epitomes of the populist will to rid our culture of this critical, reflexive space is the “menosphere”, an ecosystem of influencers, podcasters, and bloggers who seek to articulate what people (“men”, “Americans”, “wives”, etc.) really want, that is, after they are stripped off of all niceties

and hypocrisy. The project promoted by Jo Rogan, for example, one of the most prominent figures in the menosphere, is not simply to return to an old model of masculinity, but in a deeper sense, to revoke the very possibility that another authentic masculinity is at all possible.

The attraction of complete personalisation – promised by Hastings, and to a lesser degree already practiced in all our digital platforms – can be attributed not only to the fact that it is based on a technology which knows our will; instead, this technology redefines what will is, in a way that strips it of its complexity and contradictions, a technology which knows how to tap into our will before our will is corrupted by reflexivity and critique. Algorithmic devices – underlining personalisation – promise to contract that space where wants are rendered from automatic and given into a work-in-progress, subject to critique and reflexive deliberation. They tap into wants through data – presumed to be objective, unbiased, devoid of theories and theologies concerning what humans are. And most importantly: devoid of the interference of our own subjectivity.

4. Conclusion

At the heart of this article is the technological assemblage which allows for personalisation on digital media. It is comprised of media platforms, big data centres, algorithms, and many more actants which ultimately help capture users' data, translate it into knowledge about them, and provide them with appropriate content. My argument draws on a long lineage of research into the political orientations of technology, its affinity with particular social and political orders rather than others (Winner 1977). Specifically, I have sought to link personalisation technology with populism by laying bare their shared ideological underpinnings, thus thinking about the discourse on technology as a projection of political concerns (Sturken and Thomas 2004). This I have tried to achieve through the work of Shapin and Schaffer (1985).

Shapin and Schaffer (1985) link technology and politics through their shared epistemology. They suggest a theoretical where epistemology is seen as a constellation of ideas and practices about truth and reality that underpin not just scientific endeavours but political projects as well. How scientific facts are established becomes a blueprint for constructing truths in the public sphere as well. The debate between Boyle and Hobbes, then, was as much political as it was scientific, offering "competing, coproduced imaginations of natural and social orders" (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 11). Both men were concerned with the question of authority in science and in politics, and "Implicated … in these two men's quarrels was the emergence of a democratic public sphere in which authority would depend on experimentally verifiable truths, observable in principle by everyone, rather than on declarations from an inaccessible central authority such as the monarch" (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 11).

Taking my cue from Shapin and Schaffer's seminal work, I sought to show how personalisation – as a technical and technological project – can be associated with the political project of populism, particularly its disdain for an elitist, sophisticated, multi-layered conception of the self as reflexive and critical. An anti-elitist ideology of indignation, protesting hierarchies of knowledge and taste, encountered a technological system which allows "the people" to bypass not just the high-brow elites who think they know better what's best for the people, but also bypass their own inhibitions and self-critique. An algorithmic system which promises to distil the real, authentic wants of each individual by mathematically rendering the digital dust she leaves behind. Epistemologically, then, personalisation technology and populist

ideology are related through how they conceptualise (explicitly and implicitly) what will is and how to gauge it.

As a final remark, it's important to note that this promise carries two inherent paradoxes. Firstly, while techno-populism opposes experts, elites, bureaucracy, and the very idea of epistemic superiority, it is based on a new type of algorithmic expertise, data science, and a whole array of techno-bureaucrats. The carriers of this expertise are precisely the tech-oligarchs that adorned and front row of the stage in Trump's inauguration ceremony. Recall the new Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) – inaugurated and headed by Elon Musk – using digital platforms, big data archives, and data science, in order to govern. Not only are they symbols of personalisation, but they are also the owners of the enormous technological systems which allow personalisation. And secondly, while personalisation promises to afford more individuality, it also drains it from its substantive qualities, undermining the faculties which allowed an autonomous subject – reflexive, dynamic, reasoned, and critical – to develop and flourish.

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