

A Tale of Two Narratives

Stephen Coleman

INTRODUCTION

Whatever the functional rationale of elections might be as ‘a means of translating the popular will into an elected assembly’ (Butler and Ranney 1992: 7) or as a mechanism for forging ‘connections between the wishes of citizens and the behaviour of policymakers’ (Powell 2000: 14), their social significance exceeds such simple instrumentalism. Beyond facilitating a grand act of quantitative aggregation, elections perform an essential cultural role in legitimising the political order, especially within polities that purport to be democratic. The terms of electoral legitimacy are neither codified nor the same everywhere, but tend to comprise a number of widely acknowledged conditions.

Firstly, elections are public events. Their legitimacy depends not only upon a critical mass of eligible electors participating in them (in some form), but in all those who have the right to vote knowing about them. So, elections cannot be confined to brief periods (usually a single day) or institutional spaces (polling stations) in which voting happens. Electoral legitimacy entails a long period of publicity in which the meaning of the event and the options on offer are framed and made known.

S. Coleman (✉)
University of Leeds, Leeds, UK
e-mail: S.Coleman@leeds.ac.uk

Election campaigns are periods of focused publicity in which key issues and choices are made relevant and connected to the private orbits in which people experience their personal troubles and form their individual aspirations. Election campaigns become democratic when they generate a collective focus of attention upon challenges and dilemmas that might otherwise have remained exclusive and undisclosed. The vibrant buzz that precedes and follows the mechanistic moment of casting votes often says more about elections as politico-cultural projects than the banal statistics of turnout.

Secondly, elections are moments in which publics come together as a sovereign entity, even though they might differ widely in their interests, values and preferences. Through the alchemy of the ballot box, cultural substance is given to the political pronoun, 'We'. Indeed, it may be that, rather than disclosing what is there, within the 'public mind', the function of voting is to construct what is not there: the public itself. In this sense, the social performance does not serve to show what the public thinks, but that there is such a thing as the public. It is a means of conjuring the public into existence, of constructing that which can then be disclosed (Coleman 2013).

In this sense, elections generate, consolidate and affirm civic solidarity: 'We might not agree about what we want, but we agree that there is an "us" that can speak or be spoken for' says the electorate. Without such minimal cultural cohesion, the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) begins to atrophy. Elections not only determine who will run the state, but they sustain the body politic as a plausible domain of belonging.

Thirdly, elections are legitimised by the tangibility of their consequences. Just as an election that nobody knew about or participated in would lack democratic credibility, so an election in which the final moment of significant consequence was the declaration of a winner would be regarded as a rather futile exercise. The victor in an election acquires a mandate to act in certain ways. Failure to do so, or appear to do so, would not only constitute political impotence, but radical cultural failure. In this sense, elections constitute projective historical moments; ephemerally consensual rehearsals in the staging of agonistic democracy.

Since their inception in June 1979, elections to the European Parliament have failed to realise these cultural objectives. As public events, they have been far less conspicuous than national elections and often seen as second order opinion polls on voters' confidence in the performances of national governments. In terms of the coming together

of a European public, these elections have failed to generate the kind of transnational consciousness that could justify the articulation of a European ‘we’. Offered the opportunity to imagine itself as a multinational electorate, most voters have remained uninspired, preferring to regard European election results as national mandates to an external authority rather than a constituent element of a collective polity. In terms of consequences, most European citizens remain uncertain about what the European Parliament does and how it affects them—and those who are familiar with its constitutional role are aware that it possesses neither the power nor legitimacy to act with equivalent decisiveness as national legislatures. For all of these reasons, European elections have taken place in a context of radical tension between the political rationalities of transnational ambition and the conspicuous marginality of mass cultural indifference.

CONTESTED NARRATIVES

The primary focus of this chapter is to explore how elections in general, and the 2014 European parliamentary election in particular, can be understood as events in which rival narratives collide and converge and cultural norms are realised and disrupted. We are interested here not in the conventional political questions of how campaign strategies played out and who voted for what, but the ways in which routine expectations that surround elections are open to radical disjuncture between meaning and reference. In this respect, the analytical approach adopted here explores the ways in which the assumed indexical correspondence between meaning and reference can be discursively unsettled by the situated and reflexive status of political language within practical communication. Rather than being syntactically prescribed, as structuralists would have it, relationships between the meaning and reference of a term such as ‘democratic election’ depend upon situated performance and reflexive interpretation. That is to say, no event possesses an ontological or indexical right to be considered as a democratic election. The work of making it ‘walk and talk’ (Boulton 1968/2014) as a democratic election entails communicative investment and collective interpretation.

Elections can be thought of as ‘storytelling contests’ in which rival actors—politicians, journalists and citizens—compete to tell their stories, inscribe their own agendas and frame the options for possible action (Coleman 2015). This narrative contest is not only between groups of

actors, but within them, with each seeking, more or less explicitly, to determine the plot and influence the denouement. A key question to be addressed in this chapter is what happens when the meaning of an electoral event becomes unsettled; when there is an irreconcilable conflict between contrasting narratives of political reality. To adopt the language of cultural sociology (Alexander 2004: p. 529), we are interested in

the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of the social situation. This meaning may or may not be one to which they themselves consciously adhere; it is the meaning that they, as social actors, consciously or unconsciously wish to have others believe. In order for their display to be effective, actors must offer a plausible performance, one that leads those to whom their actions and gestures are directed to accept their motives and explanations as a reasonable account.

Alexander (2006: 80) refers to such performative felicity as cultural fusion and argues that ‘only if performances achieve fusion can they reinvigorate collective codes’. This applies markedly to elections as cultural events. Only if voters as well as leaders, audiences as well as journalists, and reflexive social beings as well as elite commentators, regard an election as an event likely to generate representative legitimacy can the collective code of constitutional democracy be upheld. Elections are exercises in political fusion. When they succeed, it seems as if they somehow embody the intentions of the represented and maintain the normative scaffolding of democratic governance. When they fail to fuse, they appear to be hollow events or, more dangerously, they are appropriated by latent cultural energies generated by the resentments of misrecognition.

The 2014 European parliamentary election offers us a fascinating opportunity to explore the dynamics of cultural fusion. In this election, two radically different narratives were forced to compete with one another for credibility. On the one hand, both politicians and journalists adhered to a conventional narrative of the election as a predictable event in the cycle of emergent and irresistible transnational democracy. In short, they acted as if everyone knows what to do when a European election comes around: politicians appealing for votes and journalists producing half ‘sacerdotal’ (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995) and half deconstructive accounts of a routine mediated drama, both in

accordance with an historical script predicated upon institutional continuity. The implicit message of this conventional narrative was that ‘This event matters’ and ‘You have a duty to take an interest’. Such messages are part of the standardised script of any electoral contest, in which participation is taken to indicate a form of soft consent. But, as we shall see, it is only successful when there is a critical mass of citizens who are persuaded that these injunctions apply to them. Just as traffic lights only manage risk if all or most drivers and pedestrians believe that there *is* a risk and that obeying the dictates of coloured lights will minimise it, elections only matter if enough citizens believe in the political entity to which they are told they belong.

A second narrative response to the 2014 European election was one of popular scepticism, undoubtedly variant across the member states, but prevalent as an institutional deficit. At the level of publicity, conventional appeals to duty and partisan loyalty found themselves competing with forceful messages suggesting that established political representatives could not be trusted, legislative institutions were timewasting and corrupt and ‘politics as usual’ could not be relied upon to address the profound social challenges emanating from politico-economic turbulence. Such scepticism was not confined to EU politicians, parliaments and political challenges, but there was a strong sense in which Europe became a symbolic focus of disenchantment; a manifestation of all that seemed particularly egregious about institutional politics and the complacency of ‘the Establishment’.

While the performance of the former narrative was framed in terms of determining how best to generate political trust and consent in a globalised era, the performance of the latter counter-narrative was geared to asserting that globalised politics could not be made trustworthy or deserving of mass consent; that its consolidation and durability would inevitably be at the expense of national identity and popular sentiment. While the narrative of political continuity was geared towards realising cultural fusion for the institutions of trans-European governance—a cultural project that had been limping along unsteadily for almost half a century—the counter-narrative of political disenchantment was rather more complex, seeking both to defuse the post-Westphalian narrative and re-fuse a performance of vexed national publics, exasperated by the condescension and inefficiency of globalised elites and eager to assert long-suppressed sovereign claims.

It is not possible in the space of one chapter to analyse this narrative contestation comprehensively. As has become dramatically apparent since the 2014 European election, the simmering dynamics of Euroscepticism were complex and far from susceptible to superficially rationalistic explanation. Instead, the aim of this chapter is to explore critical moments of narrative collision and crisis that occurred during or soon after the revelation of the election results which indicated a popular surge in support for a European counter-narrative. It is in moments of immediate narrative destabilisation such as these that leading broadcasters and elite politicians tend to be explicit about what they believe is at stake. In such moments we can stand close and regard the sweat on the brow of usually confident political performers.

The terms of this narrative crisis sets a framework for the book as a whole, which seeks to cast comparative light upon the unsettled discursive construction of the 2014 European election. While ‘insiders’ sought to present the election as an uncomplicated political event, it became impossible to avoid the presence of an undermining discourse that cast doubt upon the meaning of the occasion. Faced with discursive disequilibrium, it became necessary for ‘insiders’ to work harder to sustain their signifying intentions. In the next section of this chapter, a moment of narrative volatility is explored through a detailed analysis of the BBC election night results programme in the United Kingdom. This is followed by a more comparative account of responses emerging in the hours and days after the election from elite actors in other countries considered within this volume. The chapter concludes with some reflections on what these moments of radical uncertainty imply for narrative contestation in culturally pluralistic democracies.

THINGS FALLING APART

The BBC’s election night results programmes have, since the 1950s, provided an opportunity for the population of the United Kingdom to gather together within the comforting virtuality of media space. Here they could witness the outcomes of their private and collective contributions to the ballot box.

The BBC results programme on Sunday, 25 May 2014 was in many respects a traditional affair. It was presented by the veteran election night anchor, David Dimbleby—whose best-known predecessor had been his father, Richard Dimbleby. Decades of declarations of election results

in the UK have been inflected by the predictable tones of a Dimbleby. Alongside Dimbleby was Nick Robinson, the BBC's chief political editor. Alongside him were selected academic experts whose laptop computers somehow offered an iconic promise that objective sense could be made of the night's happenings. As has been common on BBC election broadcasts for many years, there is an elaborate graphic display, intended to represent the political state of Europe. As the night goes on, Dimbleby et al. are joined by politicians from various parties whose job is to exaggerate minor victories and point out the limited significance of blatant political defeats. This ritual exercise in partisan rhetoric is a regular feature of the proceedings, serving as a reminder that 'results' are always a matter of interpretation.

Results flash across the screen. Experts aggregate and explain; politicians rejoice and discount; the electorate-turned-audience waits to see what it has done; for a few hours, democracy takes the form of a media event (Dayan and Katz 1994). In bringing together fragmented characters, locations and events through its own diegetic narrative, television and other electronic media are implicated in the construction of the electoral rituals they claim to be merely reporting.

A conventional election night ritual in several ways, there were features that were out of the ordinary. To begin with, this was a Sunday night. The European election had taken place three days earlier, on Thursday, 22 May, but counting of the results had to be delayed to coincide with counts in other EU states that vote on Sundays. Secondly, this was not a first-past-the-post election, but one conducted in accordance with a proportional, party-list voting system that, while not entirely new, was unfamiliar to most UK citizens. Thirdly, the UK had already had an election night only three days earlier, for 22 May had been the day of elections for local councils in England and Wales as well as for the European Parliament. The election results programme on 22 May had been dominated by the story of unprecedented political victories by United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in areas once securely controlled by the mainstream parties. Talk of a 'political earthquake' was widespread—despite the rather sobering fact that UKIP's share of the vote was in fact lower than it had been in the previous year's local elections. The results programme on 22 May began to seem like a dress rehearsal for 25 May, a date pregnant with seismic possibility. Fourthly—and closely related to the 'UKIP earthquake' narrative—both politicians and journalists approached the European election as a moment of

profound political uncertainty. Questions of legitimacy were in the air; conventional electoral narratives constructed around mainstream policy differences, potential winners and supranational ramifications competed with narratives highlighting a disenchanted citizenry, undemocratic institutions and a pervasively unrepresentative political class. In short, by the time the 25 May results programme came on the air, the idea of competing narratives had been framed.

Democratic Indeterminacy

In the opening seconds of the European election results programme, David Dimbleby left viewers in no doubt about what to expect: 'Welcome to our election centre on what promises to be a dramatic night'. To describe a night ahead as being 'dramatic' is to anticipate its indeterminacy; to suggest that its outcome is unsettled in ways that more predictable narratives are not. In this sense, it is to foresee a likely interruption in the conventional rhythm of things; in Victor Turner's (1969) terms, to envisage a 'time out of time' (Turner 1969) in which relationships between scene, script and potential action seem somehow open-ended. We must assume that this sense of drama amounts to more than the characteristic indeterminacy of standard voting fluctuations. So, what is it that Dimbleby is so breathlessly anticipating? The answer relates to a perception of danger that is well summed up by one of the political experts in the studio, Professor Vernon Bogdanor:

Aren't we looking for the answer to two questions: what sort of Europe do people want to live in: a Europe of the moderate left or moderate right? And the second question is, do they want to live in a European Union at all?

In short, what is being played out is an existential drama. Bogdanor's first question refers to the traditional electoral narrative: a choice between two 'moderate' positions that lie clearly within the institutional and systemic framework. The second question cuts through to the legitimacy of the framework. Rather than 'who will win the game', it raises the question 'shall we play the game'. The 'drama' lies in this emergent tension, made strikingly vivid as results showed UKIP almost doubling its share of the national vote and beating both of the mainstream political parties in its share of the popular vote. Narrative tension

is highlighted at one point in the long night when Dimbleby, looking seriously anxious in the face of a series of strong performances by parties across the EU seeking to undermine the game, asks the BBC's Europe Correspondent, Matthew Price, whether 'we're seeing Europe falling apart'. Price's response is not entirely reassuring:

If it's right to describe what's happened in Britain tonight as an earthquake, we've had an earthquake in France, there's been an earthquake in Denmark where a heavily Eurosceptic party has taken more of the votes than anywhere else. You've talked about Greece. There's also in Spain ... some insurgent parties coming up ... So, there is an insurgency across Europe. That much is clear.

Note the shift in metaphors. The drama begins as an 'earthquake': a natural phenomenon; a disaster to be sure, but not of a kind for which anyone can be held responsible. As the enormity of the seismic shock develops, the metaphor changes to insurgency, suggesting that there are culpable agents at work. Talk of 'an insurgency across Europe' is a kind of drama that one does not expect to encounter on an election results programme. It is as if, for that brief moment of anxiety, the discourse has moved from the contingencies of the political game to the emergencies of embattled history. The latter discourse is reinforced by Vernon Bogdanor who says:

Now, many people hoped that the Crash would lead to the end of neo-liberalism, a social-democratic moment. It's done the opposite – as it did after all in the 1930s: the Great Crash led to the politics of the extreme right in Europe. And we're seeing that, not fortunately on the same scale, but in a kind of minimal scale.

The transition from psephological vagaries to the resurfacing of a fascistic threat to Europe (albeit on 'a kind of minimal scale') seems somewhat hyperbolic. Nick Robinson explains the grounds for these worries:

I imagine, in that old phrase, they used to say 'In the Chancelleries of Europe', there will be people who wake up, they're a little bit worried about Nigel Farage no doubt, but their real concern will be about Le Pen, the Fronte Nationale and what this means to Europe.

Robinson's explanation refers to the anxieties of the political elites. The warning signs to which they will 'wake up' relate to their own ways of

playing the game. Robinson's message is supported by another studio expert, Isobel Harding from the *Spectator* magazine:

This is a message to the Euro-elites: that it takes voters to elect these sort of parties before they listen ...

The difference between the competing narratives begins to seem very clear. For Bogdanor, the threat is to political business as usual, governed by elites of 'the moderate left or moderate right'. In Dimbleby's world, such a threat constitutes 'Europe falling apart'. For Harding, what we are witnessing is not insurgent fascism, but democracy acting as a check upon complacent elites who must learn to 'listen' (that much over-worked and misused verb of the contemporary political lexicon). If Harding is correct, the language needs to change from 'earthquakes' and 'insurgencies' to a rather less catastrophic narrative.

The Feeling Public

During the course of the night, politicians line up to explain what the voters are feeling. Liam Fox from the Conservative Party offers the following translation:

What I think tonight is very clear, not just in the UK but across Europe, is that the citizens of Europe feel that they are not being well served by the priorities of the European Union. And I think they feel that it is run by a group of Eurocrats who are overpaid, with a bloated bureaucracy and out of touch.

Labour's Harriet Harman interprets the night's results as evidence of a 'rupture between politics and the people':

They've taken this European election as an opportunity to ... as people said right into my face ... to give you a shake-up. And I think we've got to listen to that concern because I think people are entitled to have confidence in their democratic political system and not to feel that ... nobody's taking their concerns into account.

Both of these politicians speak about what voters 'feel'. Typically, the interpretation of feelings calls for considerable sensitivity; it is a craft we

have come to associate with therapists and psychoanalysts. Such interpreters work with feelings rather than thoughts in the belief that what people feel exceeds the repressive constraints of rationality. To get at feeling is somehow to disclose deeper motivation. Both Fox and Harman believe that they have identified such stimuli; that what voters are trying to say is a response to being insulted and ignored, in Fox's case mainly by 'bloated' European officials, in Harman's case by politicians (including herself) who have forgotten how to listen.

A conversation between journalists Andrew Rawnsley and Isobel Harding is illustrative in this respect. As part of the programme format, these two pundits were placed in a separate part of the studio with BBC journalist, Emily Maitlis. Away from the buzz of incessant results and computer calculations that surrounded Dimbleby, these three were clearly given a brief to reflect more expansively. 'Think the big thoughts' the producer might have said. In relation to 'voters' feelings',

Rawnsley: Although there are obvious complaints about Europe – that it's elitist and it's remote and that kind of thing – it's actually become a proxy for much wider and deeper things: anger with elites of all sorts, whether they are political elites or financial elites. And also a way of expressing the rage felt by many people with a changing world which is leaving them feeling insecure or left behind – they think other people are doing much better than them.

Harding: A real problem for mainstream politicians is how do you respond to UKIP which appeals to voters because it's quite rough around the edges. You can't have, if you're Ed Miliband or David Cameron, a personality transplant and suddenly start talking like Nigel Farage. I mean, that would be extremely weird. If Ed Miliband's worried about being weird this would just increase his problems...

Rawnsley
(re Farage): ... He's had this brilliant way of posing as the champion of the ordinary, downtrodden folk. And as long as he's the anti-establishment insurgent, he really profits from that – and he really goes out of his way to profit ... The danger, some people say, for him is if he becomes a bit more conventional and a bit more establishment and then he loses some of his appeal. So, if UKIP is not to fizzle away he

has to somehow do this delicate balancing act between becoming more than a protest party, if it's really serious about getting MPs, but not losing what's really its essential appeal at the moment of being the guerrillas.

Maitlis: You have to get from the pint of beer to the bacon sarnie without a hiccup.

This entire exchange is about the management of feelings. Rawnsley begins by stating that, however much they might seem to be a protest against the European Union, the results are really a 'proxy'; an act that appears to indicate one thing, but is intended to say something else. To be precise, it is an embodiment of two 'feelings'; one of rage and the other of insecurity. One might have expected the presenter to ask Rawnsley how he knew this. In what way is he able to translate votes into feelings with such confidence? But before there is any time for such analysis, Isobel Harding is rushing into an equally confident assertion: that UKIP appeals to voters because it is 'rough around the edges'. What exactly does this mean? From what Harding goes on to say, it appears to have something to do with a way of speaking—a way so qualitatively different from conventional styles of political speaking that it would require 'a personality transplant' to replicate it. For the Labour leader, Ed Miliband, this would seem to present an insoluble dilemma: he seems 'weird' when he speaks like himself and would seem 'weird' if he spoke like Nigel Farage. It is possible to guess at what these pundits are saying and even to acknowledge its validity, but that is not the point. Taking upon themselves the role of 'interpreters of feelings', the terms of their analysis become oblique and poetic; it is as if feelings—rather than interests, preferences or actions—call for a special mode of commentary. Rawnsley goes on to suggest that the UKIP leader, Nigel Farage, is merely 'posing' (albeit brilliantly) as 'the champion of the ordinary, downtrodden folk'. He does not say by whom these folk are downtrodden or whether that might have something to do with the feelings he is attempting to discuss. Farage is labelled as an 'insurgent' (interesting resonances with rather more explicit geopolitical threats) and a 'guerrilla' and—perhaps in line with Harding's 'rough around the edges' characterisation—Rawnsley suggests that it is only by maintaining these personae that it can preserve its 'essential appeal'. This is an extraordinary conclusion. Building on the democratic narrative that the election results represent a warning from the public to the elites, Rawnsley seems to be

suggesting that public sensibility can only be appeased by insurgent leaders who pose as its champion.

Then what are we to make of Emily Maitlis's odd bundle of metaphors that serve to summarise what had been said: 'You have to get from the pint of beer to the bacon sarnie without a hiccup'? Sounding more like a line from the BBC satire, *In the Thick of It*, than a serious reflection on political strategy, Maitlis seems to be suggesting that the 'hiccup' to be avoided is any impression of inauthentic performance. Viewers who paid close attention to campaign semiotics would recognise allusions here to Farage's custom of rarely being filmed without a pint of beer in his hand and the unfortunate episode in which Ed Miliband made a mess of eating a bacon sandwich in front of a crowd of press photographers. The use of the term 'sarnie' was presumably a gesture towards the vulgarity of the vernacular. Both Rawnsley and Harding smile knowingly in response to this pithy summing up of contemporary public feeling. And so the action returns to the main studio where there is more talk of volatile swings and Europe falling apart.

Disparate Narratives

Two competing narratives were in visible tension within the BBC election results programme. The presenter, experts and politicians felt secure working within the traditional narrative. They understood the script and assumed that viewers would know what to expect. There had been an election; its results would be announced; parliamentary representatives would be legitimised; the rules of the game would prevail.

A competing narrative served to undermine this story of constitutional regularity, leading political insiders to experience a degree of ontological insecurity; a sense that the identities, institutions and structures typically associated with an electoral situation had been rendered unstable and indecipherable. Faced with public actions that deviated from the predictable flow of the game, the presenter, experts and politicians turned to interpretive theories that sought to identify public feeling as a source of non-rational disruption. A drama of indeterminacy was played out through forms of catastrophising historical anxiety; sometimes glib accounts of what the public was really feeling and wanting; sometimes appeasing gestures around commitments to attend to vernacular frustrations; at other times drawing upon historical narratives of anti-democratic cataclysm.

NARRATIVE TRAVELS

How did the narrative tension that was so conspicuous in the United Kingdom play out in other European countries? While not all of the countries in our sample had equivalent election night programmes to the BBC's, the references below are taken from a review of results' coverage on election night and the following day in France, Sweden, Greece and Italy.

Let us begin by looking at France, where narrative tensions between mainstream and anti-establishment politics had many of the same characteristics as the United Kingdom. As the election results began to be revealed, it became apparent that the governing Parti Socialiste was in third place with under 15% of the popular vote, while the populist Front National had won 24.8% of votes cast, more than any of the other parties. French politicians lined up to compete with one another in expressing the scale of the crisis produced by this rejection of the mainstream political narrative. Regarding the European election results as a precarious disruption of the hierarchical entitlements long associated with French governance, the mainstream elite portrayed the result as a repudiation of French liberal identity. In a very sombre televised speech on the day after the election results were announced, shown on both channels TF1 and F2, the French President, Françoise Hollande, declared that

The results are painful. Only one in four people voted. France – founder of the EU, home of human rights and freedom – is the EU country where the far right has had the most success and won the most seats....

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the left-wing Front de Gauche, which won just over 6% of the vote, gave a highly emotional address to his followers in which he said 'Don't let all this be done in your name; don't allow France to become something other than what she is known and loved for all over the world'. In short, he is calling upon citizens to rally around the mainstream narrative and give their authorial consent to a story of France as a country that deserves to be loved.

In French news broadcasts in the days after the election the earthquake metaphor became ubiquitous (see Chap. 3) and the notion of 'shock' was widely used to describe both the cause of the narrative disruption and the mainstream political response to it. As in the United Kingdom, the question of political agency was euphemised by reference

to the election as a natural disaster; a ‘painful’ occurrence rather than a democratically intended wound.

On Swedish television, the ‘earthquake’ metaphor was also employed. The TV4 news anchor on the day after the election declared that

...the result of the EU election was possible to see on the Richter scale. It was an earthquake. The winners of the election in the 28 member states were a sprawling collection of EU sceptics, xenophobes, feminists, left oppositionists and separatists. The losers had in common that they were those in power who had to give up in country after country.

The broadcast news emphasis was very much upon winners and losers and a framing narrative of insiders being shoved aside by strident outsiders. But whereas in the United Kingdom and France, the earthquake was perceived to have taken place beneath the feet of the local political class, in Sweden apprehension was expressed from a distance. The emergent narrative was about something that had gone wrong in other countries; it was a European problem. To be sure, there was a sense of ‘maybe here next’, but the temporal distance moderated the articulation of catastrophe.

In Greece, a crisis narrative was well established before the European election started. After six years of extreme economic austerity and political destabilisation, the 2014 election was never going to be about whether there was an impending or apparent crisis, but which narrative response to the enveloping catastrophe would most appeal to voters. The Greek Prime Minister, as leader of New Democracy—one of the two long-established mainstream parties of power—looked to the election for an endorsement of the compromises it had negotiated with the European Union. Syriza, as a new party of the left, claimed that by voting for it in the European election Greek voters could signal their refusal to engage in abject collusion with the European political elite. As the election results came in, showing that Syriza had won most of the Greek seats in the European Parliament, a narrative war broke out between mainstream politicians, who claimed that Syriza’s win was indecisive, and Syriza itself, claiming that the election result was not only a challenge to the European elite, but that, in the words of its leader, Alexis Tsipras, ‘Tomorrow all of Europe will be talking about Syriza’. The claim here was that an anti-elitist counter-narrative was unstoppable, in Greece and beyond its borders.

In Italy, where Beppe Grillo's 5 Star Movement (M5S) had already established itself before the 2014 election as the most electorally successful populist party within any European Union state, the narrative of counter-institutional insurgency evident in other countries was replaced by a story about the declining traction of the M5S counter-narrative. Opinion polls cannot be published in Italy for two weeks prior to an election, so, apart from a number of surreptitious and unreliable online polls, there was genuine anticipation as to whether the popularity of M5S would be sustained. Grillo himself went into the election with great confidence, with the slogan '*vinciamono!*': 'we'll win'. On election night, Italian politicians and commentators focused upon the apparent enervation of the populist counter-narrative.

RAI 1 ran a three-and-a-half-hour election results programme as part of its popular, late night current affairs talk show, *Porta a Porta*, hosted by Bruno Vespa. Politicians from all parties except for M5S were in the studio (M5S refused to attend, but recorded a pre-election-day interview with Vespa). As early votes began to be counted, it became clear that the main government party led by Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, the centre-left Partito Democratico, was well ahead. As the night goes on, guest politicians in the studio refer to the results as *clamoroso* (sensational), *strepitoso* (resounding), *imprevisto* (unexpected) and *terromoto* (seismic). In short, the same terms are used to describe a move away from the disruption and towards the stability narrative as are used in other countries to describe dramatic movements in the opposite direction.

What are we to make of these diverse responses to the same election? We might have expected narrative tensions in one state to have played out in others, with each constituent element contributing to an overarching story of collective destiny. In the apparent absence of such narrative consistency, it is tempting to conclude that the project of creating a single European polity was undermined by the presence of divergent narratives of national introspection and pan-European fragmentation. Upon closer inspection, however, this initial impression of narrative disjuncture is misleading. Binding the diverse national election stories is an overarching metanarrative of fragile tension between political stability and anti-systemic resistance. Rather than reading diverse national narratives as evidence of the absence of a single historical trajectory, it would be more accurate to say that there is a common trajectory, but a variant temporal sequence between one country and another.

Ricoeur (1981: 165) rightly reminds us that ‘temporality [is] that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity [is] the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent’. Stories take place *in time*, but the temporal moment in which a narrativised event occurs determines its perceived meaning. France and the United Kingdom, culturally attuned to an expectation of ‘politics as usual’, interpreted the rise of counter-narrative as a manifestation of crisis. Sweden understood the same events as evidence of someone else’s crisis. Greece, having ceased to believe in the Europe project as a guarantor of stability, regarded counter-narrative as offering a promise of release from the oppressive rationality of enforced economic order. Italy, having adopted a counter-narrative before other countries, regarded the waning of electoral support for populism as a harbinger of restored political stability. In short, all of these countries are implicated in a common metanarrative, even though their temporal distinctiveness generates an aura of divergence.

POLITICS AS THE PERFORMANCE OF MEANING

Politics arises from struggles about what things mean—struggles that are enacted through competing narratives. Because there is no historical or political reality that can be conjured into objective and indisputable presence, it is to the performance of plausible meaning that we must turn.

The making of political meaning is a performative project. Politicians, broadcasters, commentators, pollsters and citizens ‘do things with words’ (Austin 1962). Cultural fusion happens when performances persuade. In the 2014 European election the ‘sacerdotal’ cultural foundations that have traditionally fused and legitimised electoral events were visibly shaken, to the extent that proponents of stability narratives felt as if they were being thrown into the air by a seismic blast. In attempting to give meaning to this existential jolt, political leaders and experts turned to an improvised narrative of crisis and doom. Their performative work was geared to revealing the alarming nature of the electoral outcome; to codifying its meaning in terms that served as a warning of impending peril. Working against them were performances designed to undermine the kind of stable accounts that are usually associated with state-run elections. Emanating from a growing belief that established performances of transnational politics lacked plausibility, voters and populist leaders refused to play along with the official performance.

In the immediate aftermath of voters' rejection of the established narrative 'the Great and the Good' clutched at a variety of straws: fascism was resurgent; established leaders needed to learn to listen; the downtrodden were rising up; impostors were usurping the true identity of the people; a natural disaster had occurred. Which storyline should be believed; which interpretation should be accepted? In this battle between signifier (the European election) and signified (democratic will) meaning was fought over, mainly in television studios, where first responses to historical crises tend to be rehearsed.

This battle for meaning goes to the core of the political; for relations of power are hollow unless they are deemed to have significance both by those who wield power and by those who are its subjects. In the struggle to make and maintain political meaning, the media (both old/mainstream and new/digital) play a central role, organising collective perception through its discursive framing. This is not a conscious or conspiratorial project, but one that responds both defensively to the perpetuation of political realities within which journalistic mediators are professionally embedded, as well as reactively to the irresistible traces of popular experience. Indeed, the crucial role of mass mediation in electoral contexts is as an arbiter between competing narratives. In simple situations, this entails striking some kind of a balance between contending policy agendas and the stories that justify them. While the least responsible mass media outlets pay scant attention to the avoidance of partisanship, more regulated and trustworthy outlets—such as public service television channels—can be generally relied upon to ensure that all orthodox narratives are given a fair airing. When, however, there is a first-order conflict over meaning, such as occurred in the 2014 European election, mainstream mediators become confused. To recognise counter-narratives that subvert the fundamental rhetorical claims of the political system would amount to acknowledging the mainstream media's own tacit collusion in a democratically flawed project. Leaders and experts are recruited to deny the counter-narrative recognition on its own terms. Faced with unsettled meaning, narrative security is sought in orthodox cliché and speculation. Caught disconcertingly between meaning and reference, the media turn to a mood of ill-contained panic.

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