

The Strange Case of Pope Francis: Between Populism, Celebrity and Divinity*

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Which is the relationship between populism and celebrity? And in which sense Pope Francis can be considered a celebrity? Through a brief analysis of some features of Pope Francis' discourses and practices, the paper aims at focusing the specificity that populism can assume in the religious discourse and the strange mix that we can find in this Pope between divine sacredness and earthly humanity.

Keywords: Populism; Celebrity; Semiotics; Media

My contribution will propose some reflections on the relationship between celebrity, popularity and populism, with particular reference to that 'special' celebrity - Pope Francis. As we will see, from a semiotic perspective, identity can only be a matter of meaning effects, and the effects of meaning are shaped in a public sphere where verbal discourses, media texts, public behaviours are all combined and thrown back into a mediascape where the sacred, politics and entertainment seem to overlap.

Celebrity: a topic for semiotics

The category of celebrity from the semiotic point of view represents a field of great interest.

In its internal logic (independently, therefore, from the medium in which it is shaped – TV, internet, cinema – and from the field in which it is given: cinema, music, politics, religion) it involves at least with two large dimensions of semiotics:

- i. The narrative dimension
- ii. The regimes of visibility

As regards the narrative dimension, semiotics has long focussed on the discursive procedures of actorialization. Actors are not actually given, but identities shaped by many dimensions built through the social discourses. First of all, we have a dimension that regards the syntax of action (what is the role of a given actor... Subject, helper, opponent?), one regarding their capacities in terms of power, knowledge, will and duty (known in linguistics and semiotics as 'modalities'), a dimension that has to do with their

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figurative features (age, aspect, look etc...), a dimension that has to do with their 'voice' and the way they use it (how does the subject handle their turns to speak? Are they 'autonomous' or do they have to be authorized to speak? Do they express self-confidence or hesitation? and so on). It is impossible to sum up such a complex semiotic narrative theory as Algirdas Greimas here (see Greimas 1970 and 1983), but I aim to simply provide an idea of how people become 'actors' and how the social identity of someone, their agency, their recognizability is an *effect* of many components, which are built through social discourses. In semiotics the category of meaning-effect is crucial; identity is a meaning-effect.

As for the regimes of visibility, I make reference here to the theory by Eric Landowski (1989 and 1997), which invites us to reflect on the different social effects deriving from two basic attitudes: wanting to be seen and wanting to not be seen, wanting to be visible, on the 'public stage', and wanting to hide in one's own private life, in one's own intimacy. Landowski in particular suggests to not overlap the public vs private pairing with that of collective vs individual, and this suggestion is particularly relevant for my argument. Perhaps the private life of a pop star is also, in a way, collective, shared and lived at a collective level. We will see in the case of Pope Francis (as in the case of many celebrities) that there are number of aspects of his private everyday life that become public, and the point lies precisely in the difficult equilibrium between maintaining a private space and sharing with everyone else.

Landowski also reminds us that in order to be really popular, to be truly recognized as subjects that embody the feeling of a community, it is not enough to make known, to make visible, some aspects of himself. To become truly popular instead requires the creation of a co-presence of individuality and people, coordinating a coincidence between the time lived by the subject and that experienced by 'the others' (people, audience, etc). One of the features of a 'popular' actor is that they must be visible, but maybe one of the features of an 'icon' (a particularly special category) is that they must also be unattainable, they must have something secret and special that lies in a very complex dimension between visibility and invisibility, staging plan and a backstage plan (as Erwin Goffman has already focused on).

Celebrity and Populism

I make these observations simply to highlight how the problem of popularity, celebrity, iconicity is ripe for consideration from a semiotic perspective,¹ as this approach has a number of specific tools with which to study the effect of celebrity and popularity built by social discourses.

Let us now consider why we should investigate the link between celebrity-popularity-populism.

The celebrity-popularity relationship is quite obvious. There is no celebrity without a dimension of public protagonism.

However, in times of a strong presence of populist phenomena, it is natural to reflect on the link between celebrity-populism too (popularity and populism are, of course, not the same). At the basis of celebrity and populism, beyond the obvious popularity, are a number of shared features:

- a *strong personalization*: a populist leader is not only someone who guides a party. They are someone who has a special *aura*, a sort of special power (a hero, like in movies or comic strips) for embodying people's desires and expectations, and at the same being able to answer and satisfy them. For this reason, in populism there is not just personalization but a real cult of personality. And the same goes for celebrity: a celebrity is both unique and everyone. Their uniqueness, their extraordinary personality lies in interpreting everyone else.

- (the illusion of) a *direct relationship with people*: a populist leader, just like a celebrity, does not need intermediaries in order to speak to the people. Their speech is direct, clear, effective. In an epoch where 'disintermediation' seems a key word, populist leaders and celebrities embody this overcoming of intermediate levels - they *touch* people.

- (consequent) *direct communication*: the populist leader and the celebrity both know how to speak to people; they know their language, their questions, their competences. They manage *pop communication* because they are able to put themselves in the people's shoes. They speak pop because they are pop.

Therefore, we understand that a *populist* leader is not just a popular leader; they have something more. They have a form of protagonism that is that of a celebrity (and perhaps the opposite is also true: a celebrity uses populist codes, they are not simply popular): a star, between divinity and immediacy.

The Strange Case of Pope Francis

But let us now look at the case of Pope Francis, who responds to all the features I have just mentioned.

There is no doubt that Pope Francis has attained a great level of protagonism. Following the crisis in credibility for Benedict XVI, he has brought the image of the pope under the spotlight. Let us consider the cover of Time magazine, here below.



He has not only reached significant popularity in terms of visibility (as someone very well known throughout the world); he has become a sort of *narrative hero*. What do I mean by that? I mean that he is the core of many narrations, many narrative situations and frames: he is Francis like the saint, with his well-known story: the poverty, the renunciation of material goods, his capacity to speak to every living being, animals included. He is Argentinian, so from the South of the world, the country of Italian immigration, the country of Military dictatorship. He is transgressive, he does not always comply with the protocol dictated by his role. He is unpredictable, we can expect a call from him at any time. He seems to feed stories, if not legends, and not so much 'Vatican stories' (which could be of interest only to a few), but everyday stories, stories which are eloquent and entertaining for everyone.

As for the second feature (direct relationship celebrity-people with the consequent very special management of the regime of visibility), we could say that this Pope is a real exception with respect to other Popes but, more generally, when it comes to any other 'political' leader (Presidents, political 'stars' and so on). We know things about this Pope that we have never known about other leaders: where he buys shoes, where he buy his glasses. Pope Francis is not over-exposed (we do not have the impression to know everything about him). It is not a quantitative matter, but he is very able to let us know some marginal aspects of his everyday life, giving us the feeling we are part of his ordinary life; that we are, at least in some respects, similar to him. He seems like a human among humans.

Finally, as for the third aspect – the direct language – we can underline how Pope Francis' speech is always modeled on everyday language, and has been since the famous 'Good evening' with which he opened his first appearance after election to the papal throne. Also his well-known telephone calls follow this pattern. He is not a Pope who keeps himself within the space (the cultural world) of the Vatican, but a Pope who knows how to make direct contact with ordinary people, about ordinary problems. Last but not least, we cannot forget the use of social media: a Pope who is on Twitter is of course a Pope who would like to use the communicative codes of his contemporaries, and in particular, young people.²

If with these traits we find in Pope Francis the very important features of a popular (and maybe populist)³ leader and global celebrity, we do have to say, however, that he is obviously a celebrity of a particular kind, and a populist *sui generis*. He is extra-ordinary by definition (he is a Pope, therefore divine, for those who believe), and it is his earthly dimension that is the strangest. He manages to be an exceptional person but also a subject with which ordinary people can identify.

A first specificity of Pope Francis lies precisely in this: in the transformation of a celebrity by definition into a 'normal' person. In most cases we have a 'normal' person who becomes 'celebrity'. In the case of Pope Francis however we have a 'divine' person (if not celebrity, undoubtedly extraordinary by definition) who becomes normal.

In the frame of this inversion, Pope Francis handles his relationship with the 'people' in a very personal way through his speeches, – the people listening to his speeches, the people which can be not attending the event where he is speaking but who are nonetheless also the addressees of the Pope's speech.

The word 'people' is very present in the speeches of Pope Francis and this, in my opinion, lies at the core of the dialectic 'exception (of celebrity) / normality (of the people)'.

First of all, I would like here to highlight three different meanings of "people" to which Pope Francis continually resorts.

1. On the one hand, 'people' is the whole to which everyone, including the Pope, belongs. It is people as a *people of God*. It is therefore a category that is almost supra-historical, a level to which they elevate themselves, devoid of concrete and social determinations. I quote here from the discourse in Casa Santa Marta, on May 15th 2014 but there are many other cases:

The Christian can not live isolated from the People of God or even worse out of it: the Christian is a person who lives in the People of God because he is the son of this people, just as Jesus cannot be understood on his own but contextualized in the People of God, of which he himself is a son.⁴

But I could mention a recent stance taken by Pope Francis on immigration (this is not explicitly said, but – given the timing – this is the implicit topic), entitled "Letter from His Holiness to the People of God".

2. On the other hand, Pope Francis also uses 'people' meaning *people as a nation*. In the speech of Pope Francis at the American Congress, for example, this was very evident. The people therefore here is treated as political entity:

"Our own responsibility as members of Congress, is to enable this country, by your legislative activity, to grow as a nation. You are the face of its people, their representatives."

"Legislative activity is always based on care for the people."

"Today I would like not only to address you, but, through you, the entire people of the United States."

"I wish to speak with all of you, and I would like to do so through the historical memory of your people."

3. Finally, and this is the thing that is perhaps most important for me, we find people as ordinary, concrete people: *plebs*, we would say in Latin (not *populous* or *demos* – entities tied to the political dimension – nor *ethnos*, as category linked to race, roots etc).⁵ Pope Francis enacts in various ways contact with and immersion in people; he often breaks the codes and walks, for example, among the people. This kind of people is an entity into which to mix, *to lower himself to*.

Bergoglio enters the space of the people, establishes a contact, physical or mediated, with people: neutralizes the borders, legitimizing the people's way of life. For example (one of the cases that amazed me most), he made a call on December 22nd 2016 during a very popular TV programme – "Una mattina", a typical morning entertainment programme for housewives – to participate in and celebrate its 30th anniversary. But of what interest can a TV program like that be to a Pope if not for sharing the lives of people, ordinary people, in order to be close to them?

If the people in the first meaning (people as people of God) is an ideal entity, the people in the second case is an historical-political entity, and in the third case, people is the pure world of "normality", of daily life.

So we have a 'strange' celebrity in the case of Francis, who acquires more strength and exceptionality the more he mixes himself with the people, and who by "normalizing" himself becomes more and more extraordinary.

At the basis of all this, we find a systematic overturning. The exceptionality of Bergoglio is a reversal of the typical codes of the status of the actor-Pope (while for another person it may be normal to buy glasses, for him it is not).

But the exceptionality of Bergoglio is also his narrative coherence, which makes him a kind of 'dense' icon, which does not provide exceptions but works on the mechanism of redundancy. The theological people (meaning 1) gives weight to the people-plebs (meaning 3), using theology to justify unexpected behaviors (such as calling in to a TV program), and legitimates a political discourse (in sense 2) about immigration, for example, building a continuity between minister of God-political minister-everyday model.

There is, in Pope Francis, a continuous short circuit between word and action, or between representation level and action. Jurij Lotman (perhaps the most relevant theorist

of the semiotic study of culture) made a very interesting reflections on behaviours from a semiotic point of view, selecting the case of a kind of 'dandy' group of Russian culture: the Decembrists (see Lotman 1984). He said that the Decembrists turned the directionality of the word-action relationship. not from actions to discourses (normally first we act, and then we talk about our actions), but from discourses to actions (first words are declaimed, then we adapt our action plan to words). This inversion is, according to Lotman, typical of the dandy, and typical of people looking in some way for celebrity.

Bergoglio does not choose to properly invert the directionality word-action but suspends it in a circularity, so that his words always seem to refer to his actions and *viceversa*: his actions (typical of people-plebs, meaning 3) always refer to the words of God (people in the meaning 1).

Bergoglio 'uses' the three meanings of 'people', thus shaping a model of life and discourse that neutralizes the separations inside/outside (private sphere/public sphere), high/low, theology/everyday life, word/action.

This is perfectly aligned with what the semiologist Landowski wrote about regimes of visibility (and which I have already mentioned here). In fact, Landowski reminds us that to be truly popular, to be truly recognized as subjects that embody the feeling of a community, implies not only to make known private aspects of oneself. Rather, it is about creating a co-presence of individuality and people, coordinating a coincidence between the leader and the collectivity. The 'popular' subject must be both a singular person and an impersonal symbol, in a 'mystical' union (the reference to the religious is proper to Landowski), which is actually very unusual and which is rarely achieved. It requires remaining authoritative and being ordinary; embodying the extraordinary and being ordinary. Whoever realizes it is defined by Landowski as a 'mediator hero', not because he mediates between different interests (he is not a diplomat!), but because he becomes an intermediary with regards to another plan(e?) of reality, a 'beyond': he refers to a plan(e?) that goes beyond his own person (Landowski 1997, p. 27).

This is, in my opinion, the power and the specificity of Pope Francis. He seems always mindful of the distinction between popularity as fame and popularity as communion (see Landowski (1997, chapter 7-IV). He is a great leader, he is populist in many aspects. He is popular as a celebrity, but he has managed to shape his celebrity not as mere notoriety: his is a "mystical populism" – a form of identification in which the divine and the earthly dimensions are superimposed.

Biographical note

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Notes

¹ On this, see also Spaziante 2016.

² On the language and the immediacy of Pope Francis, see Lorusso-Peverini eds. 2017.

³ See Zanatta 2016.

⁴ <https://www.papafrancesco.net/la-nostra-identita-cristiana-e-appartenenza-a-un-popolo-alla-chiesa/> (read on October 25th)

⁵ On these aspects of populism, see Diamanti-Lazar 2018 and Müller, J.W. 2017.