

Chapter 16

On quasi-messianism and the need for enchantment¹

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Introduction

Sometimes, we write articles with preliminary ideas and crude analyses that receive a lot of citations. One example is the article I wrote with Kees van Kersbergen on welfare chauvinism (Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2016). In this chapter, however, I will talk about a completely different category of articles, namely those with great ideas but (almost) no citations. ‘Quasi-messianism and the disenchantment of politics’, published by Kees van Kersbergen in *Politics & Religion* in 2010, is a good example of this second category. I remember Kees telling me about this article in Konstanz. He was a visiting researcher there at some cultural studies excellence institute, and I was visiting him for a few days. I was his PhD student at the time, financed by the so-called dowry scheme – a not very woke label. It was a very special visit. Kees had two huge offices with views of the Rhine and Lake Konstanz. Outside, locals were dressed as colorful chickens and roosters because of carnival. Inside, I witnessed Kees put up a brave fight to stay awake during the weekly seminar in which a cultural studies professor read his article aloud in German, as was the custom there. In this setting, Kees told me about magic, religion, and politics. Admittedly, at the time, I didn’t really get it. He mentioned a lot of big concepts, but back then, I was mostly thinking about regression equations and issues such as panel heteroskedasticity. Yet, the paper stuck with me, I have assigned it in class, and I am personally responsible for 10% of the total number of times the paper has been cited.²

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2 This translates to exactly one citation.

The broader claim of the paper is that ‘we have missed, underestimated, or failed to recognize, to what extent and how, in fact, religious structure and substance have penetrated and influenced conventional democratic politics’ (van Kersbergen, 2010: 32). The more specific claim of the paper is that ‘the progressive abolition of [...] political quasi-messianism in politics [...] is currently causing the widely recognized existential problem of democracy, namely massive political disaffection’ (van Kersbergen, 2010: 32). Contrary to much other research, van Kersbergen puts the blame for political disaffection not on lazy, disinterested, too-rich-to-care citizens nor on electoral institutions but rather on the uninspiring leadership of our times. In particular, he laments the lack of political projects with ‘the visionary anticipation of a better world that is attainable, here and in the distant, yet foreseeable future’ (van Kersbergen, 2010: 32).

Political projects such as the nation state, democracy, the welfare state, and European integration are examples of such quasi-messianistic projects that had ‘a capacity to enchant the political elite and the public alike’ (van Kersbergen, 2010: 32). These projects ‘established and reinforced political allegiance in terms of a beneficial exchange of power/support and (physical, political, social and collective) security and well-being’ (van Kersbergen, 2010: 46).

Why do I like this article so much? I like how it is written, hence the many direct quotes. What is more important than the article’s prose is that *I think* this article awakened the at-the-time latent political psychologist in me. The quasi-messianistic projects fulfill specific needs, an argument similar to the political–psychological argument that ideology fulfills specific needs (Jost, Federico and Napier, 2009). In this chapter, I will reinterpret quasi-messianistic projects in the light of the literature on psychological needs and ideology. I will identify *a need for enchantment* and define quasi-messianistic leadership as a type of leadership that taps into this need for enchantment. I will end by reflecting whether we should embrace or steer away from quasi-messianism.

Needs, political projects, and ideology

What did the four quasi-messianistic projects bring? First, the nation-state delivered order and security but also a sense of belonging and identity. Second, democracy brought security as well as inclu-

sion and predictability. Third, the welfare state was responsible for providing social security and freedom from want. Finally, European integration brought security and prosperity through the abolition of war and cutthroat economic competition (van Kersbergen, 2010). In sum, these projects fulfilled very different needs. If you think of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the quasi-messianistic projects combine low-level needs such as physiological and safety needs with high-level ones such as belonging. I would add that these projects also brought a sense of esteem and pride.

The needs identified here also play a prominent role in political psychology. In political psychology, however, individual needs are not linked to political projects but to ideology. In a review article, Jost, Federico, and Napier (2009) distinguish between epistemic, existential, and relational needs (or motives) that link to ideology. The need for security, for example, can be interpreted as an existential motive for ideology. A large literature identifies threats to security as a motivation to hold or adopt more conservative views on patriotism, gender relations, fairness, stereotyping, and religion (Jost, Federico and Napier, 2009). The need for belonging is a relational need. It can motivate system-justifying behavior – that is, judging the system as fair even though the system does not benefit you. This behavior is motivated by a need to belong to a group and to perceive the group as good and fair. Ideology also fulfills epistemic needs. As an organized belief system, ideology defines society's evils, the causes of these evils, and how they can be addressed. Very similar to religion, ideology fulfills a need for cognitive closure: an understanding of the complexities of the world through a deliberately simplified story. Similar epistemic needs are needs for cognition and evaluation.

An important difference between the political psychology perspective and the quasi-messianism paper is the micro-macro orientation. The political psychology literature is more bottom-up oriented, analyzing how individuals' needs correlate with ideology. This way, it links individuals to specific political parties. The quasi-messianistic projects, however, present a more top-down approach. Rather than different parties with different elites, van Kersbergen (2010) presumes a less pluralist, more consensual elite that broadly supports these projects. There are influences of ideology on how these projects take shape in each country, for example as described in

the variations of the welfare state literature (van Kersbergen, 2019). But this variation is at the country-level, not the party-level. As a final note, perhaps because the quasi-messianistic projects were only contested at the margins, they also fulfilled a need for unity among members of the population.

While there are differences between the two approaches, the psychological needs identified are highly similar. What I propose next is that these psychological needs can be combined to some extent to form a single need, a need for enchantment, that is particularly relevant in quasi-messianistic projects.

The need for enchantment

I define the need for enchantment as a psychological need to be part of a group in which the leadership simultaneously identifies a threat and lays out the road to salvation. It satisfies the needs associated with ideology: The leadership produces a belief system, it identifies a threat to existence, and it sustains the group through interactions. The need for enchantment is the need for a holistic, inspiring mission in which one can believe to the point that it can simplify life, bring order to chaos, and replace stress with calmness. It should connect problems and solutions, causes and consequences, join people, and have the belief that the enchanting agent or organization will bring relief in this world and soon.

Individuals with a high need for enchantment desire a strong and coherent belief system and also care deeply about belonging to a group to experience a sense of unity with like-minded people. The need for cognition and need for affect capture these two aspects to some extent. Arceneaux and Vander Wielen (2017) investigated how people who score high on the need for affect and the need for cognition differ from people scoring lower on one or both dimensions. They find that the former are the most persistent in their beliefs and thereby resistant to counterarguments. They are the true believers, the enchanted ones.

The need for enchantment need not be expressed politically. For ages, religion enchanted people. Today, more likely, people are enchanted by the latest Disney film. Need for enchantment is closely related to the combination of relational, epistemic, and existential needs ideology can fulfill – as identified by Jost, Federico, and Napier

(2009). The difference, however, may be that the need for enchantment is more directed towards a single person – the enchanter, the quasi-messiah, the party leader, the boss, the bringer of salvation.

The need for enchantment can be seen as an individual trait or state. Individuals may vary in the degree to which they can or want to be enchanted. This would then be trait-level need for enchantment, which could possibly be operationalized in a survey context. The environmental circumstances, however, may also stimulate a higher or lower level of enchantment. This is state-level enchantment. A crisis is a typical example of when individuals look out for a single person who will face the threat and bring about a solution. The increase in support for the government at the start of the COVID-19 crisis is a good example of this (de Vries et al., 2021). Despite the rather slow policy response in most European countries, citizens increased their support for the government. Why? A simple act of wishful thinking: By believing your government is taking proper action against the crisis, you reduce your fears about the crisis. Speeches by prime ministers and presidents suddenly became primetime television, with everyone hoping for good news but also hoping for words of inspiration and solidarity. In other words, the people were ready to be enchanted, although not every leader was equally capable of enchanting, and ultimately, a sizeable group of people chose to be enchanted by a wholly different clique of political entrepreneurs.

The need for enchantment can be seen as part of a broader sociological phenomenon. The exchange between the enchanter and the enchanted can be seen as an interaction ritual (Collins, 2004). The enchanter performs ‘on stage’ with speeches, interviews, and tweets, using verbal and nonverbal language. The enchanted absorb, applaud, and adore. This interaction arguably produces emotional energy that reinforces the dynamics between the enchanted and the enchanter. The better the enchanter aligns emotions and symbols, and the stronger the physiological resonance in the enchanted, the more emotional energy is produced (Collins, 2004). Emotional energy can be translated to physiological arousal, but in terms of the direction of emotions, I hypothesize that it produces a range of positive emotions too. This is exactly what is often forgotten when radical-right populist leaders such as Donald Trump are discussed. Their emotional repertoire is seen as primarily negative. Be that as it

may, the response of the audience, the enchanted ones, is also one of relief, hope, and pride. This is because they hear the quasi-messiah. Threats loom, yet salvation is nigh. It is this combination of positive and negative emotions that the successful quasi-messiah employs to maximize the emotional energy of the enchanted. The rejection of the quasi-messiah by the non-believers, the unenchanted ones, only serves to strengthen the cohesion of the in-group, of the enchanted ones.

My claim here is that a need for enchantment exists. Some individuals have a stronger need for this than others do, and some situations stimulate this need for enchantment. The next question, however, is what sort of leader can activate and cultivate the need for enchantment. Van Kersbergen (2010) suggested that Obama may be the type of leader who could start new quasi-messianistic projects and reestablish allegiance, trust, and involvement. But what are the general features of this type of leadership, which I call the quasi-messianistic leader?

The quasi-messianistic leader

Charismatic leadership is the type of leadership closest to what I will define as the quasi-messianistic leader. According to Weber (2004: 34) charismatic leadership can be defined as ‘the extraordinary, personal gift of grace or charisma, that is, the wholly personal devotion to, and personal trust in, the revelations, heroism, or other leadership qualities of an individual.’ Recent scholarship of charisma is rather critical of this definition as it is about the outcomes and effects of such leadership (Antonakis et al., 2016). This only allows for identification of successful charismatic leadership. The goal should rather be to identify the communication of the charismatic leader. As a consequence, Antonakis and co-authors (2016) propose to define charisma as a type of leadership that signals values, beliefs, symbols, and emotions. This way, individuals with such a style can be identified without taking into account whether they have been successful in attracting followers.

While this definition of charismatic leadership has many advantages in terms of research design, it is also remarkably vague. I propose that the quasi-messianistic leader can be defined as a more specific subset of the charismatic leader.

Building on this idea, the quasi-messianistic leader should be defined according to the values, beliefs, symbols, and emotions that are communicated. In terms of beliefs, quasi-messianistic leaders communicate revelations that link existential threats to the route of salvation. They should also symbolize the threat and salvation by their very being. For one, the quasi-messiah should be ready to suffer, to shoulder the weight of the revelation, and withstand the pressure. In terms of emotional appeals, the quasi-messianistic leader mixes fear for the threat with the hope of salvation.

I added that the quasi-messiah should be ready to suffer. A common feature in messianism is not only that the messiah relieves people from suffering and brings salvation; the messiah is also expected and ready to suffer. Think of Jesus Christ, Imam Hussain, or Shabbatai Zvi. Because we are talking about quasi-messianism, it is probably also appropriate in this context to speak of quasi-crucifixion. The quasi-messianistic leader needs to withstand major public criticism and overcome scandals and failures in order to eventually be perceived as the bringer of salvation. The quasi-messianistic leader is perhaps even able to achieve political goals by sacrificing their political career altogether. Such brave and heroic leaders contrast sharply with the average political leader, who, in my opinion, is mostly adept at deploying various strategies to avoid getting the blame for failure.

With this definition, we can define and potentially identify quasi-messianistic leaders regardless of the size of their followership. Like the religious messiahs, there are many quasi-messianistic leaders, but only very few attain a significant followership. Just like Jesus and Mohammad were rare events, so is the rise of the successful quasi-messianistic leader. I will briefly discuss here two challenges in the dynamic between the aspiring leader and the potential followership.

First, the success of the aspiring quasi-messiahs is premised on the promise of emotional contagion – that is, the degree to which emotions transfer from the quasi-messiahs to potential followers. Psychological research has suggested that emotions transfer to audience members due to the mimicry of the emotional expressions of a speaker. Yet, more recent research shows that this is not so easy and that emotional contagion in the political domain is highly de-

pendent on whether the speaker is part of the in-party or out-party of the listener. In particular, this research shows that people have strong negative emotions towards out-party leaders (Bakker, Schumacher and Homan, 2020), especially if they show emotions (Homan, Schumacher and Bakker, 2022). This research shows the importance for quasi-messianistic leaders to be considered part of the in-group.

Second, the threats and the route to salvation that the quasi-messianistic leader offers is caught in a dynamic and dangerous relationship with actual events. The threats and the salvation are prophecies, predictions of future events. Current events are continuously checked against the prophecy. If the events and the prophecy (seem to) align, followership is likely to increase. Problems arise if current events flatly prove the prophecy wrong. Therefore, it seems that there is some benefit to having a somewhat vague and interpretable prophecy, yet at the same time, such a prophecy is unlikely to be very enchanting. Threats do not work if it is highly uncertain that they will come to be. Doom should be upon us soon and for certain. Much more effective than vaguely defined threats is relying on motivated reasoning – that is, the inclination to defend your own beliefs and your in-group (Lodge and Taber, 2013). Leaders can stimulate motivated reasoning among their followers by blaming others for obfuscation. The threat has happened and is evolving, yet no one mentions it because they are in on the plot. The followers are motivated to believe this because it is psychologically easier to do so than to change one's entire worldview. Nevertheless, for motivated reasoning to take place, quasi-messianistic leaders should have already succeeded in swaying people to their side.

Conclusion

Do the quasi-messianistic projects of van Kersbergen (2010) require a quasi-messianistic leader? Although he expresses some hope that Obama might start a new project, van Kersbergen (2010) does not identify a single leader responsible for starting the quasi-messianistic projects or bringing about a critical juncture. My tentative and unsubstantiated answer is yes; in order to create critical junctures necessary for quasi-messianistic projects, a quasi-messianistic leader is needed. Yet, this is a rare event.

Then do we need quasi-messianistic leadership? Many would argue here that charismatic leadership is dangerous, and perhaps, quasi-messianistic leadership is even more so. These types of leadership are too emotional and thereby open up the risk that the state is hijacked by fundamentalists or crazies. I think this critique is overblown. It rejects the positive role emotions can play (Marcus, 2002). I do see the risk that quasi-messianism can kick-start a spiral of exceeding expectations. Both Obama and Trump can be seen as exhibiting a degree of quasi-messianism. This leads to a sort of bidding war: The looming threats become bigger and the measure of salvation larger. In such a context, losing elections becomes such a dramatic and traumatic event that people of the losing party are willing to defend their salvation with violence. At this stage, this spiral of exceeding expectations is broken by the election of Joe Biden, a rather boring figure incapable of enchanting. There are historical parallels, for example the flamboyant Sarkozy lost against a very boring Hollande. Perhaps too much enchanting sobers up part of the electorate, who turn to more down-to-earth figures (for a similar argument, see Crum (this volume)). Supporting this observation is the fact that there is no increase over time in the emotional arousal in political speech in general (Pipal et al., 2022).

This suggests that quasi-messianism is dynamic. Leaders incapable and unwilling to enchant will eventually be challenged by leaders who seek to enchant. This will remain a rewarding political strategy because it is unlikely that contemporary politics could eradicate the psychological need for enchantment. Such leaders may – temporarily – be able to bring people back to politics, to reengage them. As such, and *contra* Crum (this volume), I believe that the nature of politics is more than ‘people steering through their ups and downs together.’ By defining what the ‘ups’ and ‘downs’ are and who is included in the word ‘together’, the quasi-messiahs can fulfill psychological needs to an extent that politicians inspired by the Habermases and Rortys of this world cannot.

As a final note, my reinterpretation of the quasi-messianism argument from a comparative–political and historical perspective to a political psychology perspective symbolizes my own personal journey. Trained in comparative politics under the guidance of Kees van Kersbergen and Barbara Vis, I turned to political psychology. The

work of Barbara Vis surely contained the seeds of this transition. But it is also the very broad scientific perspective and encouragement of Kees that helped me to locate the scientific niche that enchanted me. Kees once advised me to take a year just to see what other literatures I would find interesting. It took me more than a year, but eventually, I did broaden my scope, and it was the best advice ever.

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