IULIA MEDVESCHI

SANDU FRUNZĂ

POLITICAL BRAND, SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION AND PUBLIC IMAGE COMMUNICATION

Iulia Medveschi
Babes-Bolyai University, Department of Communication, Public Relations, and Advertising, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.
Email: medveschiiulia@yahoo.com

Sandu Frunză
Babes-Bolyai University, Department of Communication, Public Relations, and Advertising, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.
Email: sfrunza@yahoo.com

Abstract: A brand is a complex construction. In addition to its tangible and intangible dimensions, it implies an intrinsic relational dimension associated to any brand building process. The relational dimension is even more visible in the case of the political brand. The political brand brings with it a symbolic construction in which the experience of a diffuse form of sacredness is central, by the presence of the inadequate report specific to the manifestations related to the sacred representations. On the one hand, we are experiencing a meeting that creates the context of identity, and on the other hand a cohabitation that highlights the role of alterity. The brand imposes itself as a symbolic construction based on this game of identity and alterity in a global communication market. Communication advisers must pay attention to this symbolic dimension. It is the expressive form in which interpersonal relationships manifest themselves as assuming the values and meanings that individuals place under the idea of having a better life. The orientation towards the development of political brands understood as personal brands corresponds to a phase of professionalization of politics and political communication in electoral campaigns, but also in the stages between campaigns. At the same time, political brands grow in importance in times of crisis, both because they offer exemplary models and because they synthesize the mythological elements of the imaginary of abundance, trust and authentic dialogue.

Key words: political brand, political mythology, commodity fetishism, symbolic construction, image communication, transcendence, magical transfer, communication advisers

1. Brand - a symbolic construction in the horizon of the sacred

Nowadays, brands are regarded as symbolic constructions that bring with them a remarkable power. They develop according to the dynamic requirements of a world characterized by a global market offer. Brands correspond to a human need for meaningful investment. They participate in a significant universe in which not only people, but also things speak a language loaded with elements considered valuable by community members. This type of adhesion is akin to that based on a common identity built around the presence and manifestation of the sacred. We are not talking here about the term sacred as it appears in the mentalities of institutionalized religions. It is rather a sacred that develops in a diffused manner, in connection with the ambiguity that the man of postmodern society experiences in his relationship with everything that is for him tradition, permanence or transcendence.

To reveal how sacredness is relevant in the relationship of postmodern man to things or products with the potential to be perceived as brands, we could invoke the reflections of at least two thinkers. On one side, we can remember a type of mythology that Karl Marx included in describing the fetishization mechanisms taking place in the sphere of exchange and consumption. This particular way of reporting commodities is encompassed by Marx in the expression of *commodity fetishism*. He reveals in this way of reporting things a series of religious traits that are attributed to things. The fetish relationship which the consumer establishes with things is surrounded by a kind of mystical and magical energy at the same time. The anthropological construct of the fetish is used with a negative meaning by Marx to reveal a relationship of alienation that economic relationships are producing on the market (Marx 1999). Within a similar kind of alienation, but with a more positive perspective, Jean Baudrillard reveals a shift of emphasis from the centrality that man occupies in the universe towards the centrality that the object occupies in the human universe. Everyday life is reorganized around this new center as a kind of idolatry spectacle in which the entire life of the individual unfolds around a new idol that gives meaning to everyday life. Such a symbolic investment of things (similar to the meaningful investment man makes in his relationship with the sacred) transforms objects into bearers of personal traits, very similar to human traits (Baudrillard 1996). The alienation phenomenon is neither the result of the market nor the result of the product's presence. It is related to the type of relationships that the individuals built and locate themselves. As proof, a master of symbolic thinking such as Pierre Bourdieu, can even cast the intersubjective relations under the sign of alienation. A relevant example of these relationships could be those in the sphere of political

power delegation. Representation and power delegation are circumscribed to such a cycle of alienation when a kind of magical transfer is made from those who hold power to the one who has the role of representation, and those who obtain power forget who gave them that power. In other words, when representatives forget what the true source of power is, and sometimes act as if they are all-powerful (Bourdieu 2012).

The brand implies, among other things, a discussion of authenticity. Whether we are talking about commercial brands or personal brands we keep sight of a special type of product. A brand provides access to a form of authenticity according to the cultural register we assume. This explains the importance that branding theorists attribute to the emotional bond between the product and the consumer of the product. It is even more important when talking about a loyal consumer with a behavior based on past experience which justifies product differentiation in relation to other products. Anca Daniela Manea has such experiences in mind when she states that "a brand lives in the mind of the consumer and is the sum of all the experiences, perceptions and expectations the client has about a particular product, service or company" (Manea 2011, 10-11). Many elements related to the world of representations are of decisive importance in the formation of preferences for a particular product precisely because, in the affective register of the consumer, they are associated with a certain manifestation of the sacred, even if it is a diffuse presence or it is not conscious to a large extent. This presence, though sometimes characterized by ambiguity, is lived as an assumption of a set of values associated with the product and resonating with a cumulus of personal values. Thus, whether it is a commercial brand or a personal brand, meanings are related to this world of values that accompanies the concerned product. When applying the principles of brand building to human beings, we find that values and authenticity are part of the intrinsic structure of the personal brand. In this discussion, it is appropriate to say: "The personal brand is the mental image of others when they think of you. It is your values, your personality, qualities that make you unique in comparison with others. This is why it is very important to remain authentic once you have created your own brand." (Manea 2011, 30) This element of value-based uniqueness differentiates a particular product from a commercial brand, as it differentiates a certain being of a recognizable person as a personal brand. The fact that not every person is a personal brand becomes noticeable if we understand that in the case of a personal brand something similar happens as in the case of a commercial brand. A product becomes a brand following a very elaborate construction that maintains both the intrinsic qualities of the product and a very elaborate construction that is achieved through successive communication processes. The communication structures in which the product is integrated give consumers the opportunity to participate with their own lives in establishing the product's identity and the world of those who

consume the product. In this sense, we can understand Nicoleta Corbu's perspective when she states that "the brand seems to be perceived as an empty concept that fills in meaning over time, with repeated experiences of consumers" (Corbu 2009, 59). This personal experience related to a product, whether it may be a product on the market or a personality in the market of ideas, is most often underlined by the way the contents with which we fill that empty concept are spread in the field of advertising and marked by the nuances it can bring (Frunză 2015; Moraru 2009; Cernat 2014; Grad, Frunză 2016; Crăciunescu 2016). Such a construction is facilitated by the fact that in the sphere of branding, communication has created its own intervention tools to make communication more efficient and to build reality (Smarandache, Vlăduțescu 2014; Teodorescu 2017; Vlăduțescu, Voinea 2016), regardless of the sphere of interpersonal, social or political communication. But beyond all the similarities we could establish between the marketing of a commercial product and of a product represented by the person we sell as a personal brand, there is something that goes beyond any possibility of approaching the two perspectives. For this reason, the tools provided by marketing sales are not enough, no matter how elaborated their principles are (Henneberg, O'Shaughnessy 2007; Hughes, Dann, Neale 2008; Van Gelder 2003). Additionally, it is necessary to use communication tools and strategies that can galvanize the brand. It is obvious that we intend to discuss the product brand and the personal brand. However, we do not ignore the background of this discussion, the idea of the corporate brand or the importance of the organizational framework, even when we talk about the relationship of the product with the organization under which the product is produced and promoted, even when the personal brand is in close relationship with a status it has in a particular professional environment. They are particularly relevant when talking about the relationship between a political brand and organizational and institutional party structures. These elements of branding have already been well emphasized by brand research (Olins 2009; Lindstrom 2005). The specificity that strengthens the uniqueness of the personal brand is given by the fact that a personality that is offered at a level of ideas and public action is able to create and assume a life philosophy. In the horizon of this philosophy, all physical, social, interpersonal, and spiritual offer brought by the personal brand atones into the public sphere (Frunză 2017).

This explains that in the sphere of political communication we are witnessing a kind of rebellion of ideologies, and some even support the disappearance of the interest in ideologies. The emphasis is no longer on message transmission and on the themes of the debate, but on image construction. This is the result of a growing mythical and symbolic load to these images (McNair 2007). In this context, the affective register is used more than the rational one, emphasizing those aspects that can stimulate fears, anxieties, real or imagined crises, cultural stereotypes and

existential anguish. Thus, the consumer of political imagery is faced, on the one hand, with his vulnerabilities and, on the other hand, with his illusions and hopes for the messianic manifestation of those political personalities that could lessen the state of uncertainty and existential discomfort. In this mythological horizon, the philosophy of life brought by a powerful personal brand can be used for background of all personal construction, and its world of relationships can prove to be particularly relevant. As a symbolic construction, the brand offers us a way to place in the horizon of the sacred and to interact according to the ultimate meanings it reveals to us in the form of the values we assume and through the philosophy of life that we adopt.

2. Exploring the implications of political branding

The personal brands in the political sphere benefit first of all of this symbolic dimension (in which a significant role is played by the religious or spiritual elements). Through the role they have to assume, they are closest to the symbolic game brought by the term *persona* (mask) underlying the idea of person. Political personalities must play a role in a scenario. They must, on the one hand, take account of some general conventions on political behavior and, on the other hand, manifest themselves using a sign that distinguishes them from other individuals acting in the political space. That is to say, it is necessary to develop a personal brand capable of imposing itself on voters' preferences.

Although at an intuitive level it could be said that anybody understands what we mean by the concept of political brand, the theoreticians have not yet offered a convincing, unanimously accepted definition. We are talking about partial definitions, which start from underscoring a certain dimension, considered to be essential for the multiple dimensions involved in revealing the political brand. In the discussion about branding in general and about the political brand in particular, a definition to be unanimously accepted by theoreticians has not yet been reached.

One of the starting points in brand discussion may be the assertion that it identifies itself with "a name with the power to influence" (Kapferer 2012, 8). Emphasizing the ability to influence integrates the brand into the sphere of communication and turns it into a tool of persuasion. If we accept such a way of interpretation, then the special strength with which the brand is invested leads us to a comfort zone in which trust, certainty, positive emotions, positive thinking and experiences attached to them are integrated into a coherent existential vision, sometimes using myths that negotiate between market and religious logics (Negrea 2018; Crockett, Davis 2016). Being the instrument of such a persuasive action, the brand is in the position of risk reducers. Ultimately, "the perceived risk could be functional (linked to performance),

experiential (linked to our self-concept), or social (linked to our social image)" (Kapferer 2012, 9). Instead of a brand definition, it becomes more useful to trace the features and manifestations of the brand. As for the process of instrumentalization, the brand becomes a complex con-struction that is made in communication and for persuasive commu-nication. Such a construction takes place at the end of a process of building the public image and involves a political construction effort throughout the existence of the respective political brand.

Here are the elements of differentiation, which give uniqueness to the personality perceived as a brand, as well as the common, unifying elements that familiarize the brand and make possible the development of a trust relationship. In this way, the political brand brings with it both rational elements that underlie the choices made by the voters and a lot of elements related to the emotional register. Theorists tend to privilege today the role that the emotional facet plays in the choices made by voters. This way, we transcend those elements that ensure the relations of identification with the political brand, those which ensure the cohesion determined by internalization through empathy, those related to the intuitive resources of communication and the accumulation and projections of the desires that individuals regard as part of their system values and preferences justified from the perspective of a register of expectations in the community they are part of. This overloading of emotions is balanced by the intervention of a rationalization effort assumed by the fact that the personality manifesting itself as a personal brand in the public space projects all the options and actions on the background of a life philosophy - displaying as a model of reality and as a privileged way to ensure its actions' coherence. The assumption of one's own philosophy is visible especially at the axiological and hermeneutical level. It is about how the perceived personality as a political brand exhibits the values it cultivates and how it makes the interpretational grid it uses to reveal reference meanings to its voters. Such a register is most often circumscribed to a religious dimension. Sometimes, especially for populist reasons, this dimension gets a load and a theological manifestation, but naturally it manifests itself in the form of spiritual valences related to the need for authenticity and the natural tendency of transcendence. This relationship to transcendence is important from the perspective of integrating rational and emotional into a plan of message coherence, action and communication.

As we have become accustomed to the postmodern approaches of the sacred, the appeal to religion and spirituality is a constant one in the life of contemporary man, although he no longer preserves his traditional orientation and direction (Dima-Cozma, Cozma 2012; Backman 2014; Einstein 2008; Alisauskiene 2017). The postmodern man finds himself at the interference between his need for transcendence and the mani-festation of diffuse transcendence. In this process there is a kind of

wisdom which places communication in the center. This philosophy of transcendence and communication is particularly visible in the way in which a reciprocity relationship characterized by the presence of dialogue takes place (Buber 2002; Grad 2013). The register of reciprocity is the one in which the persuasive effect of the political brand action becomes maximum. The positive effect is lasting because it is based on the values shared by voters and personalities perceived as political brands. According to Philip Chen and Paul Goren, the brand is perceived as a value generation mechanism, seen as a twofold process: where, "in the first place we have, loyalty to the party and, secondly, image as a central heuristic that facilitates efficient and effective political judgment across a range of decisions" (Chen, Goren 2016, 703). Therefore, politicians and parties position themselves within "a left-right one-dimensional space in a conscious process of vote seeking and voters identify with the party closest to them" (Dalton, McAllister 2015, 759). The importance of the organizational dimension attached to the personal brand cannot be eluded. Particularly when talking about the political brand, the organization of personality as a personal brand on the market of ideas and election offers can play a decisive role through the institutional mechanisms it can set in motion to support the brand, cultivating an atmosphere of trust from its followers. At the same time, a powerful political brand can complete with its personality the image of a political organization through the intrinsic construction of the brand and through everything the voters are willing to attach to the brand in the identification process with the brand and the organization.

Political communication often emits a phenomenon of empathy similar, to a certain extent, to the type of reference to exemplary models we find in the narratives of religious traditions. The need for exemplary models, and especially the need for human beings to imitate and follow them, fuel the way in which the dynamics of the political brand can be perceived. Thus, first of all, we must note that in the electoral campaigns, the communication process focuses on image construction in a complex approach involving "the process of selecting personality dimensions and personality traits to be communicated and built into the 'behaviour' of the political brand" (Heding, Knudtzen, Bjerre 2008, 142). Both the characteristics of the personality that embodies the political brand and the ones built in such a way as to enhance the already existing qualities are taken into account. Secondly, communication and brand building must respond to a personal ideal that is close to that of potential voters. The communication adviser must analyze and frame the politician's brand in a paradigm that is as specific to the voters' expectations. Thereby, "if the voters are in a relational mode, they are looking for a strategic political platform to satisfy their value needs. This value goes beyond the brand. But if politicians adopt a relational strategy, the voter may engage in a long-term relationship" (Wojciech, Falkowsky, Newman 2011, 12). Thirdly,

we must bear in mind that it is necessary, on the one hand, to harmonize the personal qualities of the politician with his own brand, and on the other hand, to diminish the distance between what the politician represents as a personal presence and as a public presence, and how this presence is exposed as a personal brand to be traded in the political space. At the same time, we must not ignore the fact that the political brand acts on a market of electoral offers. Therefore, it is necessary to constantly agree on the offer of meanings, values and beliefs that the political brand brings with the exemplary model that the voter has in mind and is ready to follow, to invest heavily, even to invest it with sacredness - which means to be able to even adore the model. Brand counseling in the sphere of political communication must always take into account this process of human need for transcendence related to an ideal. It is part of the mythical nature of the West to follow this impulse of impeccable, both familiar and inconspicuous patterns in connection with the adored subject, an inadequacy typical of the relations cultivated by the Western man about the sacred.

3. Brand identity and brand personalization

Interaction with the electorate takes place on a relational model, "emphasizing the accessing of an 'inner reality' and, as a consequence, the validity of 'lived experience.' The relational approach is meaning-based." (Heding, Knudtzen, Bjerre 2008, 155) However, the meanings are the result of a dialogue, they often involve a structure of reciprocity in which the political brand and electorate are continually enriched in the process of electoral communication. From the reflections on electoral communication, we can infer that this communication is not a mere transmission of messages from politician to possible voters. It is a rather complex connection in which the message once sent to voters returns to a transmitter enriched by the receiver's experience, and only then becomes a comprehensive message of authentic significance received from the perspective of the values that the receiver of the message embodies. At the basis of this reciprocity relationship lies a type of transfer that we find in the consumption of commercial brands. Joseph F. Rocereto, HyokjinKwak, and Marina Puzakova revealed that the intersubjective projection of brands appears in the case of products as a magical form of animism or anthropomorphism of objects due to the fact that brands can be animated and personalized (Rocereto, Kwak, Puzakova 2008, 413). This transfer process is more visible to political brands and is favored by the fact that the brand is, in this situation, either an organization composed of individuals or a person who can be the carrier of values, powers and specific experiences brand construction.

We have to notice that the political brands have constructional and behavioral features similar to the brand in general. General characteristics

are found even when religion itself is regarded as a brand that manifests itself in the field of global relations of a consumerist society. We can see that, in such a context, religion is positioned according to a logic of consumption. So, „religion is made to compete with other cultural products, and is thereby forced to become more convenient, customer-oriented, relevant to everyday life, and entertaining; the divide between the sacred and profane, religious and secular, is blurred; religions can no longer demand 'brand loyalty', in the form of a life-time commitment, but instead must compete to ignite and reignite commitments; for religious organizations, the objective becomes growth and continual expansion, or at least the stabilization of their 'niche' or 'market share'; a tension is created within faith brands between disseminating their message to the widest audience and preserving their authenticity" (Gauthier, Woodhead, Martikainen 2013, 17). These elements show us that the brand plays according to market rules which the consumerist society puts out with more bold features. Often proving important in communication is the positioning of the brand on the market in relation to faith or the intersection of ideology and marketing (Al Abdulrazak, Gbadamosi 2017; Leak, Woodham, McNeil 2015). Personal brands are products that should also adapt to the market on which they are sold as products, even if everyone agrees that people are a more specific product than other products. No political brand can escape to this world of demand and supply, positioning according to the ideas market and the needs of the citizen, adapting to the changes in preferences that may occur among voters. However, what appears to be a stronger requirement for personal brands is the need for authenticity. This is why personal brand counselors should consider this maximum demand on the part of the public and give them greater importance. In the case of the political brand, it is necessary, on the one hand, to focus on the details of authenticity in the manifestation of the political brand and, on the other hand, to make life philosophy assumed and to propose the personal brand of the politician acting in a context of marketization of political relations.

As we can see from the analysis of Jean-Noël Kapferer, in political communication we use mainly two tools of brand construction: 'brand identity', specifying the facets of brands' uniqueness and value, and 'brand positioning', the main difference enabling preference in a specific electoral context, at a specific time for certain politicians (Kapferer 2012, 150). This characteristic of postmodern political communication reveals that brand dynamics is taking place according to a consumerist logic in which the symbolic dimension is as important as in traditional religious societies, even if the visibility and intensity with which it manifests is perceived in a lesser manner. Brands „are symbols around which social networks and loose communities can be formed. They function as providers of meaning, identity, and belonging. Consumerism works by instituting relations between people and brands attached to certain

lifestyles. Consumerism is about identification, not satisfaction." (Gauthier, Woodhead, Martikainen 2013, 18)

The emergence of products with special characteristics on the market, which we perceive as brands, reaches the maximum development in the consumerist ideology of the postmodern society, which wants to establish intersubjective relations specific to the global market. The fulfillment of such a desideratum is possible only in a society that recovers the symbolic dimension, which, apparently, the modern world has marginalized. There is solidarity between consumerism and postmodernism, it is not ideological in nature, it is manifested as a concern for symbolic reconstruction. From the point of view of the theme of the significant personal brand is that in the postmodern society. "Consumerism is a symbolic economy. Products refer to brands that are symbols inscribed in social relations. This is why the ideal for a brand is to achieve cult status - that is, the maximum degree of recognizability, uniqueness, authenticity, and emotional power, so that it can become a fit for identification, belonging, community, personal and collective emotion, and rituals "(Gauthier, Woodhead, Martikainen 2013, 18).

There is a series of participations to a lasting reality when talking about the symbolic dimension of brand identity. The participation of the ideology in the symbolic structure of the sacred metamorphosed, the participation of the political brand in the intrinsic symbolism of ideology, but also the participation of the political brand in the symbolic resources, fed by the religious sensitivity of the voter who guides his preferences towards a certain political brand. Thus, the political brand functions as an external reality that encapsulates the personal values that allow voters to participate in brand dynamics through an effort to internalize the brand recognition process, and the positive development of its image. Jennifer Lees-Marshment revealed that "image research reflects the way in which certain groups perceive a politician" (Lees-Marshment 2014, 110). Brand counseling should therefore concentrate, among others but not exclusively, on the possible associations between symbolic imagery derived from the voter's tradition and culture, and the image of the brand seen as a synthesis enabled by voters – including brand messages, visual symbols.

At the same time, we must not ignore that there is a certain fragility of the brand. It is determined first of all by the fact that besides the external side there is an internal conditioning of the personal brand. This refers to the intrinsic data of the person we offer as a political brand. As is the case with the brand in general, it expresses the brand's tangible and intangible characteristics. In determining the identity of the brand the personal input the politician brings with him is important, and this has to be closely correlated with the way the brand is positioned on the market of the political offer. Consequently, „the self in this context is not an organic thing with a specific location whose fundamental fate is to be born, come to maturity and die; Instead, the crucial concern, it turns out

to be whether it will be credited or discredited" (Goffman 1959, 244-245). The external consistency of brand image must always be related to internal consistency, intangible data of the brand, which can become recognizable by materialization in the system of values, in the affective register or in the symbolic consciousness of the voter. This coherence must be visible in all relational structures. As Harrison White looked, understanding of the world, "identity" or "self-realization" is the result of the entire network of interactions involving the politician. It is important that there is no "pure essence" behind the "self", strengthening that people always experience the world through their interpretations (White, 2008, 21). Here again, the importance of a politician's ideological choices is revealed here, and above all, the philosophy of life that he can put together with the exposure of his own personal brand,. The personal brand always targets a relational universe. It cannot be conceived separately from the relational structures it implies. Modern brand communication theory reminds us that when brands communicates, "one builds representations of who speaks (source re-presentation), of who is the addressee (recipient re-presentation)", and what specific relationship the communication builds between them (Kapferer 2012, 158). There is a positive dependence of the brand on the presence of alterity. For this reason, the personal brand is built in communication and must be developed and cultivated together with a communication advisor. By such statements we do not want to diminish the marketization process of the person involved in building the personal brand, but it would be totally unwise to reduce the brand to this process and not to notice that brand dynamics is built in communication and is becoming more and more bidding as communication becomes more complex and nuanced, according to the types of interaction that the relational universe of the personal brand develops.

4. Instead of conclusions

Considering that, "the personal brand is a personal identity that stimulates significant perceptions among audiences about the qualities and values they are advocating" (Montoya, Vandehey 2002, 15), political communication must play an important role in building up personal identity. In this respect, it is necessary, on the one hand, to constantly develop the intrinsic qualities of the personalities we position as political brands, and on the other hand, the politicians must "overcome the plurality of ethical personalities, but rather be seen as assuming an ontological priority" (Du Gay 1996, 181). We do not want to develop here an ontology of the relational subject, but it should be noted that any brand construction should start from the dialogic premise of such an ontology. The merger between the personal and the political brand claims „a synthetic personalization that takes place by promoting the techniques of

personal relationships and by their anchoring in the professional sphere" (Cameron 2000, 62).

At the same time, this process has to be reconciled with the dimension of the alterity specific to the brand and it is inherent in the need for recognition that makes its manifestation a political brand.

Even though secular societies are no longer in fashion to invoke messianic personalities to solve communities, the prominent political personalities retain something of their aura of sacredness. The pheno-menon can be explained if we notice that personality is „the unique configuration that an individual takes in the history of an individual's entire system responsible for his conduct" (Allport 1937, 48). Such a concentration of values and ideals gain an integrative function at the level of individual expectations and at the level of their retrieval in a model with an appropriate ontological consistency (Frigioiu 2007, 140; Med-veschi, Gori 2017). There are studies showing that the concentration of personalities is higher in crisis-stricken societies, as the orientation of hopes and trust towards organizations and institutions is increased in societies that enjoy greater prosperity. The importance of political brands grows higher during the crisis, and this demand is satisfied by all channels of communication. On the one hand there is a great demand from the public for media contact with the image of the personalities, and on the other hand, we find that any „leader loves this sensuous chord of familiarity - even factional - and emotional relationships - even illusory. This unconscious projection, fed by the media, in the form of the show, gives it a role of "representation"" (Frigioiu 2007, 143).

Also, the prestige enjoyed by the political brand in the sphere of political relations must also be related to the voters' willingness to live a better life. Thus, citizens project their expectations in the mythology of a society of abundance, often associated with paradisiacal paradigms, their projected representations of political brands, and their expectations. This explains why, especially in crisis societies, apocalyptic mythologies, cons-piracy and gold age optimism are intertwined in the public imagination and are projected, with great ease, on recognizable personalities as authentic manifestations of the ideal of accomplishing the public welfare.

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