

Political Leadership, Nations and Charisma

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10 Talking about Jörg Haider

Enactment of *Volksnähe*

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The personality cult surrounding Jörg Haider (1950 – 2008), who had been the longstanding leader of the extreme-right *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ), the Austrian Freedom Party, is a remarkable example of the construction of charisma and its function in public perceptions. To a certain degree, charisma is derived from an individual's character and how this appeals to the broad masses. But to reduce charisma to nothing else would miss the more exciting part: how perceptions of charisma actually work, for instance how specific personal traits are perceived by followers as truly charismatic. In the case of Haider, it is the attribution of *Volksnähe* (populism, closeness to 'common' people), which acquired a specific, ideological slant and carried connotations such as 'representative of the true will of the people' in questions concerning immigration and authoritarian approaches to law enforcement. After Haider's death, even former political opponents praised his charisma as an 'outstanding politician' and 'exceptional political talent', thereby unwittingly reaffirming parts of this imagery that Haider had propagated about himself.

Max Weber maintained that 'it is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma'.¹ This chapter will investigate how recognition works in an age of media democracy,² where constructions of charisma are part of the wider struggle over discursive representations in politics. Access to political power is basically dependent on generating support through the evocation and establishment of certain patterns of perception – primarily through the media – so that they are taken on by relevant parts of the public. Political reality is formed by concurring bids for defining imminent social problems in a certain society and the apt remedies that define what needs to be done.³ It is in this way that wider discourses delimit what is politically feasible at any historic point.⁴ The concurring bids also encompass political identities, perceptions of who stands for which issues and is regarded as competent to act appropriately. To become preponderant, perceptions have to be established on a broader scale, eventually influencing even sympathisers and voters from other parties. The processes – how certain meanings and ascriptions are propagated – are stabilised and begin to mobilise certain parts of a population; essentially, this is a discursive

process. A consequence is that – like other bids – claims of charisma need to be based on a certain control over one's representations in the mass media and their perception by various audiences – an aspect Weber had not accounted for in *Economy and Society*.

Political discourse analysis therefore seeks a more decentralised definition of power, departing from Weber's definition (as an actor's 'position to carry out his will against resistance'⁵) by comprising the crucial role of discursive processes in the hegemonial struggle over meanings.⁶ As the more subtle forms of political domination in late modern media-democracies gain their force through the need to influence people's beliefs, it is important to consider the inner logic of discursive representations and their effects on the consciousness of different audiences. This analysis therefore also draws on a corpus of qualitative data from everyday conversations, in which people reproduce their political perspectives on what is legitimate and normal in social and political relations.

Jörg Haider should be considered an iridescent person; for his followers, he was almost a pop star, a hero and – after his fatal car accident in October 2008 – even a martyr.⁷ For his critics, he was a dangerous demagogue who had mobilised racist prejudice and revisionist resentments in his attempt to come to power; the personal cult around Haider was always regarded as something bizarre. For instance, how could someone be proclaimed a martyr who had killed himself through reckless driving on wet roads? This, in addition to having been completely drunk, resulted in a loss of control over his car, endangering others while driving home from an evening with his male lover. However, for Haider's fans, especially in the Austrian province of Carinthia, where he had been Provincial Governor during his last nine years, he was the 'king of hearts for all Carinthians'. With his death, 'the sun had fallen from the sky'.⁸ Newspapers called him – slightly ironically – 'a second Lady Di', a term adopted by his followers. Carinthians placed thousands of candles and flowers at the entrance to his former office and at the place of his death. His homosexual affair was completely obfuscated by these devotees. In fact, one of the interesting aspects about Haider was how he, and his followers, became almost immune against what the press and his opponents said and wrote about him.⁹ During his political life, he even succeeded in turning any criticism against the critics themselves and actively used the media's attention to raise his political profile.¹⁰ Moreover, Jörg Haider also had the ability to attract protest voters from other political camps, gradually acquiring a rather heterogeneous constituency. Some of his supporters, who for the most part did not identify with the far-right ideology he represented, identified with other elements of the persona Haider had established, such as his 'Robin Hood' image.¹¹

This chapter will address important aspects of this phenomenon. In particular, how could Haider raise the FPÖ's popularity from under 10 per cent in 1986 to become an important challenger to the established Austrian mainstream parties, even overtaking the conservative *Österreichische Volkspartei*

(ÖVP) in the General Elections of 1999, in which the FPÖ won 27 per cent of the votes? Arguably, Haider achieved this by frequently changing his political positions and embracing seemingly contradictory issues. After a short introduction to the personality cult surrounding Haider, the chapter will address an important aspect of what was broadly seen as Haider's charisma. The ascription of *Volksnähe* was more than just a certain openness and communicative competence he revealed in personal contact with his constituency. The image Haider propagated of himself contained ideological overtones, positioning himself as a 'true representative of the people's innermost needs and will'.¹² Of course, Haider had not dared to make such a bold claim directly, but – as political scientist Murray Edelman has proposed – political symbols and beliefs are much more effectively transmitted through recurring implied meanings of communicative actions than through persuasive argumentation.¹³ The ideological overtones were hidden in tacit assumptions and recurring discursive structures in Haider's political speeches and press releases from the FPÖ. How these meanings were propagated, reproduced and started to double up perceptions of reality, even for Haider's political opponents, makes them an ideal example to illustrate the ambiguities of such ascriptions in the struggle for control over political representations.

The first section of this chapter will use existing studies of Haider and the FPÖ. The second part will draw on empirical material taken from a larger research project, which analyses TV audiences' identification when watching political discussions on the evening news.¹⁴ The project analyses how the interpretations of politicians presented on TV discussions resonated with the understanding of politics among different audiences, in order to produce insights into the detailed processes of perception in the forming of public opinion. The part of the data used here, a series of recordings of conversations among different TV audiences, was collected shortly after Haider's death. Five different groups were deliberately selected from diverse social and political backgrounds, including social democrat and conservative voters, who were Haider critics of varying degrees, as well as stalwarts of the FPÖ. These conversations occurred among friends, colleagues or family members, who mostly shared a common political perspective and were asked to comment on a report covering Haider's accident. Daily conversations are often full of inferences and incomplete, so the transcripts presented here may appear unfamiliarly raw, but attention to the details of conversation is necessary in order to reconstruct the interpretational work of participants. What people regard as 'social knowledge' becomes visible in what is elliptically circumscribed. The purpose of this chapter is to reconstruct the participants' own understandings of what they saw on TV and relate its relevance to politics. The conversations centre around people's perceptions of Haider. These assessments of Haider's political life can provide detailed insights into how people process and understand the political spectacle, as well as provide some clues to understanding how seemingly non-ideological ascriptions of personal character actually reproduce a hidden political agenda. It is argued here that

a certain ideal type of politician exists, which is propagated in conversations about Haider's charisma, and that this ideal type is important beyond the clientele of FPÖ voters. This chapter will demonstrate how the only seemingly non-ideological attribution of *Volksnähe* actually propagated a certain representation of political style to become a hegemonic ideal type, against which politicians of other parties started to be measured.

Utilising the mass media: a party for protest voters

Haider had an extraordinary talent for political drama and entertaining appearances, and thus skilfully played the game of the mass media – the economy of attention.¹⁵ In fact, through his political rhetoric and tactical initiatives between 1986 and 1999, he was so successful in nurturing the heterogeneous expectations of his growing groups of followers that he could never live up to them in political reality. After coming to power in a coalition with the conservative party ÖVP in 2000, Haider's FPÖ lost more than 62 per cent of their votes in less than one legislation period – a spectacular loss of almost two-thirds of their followers. In the general elections of 2002, the FPÖ fell back to the status of a small party of just 10.01 per cent.¹⁶ How can we explain this unusual divergence of expectations and political performance, and what does it tell us about media-democracy and charismatic politicians? Jörg Haider, on the one hand, had a distinctly far-right ideological background, provoking regular scandals with his public remarks, which included delivering a eulogy to SS veterans or praising the social politics of the Third Reich for having a 'sound approach towards employment policy'.¹⁷ On the other hand, sudden changes in the party line suggest that he was much more of an opportunist when choosing political initiatives according to political trends that he thought might foster his political career.¹⁸

The FPÖ had a pro-European Union (EU) stance before Austria's membership application in 1989 and the referendum on membership in 1995. There are even several examples of parliamentary initiatives and press releases in which Haider's FPÖ urged the government to join the European Community quickly.¹⁹ However, with the prospect of facing the referendum, where a very close 50:50 vote was expected, Haider changed sides. The pro-EU stance was already covered by the ruling social democrat/conservative coalition, and Haider shrewdly did not wish to leave 50 per cent of the votes to the EU sceptics, the Green Party. As a result, he began a political campaign arguing that the EU needed to do what Haider called their 'homework' before he could endorse the entry of Austria into the Community.²⁰ Haider lost this public vote and Austria joined the EU, but his tactics were successful. From then on, he was the self-declared representative of EU sceptics – a position that also gained ground within the electorate of mainstream parties.

There were many further instances when Haider's FPÖ adopted political positions for tactical purposes, mainly in an attempt to maximise their votes. For instance, in 2002, the FPÖ initiated a referendum against the Czech

nuclear power plant Temelin. Opposition to nuclear power plants had never been on the FPÖ's political agenda. However, this issue gained strength in public opinion, a process also driven by Austria's biggest tabloid newspaper. Haider's FPÖ linked their referendum on Temelin with pressure on the Austrian government to veto Czech membership to the EU unless the nuclear power plant was closed. Consequently, Haider was able to combine public support from the movement against nuclear power with the FPÖ's more traditional agendas: anti-Czech resentments and fear of Slavic immigration through the expansion of the EU to include eastern European countries.²¹

Haider cleverly and quickly adapted the FPÖ's position to popular trends in changing situations, connecting the upcoming new issues with his core political themes: immigration, the EU and public security. Unexpected moves, often introduced by deliberately provocative messages and personal attacks on his critics, were an important and powerful part of his strategy. He consciously polarised public opinion, frequently representing opinions that promised to bear the biggest potential. His aim was to portray himself as the only politician who would not stand for the 'foul compromises' of mainstream parties.²² Haider cultivated his image as a modern Robin Hood, claiming to speak truth to power and, with provocation as the main tool of his political style, he commanded the attention of the mass media with virtuosity.²³ Haider was at his best when he had just orchestrated a scandal, often with fierce personal attacks on renowned public figures. When public disapproval escalated, he would call for a press conference, where journalists and the public expected him to apologise or at least justify his behaviour. However, Haider used his rhetorical ability and the self-manufactured attention to reframe the debate and propel his political messages.²⁴ Gradually, it even became part of his fame that Haider almost always got away with his scandals. Even when he had been lying, the ability to get away with a falsehood enhanced his attractiveness to his followers.²⁵ Haider's performances were spectacular, and the mass media always provided a stage for him and his often inconsistent and contradictory messages. Putting Haider on the front page became an important method of selling more newspapers or magazines.²⁶ Haider himself had become the political programme of the FPÖ.

Enactment and implicit meanings of Volksnähe

An important part of the image Haider established of himself was his propagated *Volksnähe*, his closeness to the mind-set and 'true will' of the common people. In 1994, when Haider's anti-immigration initiatives were fiercely criticised, an election poster showed a smiling, laid-back Haider. The slogan read: 'They are against him, because he is for YOU'. Haider interpreted the fierce criticism of his xenophobic and racist policy as proof that he had attacked the established powers.²⁷ The recurring pattern of such enactments was to introduce his political initiatives under the general framework that the FPÖ was the only party that cared for the Austrian people. This, he argued, stood in

contrast to what he dubbed the ‘left-liberal power block’, which allegedly cared more about foreigners or about maintaining their own power position. To categorise everybody else in the political arena as part of the ‘left-liberal power block’ (or, as Haider used to say, ‘the left-lefts’), even the conservatives, the Green Party and the church, was just a rhetorical manoeuvre to depict the FPÖ and their followers as the ‘true Austrians’. Haider’s FPÖ also used this rhetoric when propagating minority opinions and openly xenophobic resentments, which were criticised by most other political and civic organisations. However, the constant reiteration at every possible opportunity stabilised this perception among Haider’s followers that he represented the ‘true people’. At every election at which the Freedom Party had won votes and the mainstream parties had lost them, Haider presented himself as the real winner of the election. He demanded that the ‘will of the people’ should be respected by inviting him into government, even when the FPÖ came third, with less than 20 per cent of the vote. This implicit ideological meaning of *Volksnähe* as the ‘people’s will’ was clearly a rhetorical product of Haider’s ‘ontological gerrymandering’.

Strangely enough, the loaded metaphor *Volksnähe* became part of a more widely accepted discourse when talking about Haider and was readily taken up by the mass media, including tabloids, conservative broadsheets and even the liberal newspapers. In addition to Haider’s ability to successfully pick up on popular sentiment, Haider also had an open and winning appearance when approaching people. As Klaus Ottomeyer observes in his work, he used to ‘bathe in the crowds’, and not only during election campaigns.²⁸ For example, as the Provincial Governor of Carinthia, he made it his practice to personally distribute social welfare to those in need. To receive their money, applicants had to queue at municipal offices where Haider himself handed out 100 Euro bills.²⁹ It was popularly said that every Carinthian had shaken hands with Haider at least once: a suitable picture for the pseudo-feudalistic patron – client relationship that Haider had established within his constituency. In contrast to other politicians, Haider did not shy away from direct contact with people, and he was very successful in using this ability to support the public image that he himself had created.

Perceptions of *Volksnähe* in conversations about Haider

This section now will turn to empirical data: samples from different audience groups, which for identification purposes are called *Firma* (company), *Schule* (school) and *Schützen* (shooting club), referring to the location of the interviews. The interviewees commented on their perceptions of Haider while watching news reports about him on television. After Haider’s death, his former political opponents followed the maxim of ‘not to speak ill of the dead’. The Social Democratic Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer and other high-ranking politicians praised him as a charismatic and ‘exceptional political talent’. Some of them also mentioned his closeness to the common people

(*Volksnähe*), while only a few criticised Haider's 'tendency to polarise'.³⁰ Attempts to avoid being seen as disrespecting Haider after his death led opponents to address aspects of his performance rather than ideological differences. Recordings show how these attempts were actually understood by sympathisers of the Freedom Party. As a declared Haider fan from the province Tyrol commented:

ROMAN: Jörg Haider, well. People who had been arguing with him now praise him to the skies almost immediately, only two days after his death. Even the chancellor, our 'Gusi', praised him at the funeral, and only fourteen days before they had been arguing on TV. This is what depresses me a little: that you need to be dead to be praised into the sky, in the true sense of the word (laughs).³¹

Roman, clearly a Haider follower, states that even Haider's political opponents had secretly always admired him, although they could only admit it after his death. This perception is completely modelled after the recurring 'storyline' of Haider's own framing. Namely, that Haider was attacked by his critics because he was correct – speaking 'truth to power' – and not because of his racist remarks or his trenchant personal attacks. In this sketch of Haider, as an unrecognised genius, we already find the basic traits of the imaginary figure of authenticity that is at the core of what *Volksnähe* evokes in Haider's followers.

In another example, FPÖ supporters explain Haider's political success and charisma with his *Volksnähe*, claiming that he spoke the 'people's language':

SIEGLINDE: Well for me he had – In an interview he had been telling me that this is what he stood for as a politician, as provincial governor. That this is, what it was all about with him. That he- he must be well-versed in the law and so on

VICTOR: He had studied constitutional law

ALFRED: [Trained in constitutional law, no?]

SIEGLINDE: [He is there just to give this to his people, isn't it?] The people must know what they have to do, and he said, sometimes he found himself in talking too – high, that one didn't understand, what he means, this is what lots of politicians do and I listen tensely and I don't understand what they have been saying.³²

Sieglinde's formulation in the first sentence indicates her para-social relationship to Haider. She treats a televised Haider as if he were her everyday conversational partner, claiming he told her personally what was in fact revealed publicly in a television interview. Her delusive sense of 'togetherness' is based on the fact that she felt he spoke her language. His language is the main recurring topic in her characterisation of Haider's 'natural' authority, which she repeatedly refers to. She depicts him as her ideal type of politician: an authoritative figure who gives out instructions for what needs to be done, but contrary to most other politicians, he speaks a clear and simple language. Thus, she views him not only as someone who

knew ‘the laws and so on’ better than others, but also a politician eager to connect to ‘simple’ people like Sieglinde herself.

The fact that she praises his expertise in law is especially interesting, as Haider was repeatedly admonished by the Constitutional Court for failing to implement constitutionally granted minority rights of Slovenians in Carinthia. Haider had resorted to cheap administrative tricks to block the implementation of bilingual traffic signs for several years, always asserting that the majority of the people did not want them. He even insulted the Constitutional Court and its president as ‘ideologically blind’ after several convictions ruled that his administrative steps were unlawful.³³ However, followers such as Sieglinde did not see these controversial policies as important when describing Haider. Rather, traits such as the ability to speak ‘the people’s language’ were deemed more important, a central aspect of his charismatic qualities which gained special meanings.

In other passages, this ability to speak ‘the people’s language’ is equated with being authentic and correct in what he said. Victor joins Sieglinde’s assessment of Haider as someone easily understood by the ‘people’ and extends the account with a description of Haider’s openness when approaching people in public.³⁴ For Victor, too, Haider’s authenticity was directly observable in his popular behaviour, which becomes apparent from a story he reproduces as evidence in another passage. His story of ‘a case from the Ministry of Finance’ is quite allusive, condensed and intricate.

SIEGLINDE: For me he was very uhm very uhm competent, because when he spoke I always understood what he wanted to say hmmm and of course how he presented it, he had – mmm rhetorically he was – *fantas[itic, wasn’t he?]*

VICTOR:

[One thing]

I know, Haider was always true to his – word. For example, I know a – a case from the Ministry of Finance where someone had been looking into his financial file, to find out what his zodiac sign was.³⁵

Victor’s intricate story of a civil servant from the Ministry of Finance – a female Haider fan, who wanted to know his zodiac sign and illegally accessed his fiscal file only to look for his birth date – is interesting in more than one respect. First, it must be embedded in the wider context of Haider’s political tactics. In 2001, an informant and former head of the FPÖ faction in the Labour Union of the police had revealed that the FPÖ was actively collecting incriminating material from police files, which Haider then used for unexpected personal attacks against his critics in television duels and public speeches. Haider got out of this ‘espionage affair’ in spite of evidence incriminating his close assistants.³⁶ However, in the conversations cited here, Victor replicated only the part of the story that Haider used to justify his actions: that he had himself more than once been a victim of opponents’ espionage. Victor continues his account of how Haider handled the special case of the woman who had illegally accessed his files, an account which is constructed to prove his *Volksnähe*:

VICTOR: (...) last year, that summer, the woman coincidentally met him at the Wörthersee. He was in the same group of people – uhhh and then he said uhhh he said to her: you know something, this is my business-card, when somebody – uhm will bother contacting you, you can call me up and we will settle this case.³⁷

Victor aims to explain that Haider was willing to help the woman who was being prosecuted even though she only wanted to find out his zodiac sign. The anecdotal evidence in this story underlines the unreserved, personal behaviour of Haider when he met the woman ‘coincidentally’ ‘in the same group of people’ on a Carinthian lake, immediately handing out his personal telephone number. In connection with the rather peculiar account of the ‘espionage-affair’ this depiction gains a special meaning which this chapter will come back to shortly. Moreover, this exchange between Sieglinde and Victor must be analysed in the context of the entire conversation. Here, a group of colleagues working at the same school are still negotiating their different standpoints when sitting together to comment on the evening news. Sieglinde and Victor are just about to find out that they are both sympathisers of Haider. Sieglinde at first had cautiously praised Haider as someone she ‘understood’. When Victor joins in with his anecdote, praising Haider’s amicableness in contact with common people, she ratifies Victor’s disclosure of being a Haider fan too with an inferentially loaded, pragmatic remark.

SIEGLINDE: Yes. Well I always ask myself, when everybody talks bad and there are all these accusations again – who for God’s sake has been voting for him, then?³⁸

She suggests that it is not easy to say something good about Haider in a situation where ‘everybody’ only ‘talks badly’ about him, and that she is happy to find somebody like Victor who obviously must be one of his voters too. Before that – in her opening remarks to the whole discussion – she had said that she felt repelled by the mass media which commented and viewed Haider’s death in the context of his drunkenness and homosexual affair. Here, in her inferential characterisation of the general situation, we again find this peculiar figure of a truly popular politician who was always misrepresented in the media. This gives us a clue as to how she maintains her allegorical picture of Haider despite all the unfavourable details she has heard about him. Her perception of Haider’s popularity, too, is defined by her metaphorical image of ‘closeness to common people’ and not endangered by the apparent fact that many people in her social environment do not share her political preferences, an experience obviously familiar to her.

In Victor’s story Haider’s ‘unbureaucratic ways’ were proof of his predominant interest in the ‘common people’. Note that the perception of legitimacy revealed here, in terms of Max Weber’s distinction, is oriented to the charisma of Haider’s personality, which for Victor obviously counts for more than the legitimacy of legal authority that depends on adherence to due

process. Victor's story is framed primarily as one proving that Haider 'was always true to his word', and it is remarkable that, in his account of what Haider actually did, it was only to promise to solve a problem unbureaucratically. Whether or not he was actually true to his word is not part of the account. It is merely postulated by the way in which Haider's words are reproduced in a formulation of direct speech and other clues, which can be found in the form of representation. Gossip is a major means of establishing and reproducing what counts as 'social knowledge' and, in this account of a reportedly real event, we can see how the representation of Haider's *Volksnähe* is reproduced as something taken for granted. Inferentially, it provides the core of the storyline that audiences need to fill in for understanding what the whole story is about.

Volksnähe as hegemonic ascription

This chapter has so far described cases of what Haider's former voters perceived as close-to-reality evidence of his 'consonance with the people', his *Volksnähe* and the connotations of what this term meant to them in their own political world view. What seem to be rather factual descriptions of a politician's language and behaviour in public obviously carries images of politics that bear ideologically coined meanings. Further cases covering what even critics of Haider's Freedom Party regarded as *Volksnähe* are particularly interesting, because they might reveal how ascriptions of an identity and their symbolic connotations can become hegemonic.

Tom and Wolfgang can be regarded as typical examples of traditionally loyal voters for mainstream parties such as the Social Democrats (SPÖ) or, in this case, the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), who nonetheless had developed a certain sympathy for Jörg Haider. For them, the image of Haider's *Volksnähe* seems to have become a pivotal point conciliating their critical assessments of Haider, on one side, with their fascination for him, on the other. They clearly see him as a politician obsessed with power, who never tolerated somebody else becoming too prominent besides him in his party.³⁹ Contrary to the Haider supporters in the first examples, Tom and Wolfgang have a critical perception of the strong and often delusive impact of Haider's rhetorical abilities. Nevertheless, he still embodied something of their ideal type of politician who 'especially in his last TV duels was superior to all other politicians'.⁴⁰ They had even hoped that he would initiate another coalition with their own party, the ÖVP.⁴¹ The critical point of their political assessment of Haider is where they try to come to terms with his original political position.

TOM: What was striking with him in his career was that every time he had built up something – when he came to the top, he ruined it by himself. For example when he became Provincial Governor for the first time and his saying about the Third Reich – or when the FPÖ came to government (...) shortly before his breakthrough he always somewhat ruined it himself, this was my impression.

WOLFGANG: (...) I think, there are certain statements – compared to what today

TOM: You shouldn't make certain statements but they were overstated excessively.

WOLFGANG: Yes.

TOM: In my opinion, in Austria this was – completely exaggerated, from a certain side, and naturally was a welcome opportunity for the whole world, when an Austrian – or a German says something positive about the Nazi regime, this was of course a welcome opportunity for the whole world. But one thing you couldn't blame Haider for, he surely was not Nazi – this – surely he was not.

WOLFGANG: Naturally he had received something from his father who was [involved, and of course he had received something from him in this direction,]

TOM: [Well ok, you have to judge him for what he has done, of course, but –]

WOLFGANG : but that he was, I mean really, the proper right-radical or something, this he surely was not.⁴²

Haider's praise of the Third Reich for its 'sound approach towards employment policy' was clearly unacceptable for Tom and Wolfgang. They also considered Haider's political socialisation by his father (who was a devoted member of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, or NSDAP) as part of their assessment of what he stood for. Still, they would not regard him as far right or even a Nazi politician. Instead, they see these accusations only as politically propagated prejudices 'from a certain side'. Again, this is an image central to Haider's self-presentation that he managed to disseminate among certain audiences. Whenever he was accused of Nazi jargon or racist positions, he discredited the criticism as politically motivated and presented himself as the one who was actually *ausgegrenzt*, or excluded, from political power by such discriminating imputations.⁴³ The phrase 'from a certain side' was Haider's own phrase when referring to those he regarded as his *Jagdgesellschaft*, or 'hunters'.⁴⁴ The fact that Tom and Wolfgang use this ideologically loaded phrase in this peculiar context and ideological sense is a strong indicator of them having ratified this discursive proposition as a 'truth'. If Haider actually was a Nazi in their opinion, they would not have regarded him as eligible for any political office. But by adopting Haider's interpretive frame of allegedly politically motivated criticism, their considerations are reframed and put into a relativised perspective.

Haider personified Tom and Wolfgang's ideal type of politician, and this obviously weighed more than their reservations against him for ideological reasons. And it was his *Volksnähe* that made him an ideal type. In their notion of 'biggest political talent', all their ideological differences are blurred:

TOM : Well isn't it right, he was in no way detached, like many or the most of our politicians – but rather somebody who was going right up to people and could talk to people and I think this has much value in our time (...)

WOLFGANG : Like in Tyrol, we had Partl.⁴⁵ Simple people who – Just one week ago I met Partl in Kitzbühl; he approaches you and shakes hands with you, well they are just simple people and Haider was one, too. He was just like that, each time when I met him he had greeted

TOM : Mhmm

WOLFGANG : and already from the distance. And he was very popular, in Carinthia, when I look at the debts – he had surely moved something [in the last years, this is indisputable].

TOM : [Its like that and you hear it also from] his opponents that he was the biggest political talent after Kreisky⁴⁶ almost everybody says that – what he was standing for, well, this is, either it found your favour or not, there was no middle, but he surely was a political talent – the biggest which we had in the last 30 years.⁴⁷

‘Political talent’ is an ascription that touches the imagined essence of an individual’s abilities and original position, a potential, which only might be reached in the future. Here, it is another conciliating concept for the Haider critics Tom and Wolfgang, reframing the burning question about the original political position of Jörg Haider. Haider’s socialisation by his Nazi father and his remarks about the Third Reich become secondary to them in comparison with this potential, with what he could have been because of his ‘closeness to the people’.

Wolfgang mentions ‘debts’, meaning the exorbitant public debt in Carinthia, which was widely criticised. Haider financed his popularity with numerous benefits, gifts and high representational expenses, bringing the province close to financial bankruptcy. However, Wolfgang viewed these expenditures as proof that Haider had actually ‘moved something’. Even the critical accounts about Haider, which Wolfgang and Tom ratify as true, legitimate and relevant, are reframed and turned into an achievement, through balancing them with Haider’s *Volksnähe*. ‘Closeness in contact’ is semantically equated to ‘closeness to the real problems of people’. The statement that politicians generally are seen as ‘detached’ is more than an individual assessment. It serves as a diagnosis of what is wrong in current politics, referring to a sentiment of political estrangement. In the way in which Tom and Wolfgang handle ‘detachment’ in contrast to ‘being in touch with common people’, it becomes obvious that they understand and use their indicators for both traits quite metaphorically. Knowing about the real problems of ‘simple people’ for them is a matter of contact, and its close-to-life-indicator can be as simple as how politicians are seen to behave in greeting rituals on the street.

So which kind of political world view is hidden in the only seemingly ideology-free category of *Volksnähe*? Obviously, it is an ascription which – when advanced to the main criterion for the assessment of political eligibilities – allows a certain politician to appear as singular and without alternative, even in spite of all the critical considerations and ideological differences one might have.

The individuals who were recorded showed a certain disposition to elevate *Volksnähe* or populism to their main assessment criterion of politicians. Moreover, they expressed their exhaustion with processes of political negotiation, especially with the negotiation of ‘true meanings’. The recurring topic of the detachment of politicians from everyday problems is a strong indicator for these individuals being overstrained from complex political processes, where different ideas of a good life and of just government within one society need to be reconciled. It is an expression of their feeling of estrangement from politics generally, which nurtures a longing for a simple and quasi-natural consonance of socio-political orientations between representatives and those they represent. This familiarity and reliability is reconstituted in what people regard as *Volksnähe*. In the process of talking about *Volksnähe* or populism, it becomes obvious that actually this bridging of a gap, between politicians and their constituencies, is what is at stake. However, the core of the imaginary figure *Volksnähe* lies in constructions, which veil the ideological meanings hidden in underlying connotations of authenticity and imagined accordance with the true people behind a rather descriptive account of political behaviour and public performance. Arguably, it is important to see the functions of such ascriptions, which are blurred by a mystification of charisma as something to be located in the ‘genius’ of political actors.

Conclusion

The way in which *Volksnähe* is advanced to an ideal of political legitimacy is mirrored in the traditional social relationship Weber called *Vergemeinschaftung* (communal relationship) which reappears in the populist tendencies of late modern democracy. “Communal relationship is based on a subjective feeling of the parties, whether rallying emotions or traditional, that they belong together”.⁴⁸ The dominant form of politics in modern societies is supposed to be *Vergesellschaftung* (associative relationship), but Weber had already covered the ‘Transformation of Charisma in a Democratic Direction’ in a chapter of *Economy and Society* carrying the same title.⁴⁹ In his typology of legitimate domination, he saw charismatic, plebiscitary leadership in democracies as something positive and necessary. Weber had already provided for the trend towards the personalisation of politics in modern democracies, and has often been criticised for not seeing its dangers.⁵⁰

Weber’s concept of power and domination might be too narrow to encompass the importance of another factor in legitimacy: the eminent role of discourses, of socio-political representations, as recurrent and recognisable ‘patterns of meaning which organize the various symbolic systems human beings inhabit’⁵¹ and which ‘recruit people to a particular view of the world without their really realizing it’.⁵² Hegemonic discourses need to be considered as a crucial element of political domination and as a source of public perceptions of legitimacy in late modern media-democracies. Almost a century after Max Weber’s attempt to articulate his political sociology, the

processes reconciling socio-political representations and their actual influence on political reality are still waiting to be integrated in an empirically grounded and equally groundbreaking social scientific concept. Such a concept must be able to explain the inner logics of political representations and their public resonance, especially cases of how meanings can be transformed, for this is how interpretative frameworks develop a dominance over others and spread across different socio-political milieux.

What we can learn from studying the success of Jörg Haider's FPÖ might be useful as a guideline for identifying crucial elements in the symbolic struggles that characterise relations of political domination in contemporary democratic societies. Right-wing populism seems to gain some of its strength from taking advantage of important mechanisms in media-democracies, especially the economics of attention.⁵³ Tactics of deliberate polarisation of public opinion, which dominate the political agenda of the FPÖ and similar political movements, depend for their success on an array of discursive sub-strategies that were touched upon, by means of examples only, in this chapter.

To evaluate the role of charisma in the rise of (right-wing) populism, one should consider another puzzling phenomenon: Jörg Haider as a widely recognised charismatic figure initiated the extraordinary rise of the FPÖ between 1986 and 1999. The charisma of his successor as head of the FPÖ, Heinz Christian Strache, is at least questionable, and still Strache enjoys a degree of popularity that is comparable to the popularity of his charismatic political predecessor.⁵⁴ Charismatic politicians might be important for the rise of political movements and the creation of certain demands, and that Haider had successfully created a longing for 'popular' politicians was the main point of this chapter. As political figures, they obviously seem to be replaceable by persons imitating their tactics and style.

Notes

- 1 M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1922, vol. 1, chapter 3.
- 2 The notion 'media democracy' is adapted from the German term *Mediendemokratie*, referring to the conditions of democracy in the age of mass media, where attention has become a scarce resource and the logic of being represented in the mass media has a severe impact on policies.
- 3 D.A. Schön and M. Rein, *Frame Reflection. Toward the Resolution of Intractable Policy Controversies*, New York: Basic Books, 1994.
- 4 M. Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985; J. Potter, *Representing Reality. Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Construction*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996; G. Lakoff, *Don't think of an Elephant. Know your Values and Frame the Debate*, White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishers, 2004; E. Gotsbachner, 'Durchsetzung von Deutungsrahmen in politischen Fernsehdiskussionen', *Gesprächsforschung – Online-Zeitschrift zur verbalen Interaktion*, 9, 2008. Available online: www.gespraechsforschung-ozs.de/heft2008/ga-gotsbachner.pdf (accessed 10 January 2011); E. Gotsbachner, 'Asserting Interpretative Frames of Political Events: Panel Discussions on Television News', in W. Housley and R. Fitzgerald (eds), *Media, Policy and Interaction*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009, pp. 49 – 71.

- 5 Weber, *Wirtschaft*, vol. 1, Chapter 1.
- 6 R. Keller, 'Diskursanalyse', in R. Hitzler and A. Honer (eds), *Sozialwissenschaftliche Hermeneutik* Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 1996, pp. 309 – 33; Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant*.
- 7 From a report on reactions of the public in Klagenfurt on the day of Haider's death in *Falter* [magazine], 42:8, 15 October 2008.
- 8 *Kurier* [newspaper], 19 October 2008; *Kronen Zeitung* [newspaper], 19 October 2008; *The Guardian*, 18 October 2008, Available online: www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/oct/18/haider-austria-fascism-far-right (accessed 20 June 2011).
- 9 A phenomenon that a journalist from the weekly political journal *profil* later called 'Teflon effect'. *profil* [magazine], 39:43, 20 October 2008.
- 10 S. Reinfeldt, *Nicht-Wir und Die-Da. Studien zum rechten Populismus*, Wien: Braumüller, 2000; E. Gotsbachner, 'Normalisierungsstrategien in der Rhetorik der FPÖ. Die politische Alchemie, Kritik in Unterstützung zu verwandeln', *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, 32, 2003, pp. 457 – 83.
- 11 A. Gingrich, 'A Man for all Seasons: An Anthropological Perspective on Public Representation and Cultural Politics of the Austrian Freedom Party', in R. Wodak and A. Pelinka (eds), *The Haider-Phenomenon in Austria*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002, pp. 67 – 91; Gotsbachner, 'Normalisierungsstrategien'.
- 12 Reinfeldt, *Nicht-Wir und Die-Da*; Gotsbachner, 'Normalisierungsstrategien'.
- 13 Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*.
- 14 For a description of the project and its methodology, and access to the working papers see www.univie.ac.at/frame-project (accessed 20 June 2011). I am indebted to my colleagues Judith Welz and Philomena Pötscher for ideas developed in our common analytic sessions.
- 15 Reinfeldt, *Nicht-Wir und Die-Da*; K. Ottomeyer, *Die Haider-Show: Zur Psychopolitik der FPÖ*, Klagenfurt: Drava, 2000; Gingrich, 'A Man for all Seasons'.
- 16 Online source: www.bmi.gv.at/cms/BMI_wahlen/nationalrat/NRW_2002.aspx (accessed 19 July 2011).
- 17 J. Haider, *Der Westentaschen-Haider*, Wien: Czernin, 2000, p. 35 and 47f.
- 18 C. Zöchling, Haider. *Licht und Schatten einer Karriere*, Wien: Molden, 1999; Reinfeldt, *Nicht-Wir und Die-Da*, 115 ff. See also the obituaries in *profil* [magazine], 39:43, 20 October 2008 and *Kurier* [newspaper], 19 October 2008.
- 19 Freiheitlicher Pressedienst 25.3.1987; 6.11.1987; 17.3.1991; Parliamentary initiative 136/A, 15 December 1987 www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XVII/NRSITZ/NRSITZ_00110/imfname_160821.pdf, p. 12992 (accessed 20 June 2011).
- 20 J. Haider, *Die Freiheit, die ich meine. Das Ende des Proporzstaates*, Frankfurt/M.: Ullstein, 1993: 261 ff.
- 21 Gotsbachner, 'Normalisierungsstrategien in der Rhetorik', p. 464; O. Geden, *Diskursstrategien im Rechtspopulismus. Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs und Schweizerische Volkspartei zwischen Opposition und Regierungsbeteiligung*, Opladen: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaft, 2006, p. 126; www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/jan/24/austria.eu (accessed 20 June 2011).
- 22 Zöchling, Haider. *Licht und Schatten einer Karriere*; Gotsbachner, 'Normalisierungsstrategien in der Rhetorik'; Geden, *Diskursstrategien im Rechtspopulismus*, p. 37.
- 23 Reinfeldt, *Nicht-Wir und Die-Da*.
- 24 H. Gruber, 'Der kleine Mann und die alten Parteien. Zum Sprachgebrauch J. Haiders 1973 – 87', *Journal für Sozialforschung*, 28, 1988, pp. 137 – 45; Gotsbachner, 'Normalisierungsstrategien'.
- 25 Ottomeyer, *Die Haider-Show*.

- 26 The editors of two Austrian political journals, Armin Thurnher and Herbert Lackner, in their obituaries; *profil* 39/43, 20 October 2008, p. 22; and *Falter* 42/08, 15 October 2008, p. 11.
- 27 For an extensive analysis of this strategy, see Gotsbachner, 'Normalisierungsstrategien'.
- 28 Ottomeyer, *Die Haider-Show*.
- 29 *profil* [magazine], 39:43, 20 October 2008.
- 30 *Kurier* [newspaper], 19 October 2008; *Kronen Zeitung* [newspaper], 19 October 2008.
- 31 Transcript, 'Firma', 3 November 2008, lines 748 – 55.
- 32 Transcript, 'Schule', 29 October 2008, lines 384 – 94.
- 33 BBC News, 7 January 2002, Available online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1747346.stm> (accessed 20 June 2011).
- 34 Transcript, 'Schule', lines 481 – 98.
- 35 Transcript, 'Schule', 29 October 2008, lines 140 – 6.
- 36 Florian Klenk, Die untertänige Justiz: www.falter.at/print/F2001_49_1.php (accessed 20 June 2011).
- 37 Transcript, 'Schule', lines 156 – 60.
- 38 Transcript, 'Schule', 29 October 2008, lines 150 – 5.
- 39 Transcript, 'Schützen', 3 November 2008, lines 157 – 64.
- 40 Transcript, 'Schützen', 3 November 2008, lines 186 – 202.
- 41 Transcript, 'Schützen', 3 November 2008, lines 210 – 15.
- 42 Transcript, 'Schützen', 3 November 2008, lines 218 – 77.
- 43 Gotsbachner, 'Normalisierungsstrategien'.
- 44 Haider, *Die Freiheit, die ich meine. Das Ende des Proporzstaates*, p. 70.
- 45 Alois Partl, ÖVP, former provincial governor of Tyrol.
- 46 Bruno Kreisky, SPÖ, Austrian Chancellor between 1970 and 1983.
- 47 Transcript, 'Schützen', 3 November 2008, lines 481 – 506.
- 48 Weber, *Wirtschaft*, vol. 1, Chapter 1.
- 49 Weber, *Wirtschaft*, vol. 1, Chapter 3.
- 50 S. Seubert, 'Paradoxien des Charisma. Max Weber und die Politik des Vertrauens', *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, 12, 2002, pp. 1127f. and 1138.
- 51 I. Parker, *Critical Textwork. An Introduction to Varieties of Discourse and Analysis*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999, p. 3.
- 52 B. Rampton, 'Critique in Interaction', *Critique of Anthropology*, Special Issue: Discourse and Critique, 21:1, 2001, p. 99.
- 53 E. Grande, 'Charisma und Komplexität. Verhandlungsdemokratie, Mediendemokratie und der Funktionswandel politischer Eliten', *Leviathan*, 28, 2000, pp. 139 – 41; Geden, *Diskursstrategien im Rechtspopulismus*.
- 54 The same applies to the former charismatic leader Pim Fortuyn and his successor Geert Wilders in the Netherlands.