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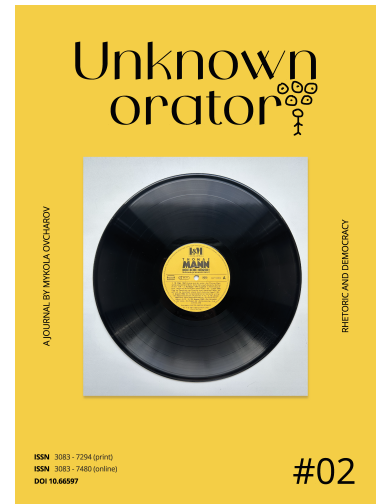
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AUTHORITARIAN RHETORIC: AN ANATOMY OF MANIPULATION

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ANNOTATION

This article offers a systematic analysis of authoritarian rhetoric as an instrument of manipulation and a mechanism for suppressing critical thought. The author identifies the defining characteristics of authoritarian discourse: binary thinking, categorical judgement, unidirectional communication, and the absence of pluralism. Drawing on speeches by Fidel Castro and Ding Xuexiang, Vice Premier of China, the piece examines the key markers of authoritarian rhetoric: the obligatory invocation of the leader, appeals to authority, the substitution of emotion for argument, the scapegoating of "others", and a cynical disregard for human life. Particular attention is given to the fundamental law of propaganda — repetition as a method of manufacturing the illusion of truth. The author argues that authoritarian rhetoric is by no means a relic of the past: it actively infiltrates democratic societies through populism, the reduction of complex questions to crude binary oppositions, and the deliberate cultivation of fear towards "others". The article underscores the necessity of developing critical thinking and rhetorical literacy as civic skills for recognising manipulative techniques. The ability to identify five key markers of authoritarian rhetoric is presented as a practical instrument for defending democracy and individual intellectual freedom.

KEYWORDS

authoritarian rhetoric, manipulation, propaganda, binary thinking, cult of the leader, populism, critical thinking, pluralism, emotional excess, repetition, Fidel Castro, Xi Jinping, markers of authoritarianism, rhetorical culture, democracy

Narrow Thinking as the Foundation

Authoritarian rhetoric is, above all, characterised by narrow, binary thinking. It is

oriented towards a single vector — the one correct direction of thought, determined by the one correct system of values. This constrains development and diminishes the quality of communication, since it precludes the kind of debate and multifaceted inquiry that are the hallmarks of democratic life.

Authoritarian power does not permit multidimensional thinking. It is precisely authoritarian rhetoric that ensures a broad, pluralistic worldview never takes root — standing in direct opposition to democratic rhetoric, which cultivates a multiplicity of perspectives.

A Case in Point: Fidel Castro

Consider a speech delivered by Fidel Castro on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution: "Let the heroic rallying cry of our people — what we have learned — endure for ever: Homeland or death!"

The word "ever" admits no alternative scenarios. Yet history is anything but linear. "Homeland or death" is binary thinking at its most naked — a formulation that forecloses all other arguments, all other trajectories, all other values, all other futures.

Categorical judgement is itself a form of emotional excess. And emotional excess is a powerful instrument of persuasion, particularly before a large audience — but only under one condition: that critical thinking has been suppressed and the information environment narrowed to the "correct line" of the authoritarian leader or party. The larger the crowd, the more susceptible it is to emotional rather than rational appeal, precisely when the capacity for independent thought has been systematically eroded.

Authoritarian Rhetoric Today

One might be tempted to regard authoritarian rhetoric as a phenomenon of the past, and assume its contemporary manifestations are mere historical aberrations. Yet this would be a serious mistake. The greater part of the world remains non-democratic. And even in those regions of the world — Europe, the Americas — where democratic norms hold sway, one regularly encounters the rhetoric of the far right and the far left.

Populists and authoritarian leaders frequently acquire power through the force of words. And through those same words they impede the development of society and corrode rhetorical culture. This occurs precisely because rhetorical education does not

yet occupy a sufficiently firm place at the foundation of schooling and civic culture, even within democratic societies.

The Fundamental Law of Propaganda

Human beings are inclined to agree with what they have already heard, and with what they wish to hear. Propagandists therefore often repeat the same narratives over and over again — narratives that appeal to people's fears or desires. Sometimes, they repeat them for years on end.

The longer such narratives are repeated, the more they come to be perceived as truth. Repetition manufactures the illusion of veracity.

The Obligatory Invocation of the Leader

Another defining feature of authoritarian rhetoric is the obligatory invocation of the leader, or of the regime's political icon, within every public address. Leaders of communist and authoritarian regimes invariably reference their supreme figurehead.

A Case in Point: Ding Xuexiang

Consider the speech delivered by Ding Xuexiang, Special Representative of President Xi Jinping and Vice Premier of the People's Republic of China, at the UN Climate Summit COP30 in Belém, Brazil, on 6 November 2025:

"First of all, I have the honor to convey the best wishes from President Xi Jinping to Brazil for hosting this Summit. President Xi Jinping highly commends the important contributions made by the Brazilian Presidency to global climate governance, and wishes COP30 a full success."

"At the United Nations Climate Summit on September 24, President Xi Jinping solemnly announced China's 2035 NDCs covering all economic sectors and all greenhouse gases."

Twice within the opening lines of the address — a reference to the authority of the leader. This is a textbook marker of authoritarian rhetoric.

The Five Markers of Authoritarian Rhetoric

By what signs may we identify authoritarian rhetoric, or the first stirrings of its

emergence?

1. The absence of pluralism. The most critical marker. There is no multiplicity of opinion, no acknowledgement of the right to hold a different position.
2. Appeals to the authority of the leader. The constant citation of the leader, the invocation of his wisdom, his vision presented as the sole correct one.
3. Emotional excess. Heightened emotion in voice and gesture that substitutes for argumentation. Pathos in place of logos.
4. The scapegoating of others. Minorities, other peoples, other nations. Authoritarian rhetoric flatters the natural human desire to feel absolved of responsibility for the poor condition of one's country or economy. People wish to hear that they bear no blame — that the fault lies elsewhere, and that someone else will be made to pay.
5. Cruelty and cynicism. The authoritarian orator is indifferent to human lives, to tragedy, to suffering. In the deepest sense — indifferent to the human being as such.

Authoritarian rhetoric is not confined to overtly dictatorial regimes. It seeps into democratic societies through populism, through the reduction of complex questions to crude binary oppositions, and through the deliberate cultivation of fear towards "the other".

The development of critical thinking and rhetorical culture is therefore not merely an educational aspiration — it is a political project for the defence of democracy. The ability to recognise the markers of authoritarian rhetoric is a civic skill that every member of a free society needs to possess.

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