

Aviv Hagar

Pathos for profit Affective recursivity in populism

Abstract

This paper argues that populism is a self-reinforcing system that transforms emotional intensity into political power and economic profit. Drawing on cybernetic theory, it develops affective recursivity to show how media, rhetoric, and embodied response generate feedback loops in which citizens actively reproduce and intensify their own affective capture. Trump's immigration rhetoric serves as the central case study.

Keywords

Populism, Affective recursivity, Cybernetics

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hagaraviv02@gmail.com (Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals)

1. *Pathos as problem: between aesthetics and cybernetics*

In classical aesthetics, pathos names a specific and philosophically significant phenomenon: the power of an event, image, or utterance to move its audience not through argument but through affect, the passion that crosses the gap between object and subject, transforming mere perception into felt experience. For Aristotle, pathos was one of the three modes of persuasion, but philosophically the most complex: it operated not at the level of the proposition but at the level of the body, producing states (fear, pity, indignation) that repositioned the audience before deliberation could engage. What the aesthetic tradition has consistently recognized about pathos is that it precedes judgment: it organizes the perceptual field, shapes what appears threatening or reassuring, and determines what kinds of responses feel natural rather than constructed. Pathos precedes and conditions cognitive experience; it is the ground of its possibility.

This paper takes that aesthetic insight seriously in order to ask what becomes of it under contemporary conditions of mass media, digital circulation, and populist politics. The central argument is that pathos has been transformed from a rhetorical resource into a cybernetic mechanism. In the context of populism, with Trump's immigration rhetoric as its central and sustained case study, emotional affect goes beyond a means of persuasion directed at individuals. It operates as the operative logic of a self-reinforcing system: one in which bodies respond, media amplifies, political power consolidates, and polarization deepens through recursive cycles that each iteration makes more difficult to disrupt. The phrase "pathos for profit" names this transformation precisely: emotion has become an information commodity, systematically produced, amplified, and consumed for both political gain and economic revenue. Affect has long been exploited in political life; what distinguishes the present moment is the recursive infrastructure through which it is now extracted at scale.

A clarification of scope is necessary before proceeding, and intellectual honesty requires making it explicit. The cybernetic account of affective recursivity developed in this paper is not a complete theory of populism. Populism is a complex political phenomenon with deep structural roots in economic precarity, institutional erosion, demographic anxiety, the long decline of intermediary political institutions, and the specific historical conditions of post-industrial democracies. These social, economic, and political systems interact with one another and with the affective dynamics described here in ways that a single account cannot exhaust. The

claim advanced here is more specific: that affective recursivity is a distinct and undertheorized mechanism within this broader constellation: an amplifying system that captures pre-existing social tensions and transforms them into self-sustaining feedback loops, making what might otherwise remain resolvable political conflicts progressively more difficult to address through normal democratic means. Understanding this mechanism reveals something the existing literature has systematically missed: why the system escalates, why it resists epistemic correction, and why even opposition feeds it.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 identifies the gap in existing populism scholarship that a cybernetic account is positioned to fill. Section 3 builds that framework. Section 4 connects it to pathos as an aesthetic concept. Section 5 applies it to the case study in detail. Section 6 examines the affective trap. Section 7 confronts the critical warning.

2. The missing recursion: a gap in populism and emotion research

The scholarly literature on populism has established two foundational orientations that together define the dominant paradigm, and its limits. The first is ideational: Cas Mudde's influential definition frames populism as a "thin-centered ideology" dividing society into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, the pure people versus the corrupt elite, with politics as the expression of the popular will (Mudde 2004: 543). The second is performative: Benjamin Moffitt reconceptualizes populism as a "political style" characterized by appeals to "the people," the performance of bad manners, and the persistent invocation of crisis and threat (Moffitt 2016: 38). Both frameworks acknowledge, at least implicitly, that affect plays a role. But affect in both accounts remains peripheral, a feature of the style rather than the mechanism.

In recent years that implicit acknowledgment has become an explicit research focus. A growing body of work examines the emotional dimensions of populist mobilization: Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza's comparative study of populism and emotional response (Rico, Guinjoan, Anduiza 2017), Wirz et al.'s analysis of emotional appeals in populist communication (Wirz et al. 2018), Gerbaudo's account of social media as infrastructure for populist emotional mobilization (Gerbaudo 2019), Mouffe's normative argument for reclaiming passion as political force (Mouffe 2018), and Wodak's discourse-analytical work on the politics of fear (Wodak 2015). This scholarship has significantly deepened understanding of how

populist leaders deploy fear, resentment, and moral indignation, and how media environments amplify affective content.

Yet for all its richness, this body of work shares a structural limitation: it treats affect as either an input or an output of the political process, and never as a recursive agent within a self-sustaining system. In the input model, emotional appeals are instruments that leaders deploy to produce desired responses: fear leads to support, resentment leads to mobilization. In the output model, affective responses are symptoms of populist ideology: people feel angry because they have been told they are victims of elite corruption. Both models miss the possibility that emotional responses themselves become productive forces within feedback loops: that the fear generated by rhetoric feeds back into the media system, which selects for and amplifies emotional intensity, which generates further rhetoric, which produces stronger emotional responses, in recursive escalation.

This gap is not merely theoretical. It has concrete analytical consequences. A linear causal model leaves three things unexplained: why populist affect intensifies over time rather than diminishing as its claims are refuted; why factual correction so consistently fails to disrupt the emotional consensus it targets; and why, most counter-intuitively, even opposition feeds it. These phenomena require a systemic, recursive account, one that treats the social field, the media environment, and embodied affective response as components of a coupled cybernetic system rather than as sequential links in a causal chain. The following section builds that account.

3. A cybernetic framework for affective recursivity

The cybernetic framework deployed in this paper is explicitly second-order. First-order cybernetics, associated with Norbert Wiener's foundational work on control and communication in machines and organisms, modeled feedback as a mechanism for self-regulation observed from outside the system: a thermostat adjusting to temperature, a guided missile correcting its trajectory. The observer stood apart from the system described. Second-order cybernetics, developed by Heinz von Foerster from the late 1960s, turned this assumption reflexively on itself: "we must include the observer in the description of his observations" (Von Foerster 1979: 77). The description of the system is itself a component of the sys-

tem's dynamics. This has a precise consequence for the analysis of populist affect: no participant in the affective field (the leader, the media, the protester, the analyst) occupies a position outside the loop from which it could be neutrally observed and corrected.

This second-order framing is the structural foundation of the argument. It explains why populism cannot be adequately analyzed as a top-down process in which a charismatic leader produces effects in passive audiences, and why factual correction, which presupposes an observer positioned outside the affective field offering neutral information to those within it, so consistently fails. There is no outside. The model of populism developed here treats the entire ensemble (rhetoric, affective response, media amplification, political mobilization, renewed rhetoric) as a single recursive system in which no element is simply prior to the others and no participant is simply external. Five theoretical frameworks specify what such a second-order cybernetic account requires at each level of the system.

Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, in their foundational account of enactivism, argued that cognition is not the internal representation of a pre-given world but the enactment of a world and a mind through embodied action (Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991: 9). On this view, emotions constitute modes of bodily sense-making, structurally coupled with the environment, prior to and formative of any cognitive process. The encounter with a threatening narrative (an image of invasion, a claim of contamination) registers in the body as a whole, pre-reflectively, generating an affective orientation that shapes subsequent cognition. Affective responses are embodied enactments that feed back into the system as inputs. People perform populist pathos, carry it in their bodies, enact it through rallies, votes, and social media shares. The body is an active node of the loop, generating as much as it receives.

Enactivism's concept of structural coupling deepens this point in a way that is essential for the cybernetic model. Structural coupling in Varela's account does not simply mean that an organism responds to its environment. It means that organism and environment co-evolve through their ongoing interaction: each shapes the other recursively, such that neither can be understood independently of the history of their mutual adjustment. Applied to the populist affective field, this means that rhetoric and audience stand in a relation of mutual constitution. The people attending a rally co-produce the affective field through their presence, their collective embodied energy, their visible enactment of affective alignment, a

field that then generates more rhetoric, more intense claims, more extreme performances of the binary. The leader is structurally coupled to the affective field as fully as the followers are. The system is co-constituted through the recursive interaction of all its components, with no single element as origin. The standard critique of populism as top-down manipulation, a charismatic leader acting on passive deceived audiences, misses something structurally important. The bodies in the crowd are co-producers of the very field that acts on them. This mutual constitution is precisely what makes the system so difficult to exit. One is structurally coupled to it, shaped by and shaping it through every interaction. Disruption, on this account, requires building a different structural coupling altogether, which is exactly what genuine local affective systems attempt, and exactly why that attempt is so difficult to scale.

What structural coupling cannot tell us, however, is how quickly this mutual constitution operates — and why that speed is so decisive for the political system the loop sustains.

N. Katherine Hayles's account of the cognitive nonconscious specifies the temporal dimension of this embodied response. Hayles argues that the majority of cognitive processing occurs nonconsciously, prior to and faster than conscious awareness, in recursive dynamics with consciousness that are asymmetric: the nonconscious handles the bulk of cognitive operations (processing stimuli, generating affective orientations, preparing responses) while consciousness operates selectively, as Hayles puts it, as "a strategic focusing tool" that intervenes at specific moments rather than governing all information processing (Hayles 2017: 22). Crucially, affective responses arise from this nonconscious layer before the conscious mind can engage: by the time deliberation is possible, the affective orientation has already been set. Technical media (television, social media platforms, algorithmically curated feeds) is calibrated to this nonconscious processing speed, delivering affective stimuli at rates that bypass deliberation by design. In the context of populism this means that the feedback loop operates largely below the threshold of conscious reflection. The system needs only to trigger, not to convince.

But nonconscious processing is by definition individual. What aggregates millions of individual somatic responses into a coherent collective force — one capable of reshaping an entire political landscape — requires a different account.

Kurt Lewin's field theory, though predating the formalization of cybernetics, operates on a fundamentally cybernetic logic: behavior emerges from recursive interactions between persons and their environment, with

each action modifying the field that produced it. It provides the vocabulary for understanding how individual embodied and nonconscious responses aggregate into collective dynamics. Lewin argued that behavior is a function of the life space, the person in their psychological environment, and that understanding or changing behavior requires attending to the entire constellation of forces acting on the individual at any given moment (Lewin 1951: 25). His formula $B = f(P, E)$ encapsulates the insight that behavior cannot be predicted from individual psychology alone; it emerges from the dynamic relationship between persons and their environment, including the social field constituted by the forces and tensions of others. Affective narratives, on this account, generate force fields that restructure what appears possible and desirable for entire collectives. The binary opposition of pure people versus corrupt elite functions as a field configuration that polarizes the social topology, making moderate positions literally difficult to occupy and rendering the center of the field unstable.

Lewin explains how individual responses aggregate into collective force fields. What amplifies those fields and drives them to escalation is the operational logic of mass media. Niklas Luhmann's systems theory explains how mass media operates as the amplifying mechanism in this dynamic, and in doing so extends the concept of field from Lewin's psychological register into the systemic register of communication. Where Lewin's field is constituted by forces and tensions among persons, Luhmann's media system constitutes a communicative field in which the selection and amplification of affective content shapes the environment within which all social actors operate. For Luhmann, society consists of functionally differentiated autopoietic subsystems (law, politics, economy, media), each maintaining operational closure and processing only inputs that can be translated into its own code (Luhmann 1995: 36). The mass media system's selection criterion is newsworthiness: the capacity of a communication to generate further communication. Luhmann's crucial observation for our purposes is that whatever we know about society, we know through mass media (Luhmann 2000: 1). Media constructs the communicative environment within which social systems operate, rather than reporting a pre-existing reality. The implication for populism is structural: inflammatory rhetoric, crisis framing, and affective spectacle are selected for amplification not because of deliberate editorial bias but because emotional intensity generates engagement, engagement gener-

ates further communication, and further communication generates revenue. The system selects for pathos because pathos is systematically profitable.

One important distinction is worth drawing here. The systemic account developed in this paper addresses the recursive mechanism through which affect circulates and escalates. It does not, on its own, explain why specific emotional registers prove particularly effective in populist mobilization. Fear, disgust, and resentment are compelling precisely because they resonate with historically sedimented cultural narratives of threat, contamination, and boundary defense already available within the social field. Populist actors make strategic and selective choices about which emotional registers to activate, choices calibrated to the culturally available pathways through which affect can flow most readily. Systemic recursivity and strategic intentionality are not competing explanations but mutually reinforcing ones: the system amplifies what has been strategically selected, and strategic selection succeeds because the system is structurally poised to amplify it.

Luhmann's account explains how the system sustains itself. It does not yet explain what the system eventually produces — what happens when amplification runs long enough that the constructed emotional environment displaces the reality it originally referenced. Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and hyperreality names that terminal condition. Within a sufficiently recursive affective loop, the constructed sense of crisis begins to feel more real than any factual account of the situation. That feeling is precisely what Baudrillard names hyperreality. When simulation becomes sufficiently pervasive and self-referential, it replaces reality with something more persuasive, a hyperreal environment in which signs refer not to any external referent but to other signs, generating a seamless experiential surface that feels more real than reality itself (Baudrillard 1994: 1-2). Baudrillard distinguished dissimulation, the hiding of what is real, from simulation, the substitution of signs of the real for the real entirely (Baudrillard 1994: 6). In the context of affective recursivity, hyperreality names the condition in which the emotional atmosphere produced by the feedback loop (the sense of crisis, threat, invasion, and righteous belonging) has itself become the political reality within which people act. The simulacrum is the political reality itself, sustained by the recursive operation of the system.

The framework requires one further precision. The critique of hyper-reality serves as a targeted analytical tool rather than a master key dissolving all factual claims into media construction. Applied without discrimination, it becomes its own closed interpretive loop, one that, paradoxically, mirrors the structure it critiques. When critical theorists have invoked media-manipulation frameworks to deny situations where factual referents were real and documentable, they have misapplied Baudrillard rather than extended him. The distinction that matters is between the manufacture of a threat where the factual referent is absent or systematically distorted (which is what populist affective recursivity produces) and the critique of how real events are framed, amplified, or politicized. The hyperreal coexists with the real. The recursive system produces a political reality whose operational force is independent of its factual accuracy. In Trump's immigration rhetoric, the threat is manufactured; the harm it produces is material. Both things are simultaneously true, and Baudrillard's framework is useful precisely because it holds that tension rather than collapsing it.

4. Pathos as systemic mechanism: aesthetic experience in the feedback loop

The five theoretical components assembled above constitute a cybernetic model of affective recursivity. Before applying it to the case study, it is worth articulating what this model means for pathos understood as an aesthetic concept, since the aesthetic stakes of the argument are central to it. The classical aesthetic account of pathos treats it as a transaction between an expressive object or event and a receiving subject: something moves us, something transmits its charge across the gap between artwork and audience. This account presupposes a kind of asymmetry: the aesthetic object or performance is the active agent; the audience is the site of reception, however active that reception may be theorized to be. The cybernetic account disrupts this asymmetry fundamentally.

In the model developed here, pathos operates as a loop. The affective charge is produced and maintained by the recursive interaction of multiple components (embodied response, nonconscious processing, collective force fields, media amplification, hyperreal simulation), none of which is simply prior to the others. The populist leader's rhetoric does not generate pathos that then flows into audiences; the rhetoric is itself a response to and anticipation of the affective field already in circulation,

shaped by media systems already calibrated to emotional intensity, already constituting a force field structured by prior cycles of the loop. Pathos, in this account, is an emergent property of the system as a whole.

This has significant consequences for the aesthetic analysis of political affect. It means that the felt immediacy of affective experience (the sense that one is genuinely moved by something real, that one's fear or outrage or solidarity is a response to actual conditions) may be systemically produced rather than epistemically grounded. The fears and grievances that populism exploits are grounded in real social conditions; the system attacks and amplifies them rather than inventing them. The specific affective form they take (the targeting of particular groups, the binary structuring of social space, the sense of existential urgency) is shaped and amplified by the recursive operation of the system in ways that exceed any individual's deliberate assessment. Pathos for profit names this condition: the aesthetic power of genuine human affect captured, formatted, and monetized by a cybernetic infrastructure that profits from its escalation. Pathos in the aesthetic tradition names a form of openness, the capacity to be affected, to have one's experience altered by contact with something beyond oneself. What the system described in this paper produces is not openness but enclosure: affect that circulates without arriving at anything, intensity that escalates without resolving into experience. The enclosure described above is the operating condition of contemporary populist communication, and Trump's rhetoric on immigration offers its most legible empirical instantiation.

5. The case study: Trump's immigration rhetoric as affective recursivity

Trump's immigration rhetoric provides an unusually transparent instance of affective recursivity in operation, because its systemic character is empirically documentable in a way that distinguishes it from ordinary political exaggeration. In a recursive affective system, repetition is not rhetorical emphasis — it is the operative mechanism. Each iteration does not add to a stock of arguments; it deepens somatic pathways, entrains non-conscious responses, and updates the collective force field with each pass. What follows should be read with this in mind: not a catalog of exaggerations but evidence of a production system whose output is measured in volume. According to data compiled by The Marshall Project, Trump's immigration rhetoric follows a pattern of systematic and docu-

mented repetition calibrated to distinct emotional registers. Dehumanizing characterizations recur throughout: unauthorized immigrants are described as criminals on over 575 documented occasions, as snakes or animals on over 35 documented occasions, and as originating from jails and mental institutions on over 560 documented occasions. Fear of violence is sustained through over 185 documented claims about immigrant-caused crime in sanctuary cities and over 235 documented invocations of isolated tragic cases as evidence of mass killing. Economic anxiety is targeted through over 270 documented claims that immigrants steal public benefits and over 155 documented claims that they take American jobs. Demands for a border wall appear on over 675 documented occasions; invocations of mass deportation as legitimate precedent on over 50 documented occasions (Marshall Project 2017-2025).

At this volume, rhetoric has crossed from persuasion into infrastructure — it conditions responses rather than making arguments. Hayles's account of the cognitive nonconscious makes this precise: the nonconscious does not evaluate claims; it registers patterns. Each iteration of a fear-coded or disgust-coded stimulus does not add to a stock of beliefs; it entrains an affective orientation, deepening the somatic pathways of fear and exclusion with each pass. The nonconscious is updated continuously and faster than deliberation can engage, so that by the time a claim has been repeated hundreds of times, the affective response it triggers becomes an automatic somatic event, conditioned in the body, prior to any conscious assessment. This is why factual correction arrives structurally too late: it addresses claims at the cognitive-discursive level after the affective entrainment has already occurred at the somatic level. The correction and the original claim do not compete in the same register. Each repetition also updates the force field of the collective social system through Lewin's recursive field dynamics, shifting the topology of what appears naturally obvious and politically necessary with each cycle. And each iteration produces content that media systems select for amplification because emotional intensity guarantees engagement, with Luhmann's media logic selecting for affective resonance because resonance is profitable. The cumulative effect is not persuasion in any epistemic sense; it is the construction of a hyperreal affective environment in which the threat of immigrant criminality registers as overwhelming and obvious regardless of any statistical reality.

Three distinct feedback loops operate simultaneously within this system, each reinforcing the others. The first is the mass media affective

loop. Trump frames immigrants as criminals and existential threats; media selects this framing for coverage because its emotional intensity satisfies the newsworthiness criterion; coverage generates affective responses (fear and resentment among some audiences, moral outrage and solidarity among others); both types of response generate engagement, shares, and further coverage; the increased salience of the topic justifies further political claims; the cycle intensifies. Media corporations profit economically from this escalation in a direct and documentable way: more divisive content generates more engagement, and more engagement generates more advertising revenue (Milli *et al.* 2025). This is pathos for profit at its most structurally legible: the affective intensity of human beings confronting genuine political questions is the raw material from which economic value is extracted.

A further mechanism operates within this loop that the analysis must name: the construction of a meta-narrative about which media is itself legitimate. Trump's repeated framing of outlets like CNN as "fake news" and "the enemy of the people" — a pattern documented by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ 2019) — functions as operational closure at the political level: it determines in advance which communications can enter the in-group's epistemic field, and which are excluded. The selection is affectively rather than epistemically determined. Media that confirms the affective field is "real"; media that challenges it is "manipulated". This produces a closed communicative system in which contradictory evidence is structurally inadmissible not because it has been evaluated and found wanting but because the source that carries it has been pre-emptively delegitimized. The in-group and out-group division extends from people to media itself: there is our media and their media, and the boundary between them is maintained by the same affective logic that maintains every other boundary the recursive loop constructs.

The second loop is the affective targeting loop. The dehumanizing language (immigrants as animals, as snakes, as consumers of pets) targets disgust alongside fear. Disgust is one of the most powerful and evolutionarily ancient social emotions, designed to generate exclusion and contamination-avoidance behavior. It is not a judgment that can be countered with evidence; it is a somatic response that restructures the affective field before reflection is possible. This is Varela's embodied affect operating at pre-reflective speed, and Hayles's nonconscious processing prior to any deliberative engagement. By triggering disgust systematically, the rhetoric generates embodied affective responses that make exclusionary policy

feel natural rather than chosen, an expression of legitimate revulsion rather than a political decision requiring justification. This generates protests and moral outrage from those who recognize the dehumanization; media covers the resulting conflict as spectacle; the conflict is framed as crisis; the crisis framing justifies further targeting; the loop intensifies.

The third loop is the executive power loop, and it is here that the cybernetic analysis yields its most theoretically significant, and most disturbing, finding. Affective mobilization from both sides of the binary creates visible disorder in the Baudrillardian sense: highly charged public events immediately available as raw material for hyperreal framing. Trump frames this disorder as crisis requiring executive response. The simulacrum of chaos (citizens exercising constitutional rights, activists expressing legitimate political opposition) is presented as evidence of systemic breakdown. Deployment of the National Guard and ICE generates more protests, which generate more visible disorder, which justifies more deployment. Each cycle intensifies the next. But the executive power loop does not terminate at spectacle. The recursive amplification of affective crisis creates the legitimating conditions for state violence against the very population whose protection nominally justifies it. ICE operations conducted against undocumented immigrants and their communities, operations whose legal basis has in numerous documented cases been contested or overturned, proceed with public acquiescence in part because the affective environment has constructed those communities as threats rather than as persons with legal standing. People have been detained without due process; families have been separated; individuals have died in detention or been deported to conditions of documented danger (ACLU 2024; Project on Government Oversight [POGO] 2026). These are not aberrations in the system; they are its material endpoint. The hyperreal threat manufactures real harm, and the affective consensus that the loop has constructed provides the political cover under which that harm is administered. The protest says, “No Kings”. The system hears “look at the disorder”. And under cover of that disorder, the machinery moves.

6. The affective trap: dual mobilization and the recursivity of resistance

The dual mobilization structure of the case study reveals the most theoretically significant feature of affective recursivity as a system: it operates

without requiring consensus, and this is precisely what makes it so difficult to disrupt. Conventional accounts of political mobilization assume that a movement succeeds by winning support, by moving a sufficient proportion of the population to agreement. Affective recursivity operates differently. The system profits from division and intensity rather than from consensus and agreement. It requires only that both sides remain emotionally engaged and that neither side's engagement disrupts rather than feeds the loop. Polarization is the system's most self-sustaining operating condition, the state in which affective intensity and profit are highest and the system most stable.

This explains a phenomenon that has puzzled many analysts of contemporary populism: the apparent indifference of populist movements to factual refutation. If the system operated through persuasion, through the generation of beliefs that motivate political action, factual correction would be disruptive. But if the system operates through affective recursivity, factual correction arrives too late (after the nonconscious affective orientation has already been set), at the wrong level (the cognitive-discursive level rather than the somatic level where the loop primarily operates), and through channels that lack the emotional intensity required for selection by media systems calibrated to affective resonance. More troublingly, fact-checking articles that describe and thereby amplify the claims they refute may actually strengthen the affective field by increasing the salience of the framing being contested.

The Baudrillardian dimension of this trap requires emphasis because it specifies why counter-communication so frequently fails. To enter the hyperreal environment with counter-evidence is to have already accepted its terms, playing the game of representation within a field that has moved beyond representation entirely. The hyperreal is not false in the ordinary sense that could be corrected; it is more compelling than the true, because it is calibrated to the affective system rather than to the epistemic one. A media system that selects for emotional intensity cannot amplify a careful correction of immigration statistics, not because its editors are ideologically committed but because careful corrections lack the affective charge that the system requires in order to circulate.

The protests against Trump's immigration enforcement make the trap concrete. Each confrontation between demonstrators and federal agents, each National Guard deployment, each "No Kings" demonstration is simultaneously the exercise of a legal right, an act of political resistance, and fuel for the executive power loop. In a media environment already calibrated to extract affective intensity, the transformation from political

act to commodity is not subsequent but simultaneous. The Presidential Memorandum of June 7, 2025, authorizing the deployment of 2,000 National Guard troops without the governor's consent and framing protests against ICE operations as "a form of rebellion against the authority of the Government," inserts real but isolated incidents into a narrative structure that transforms their meaning — producing a hyperreal account of total crisis in which citizens exercising constitutional rights become rebels and military deployment becomes legal necessity (Trump 2025; Leavitt 2025; White House 2025). A federal court subsequently ruled that the President's statements justifying the deployment were not "conceived in good faith" and were "simply untethered to the facts", finding that conditions in Los Angeles "never necessitated their deployment in the first place" (Newsom 2025; ABC News 2025). The Los Angeles deployment was not an isolated case but the first instance of a pattern that would repeat across nearly a dozen American cities — Portland, Chicago, Minneapolis, and others — all Democrat-led, each framed through the same affective template of crisis and rebellion to justify federal military force over governors' objections, and in each case rejected by courts as factually ungrounded (Capital B News 2026; NPR 2025; FactCheck.org 2025). The force field, in Lewin's terms, has been so thoroughly polarized that even acts of resistance alter it in the direction of further polarization rather than disruption.

The analysis does not suggest that resistance is impossible or that political engagement is futile. What it shows is more specific: that resistance operating at the level of affective intensity (adding more outrage to a system that runs on outrage, more spectacle to a system that runs on spectacle) is structurally likely to feed rather than disrupt the recursive dynamic. This is the affective trap: the same emotional capacities that make genuine political solidarity possible (the anger at injustice, the urgency of collective action, the bodily commitment of protest) are precisely the capacities that feed back into the system. What follows from this is a harder structural problem: where and how to act without re-entering the loop.

7. The critical warning: dehumanization, dialogue, and the limits of resistance

The positive feedback loops of affective recursivity produce polarization as both social condition and governing instrument. Populist leaders ac-

tively cultivate this: through dehumanizing language, through the recursive manufacture of crisis, through the systematic reframing of opposition as treason. Each cycle concentrates executive power further and erodes the constitutional constraints that democratic systems depend on. The deepest consequence, however, is the destruction of the conditions for dialogue itself. When the affective loop has run with sufficient intensity and duration, the other is no longer someone with whom exchange is possible. The other has been dehumanized, rendered through accumulated cycles of fear and disgust as threat, contaminant, enemy. At that point deliberation has been made structurally inadmissible. The body has already responded. The force field has already determined who belongs and who does not. This is pathos for profit at its fullest and most dangerous extension: the commodification of human affect for economic gain, its weaponization for political consolidation, and its use to foreclose the dialogue on which democratic life depends, by rendering the other not someone to engage with but a threat.

It is precisely the condition democratic backsliding requires: once the affective field closes, the system cannot correct itself, because every corrective mechanism has already been rendered part of the threat. It is not enough to concentrate power; the affective consensus must also be constructed such that the exercise of that power appears as necessity rather than usurpation, demanded by the people, justified by the crisis, directed against those who forfeited their standing as citizens by their opposition. The unconstitutional becomes normalized not through argument but through the hyperreal political reality the loop has constituted. Within that reality, those who challenge the normalization are always already positioned as part of the threat.

Counter-rhetoric feeds the same loop, adding more intensity in the opposing direction. The question is not whether to resist but how — through forms of engagement that do not feed the binary. The most promising path lies in civil society and grassroots organizing that generates alternative affective fields operating outside the dominant logic. Communities organized around care, solidarity, and the concrete recognition of the other's humanity do not oppose the recursive system directly. They construct different social fields (multipolar rather than polarized, built through proximity and practice rather than through shared opposition), fields in which the dehumanization the loop depends on finds less purchase. Whether these local dynamics can scale without re-entering the dominant system, whether they can restore the conditions for dialogue in a field engineered to foreclose it, remains an open question. But

it is the right question. Understanding affective recursivity is the first step toward disrupting it. The challenge is how to resist systemically, without becoming another simulacrum in the cycle.

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