

# Book Review: The Neopopular Bubble: Speculating on 'the People' in Late Modern Democracy by Péter Csigó

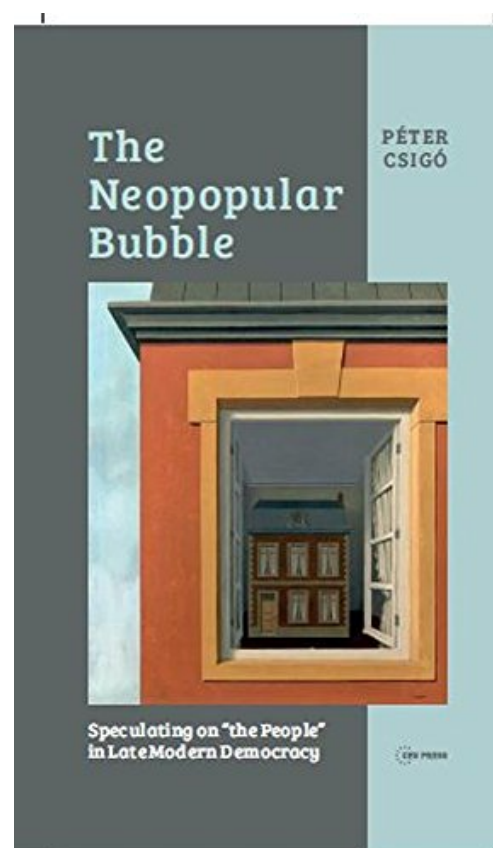
*In The Neopopular Bubble: Speculating on 'the People' in Late Modern Democracy, Péter Csigó argues that the financial crisis of 2008 has exposed the novel forms of sense-making that have come to dominate public discourse: mechanisms that are collective, speculative and mythological in nature, resulting in autonomous discursive 'bubbles' that are largely immune to falsification. The book provides a foundation for a new theory of social misconstructionism, finds Justas Patkauskas, one properly suited to the times of liquid modernity.*

**The Neopopular Bubble: Speculating on 'the People' in Late Modern Democracy. Péter Csigó. Central European University Press. 2016.**

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From sociology to Marxist criticism to business literature and media studies, scholarship over the last 50 years has embraced the idea of a fundamental change in social structure: depending on the academic discipline, it has been variously described as the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, from top-down elitism to popular participation and from bureaucratic reason to the general intellect. These developments have been most effectively summarised by Zygmunt Bauman under the overarching notion of 'liquid modernity' or simply 'liquidity', taken to mean the dismantling or discrediting of mass institutions and closed systems—such as the mass party, the welfare state and the mass media, to name but a few—in favour of molecular networks and open flows. However, instead of further investigating the architectonic underpinnings of liquidity, most contemporary works on the topic have proffered moral evaluations and future predictions, dividing the academics into two camps: those who see liquidity as a means of emancipation (either through the incoming revolutionary multitude or through the leadership of Californian capitalism) and those who treat it as a sign of impending social collapse.

*The Neopopular Bubble* by Péter Csigó—a sociological study written in the tradition of French theory, reminiscent of the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski, but also building upon insights drawn from Bauman, Donald MacKenzie and Nick Couldry amongst others—makes its first critical incision by arguing that theories of liquidity require a thorough and critical rethinking in light of the 2008 financial collapse. Unlike most theories that ascribe the various crises, maladaptations and collective delusions that have become characteristic of contemporary modernity to corrigible methodological errors in interpretation or the malicious intentions of powerful actors, the book proposes that, due to the effects of liquidity, error is the *inevitable* result of a novel form of sense-making that has come to dominate public discourse. This process—speculative, collective and mythological in nature—is marked by 'structural feedback deficiency' and a strong tendency towards exclusive self-referentiality, producing autonomous discursive enclaves or bubbles, impenetrable to falsification. This entire sense-making mechanism, composed in response to the liquidity of social structures, is gathered together under the concept of Speculative Reason, the primary hermeneutic faculty for interpreting public discourse in the post-2008 world.



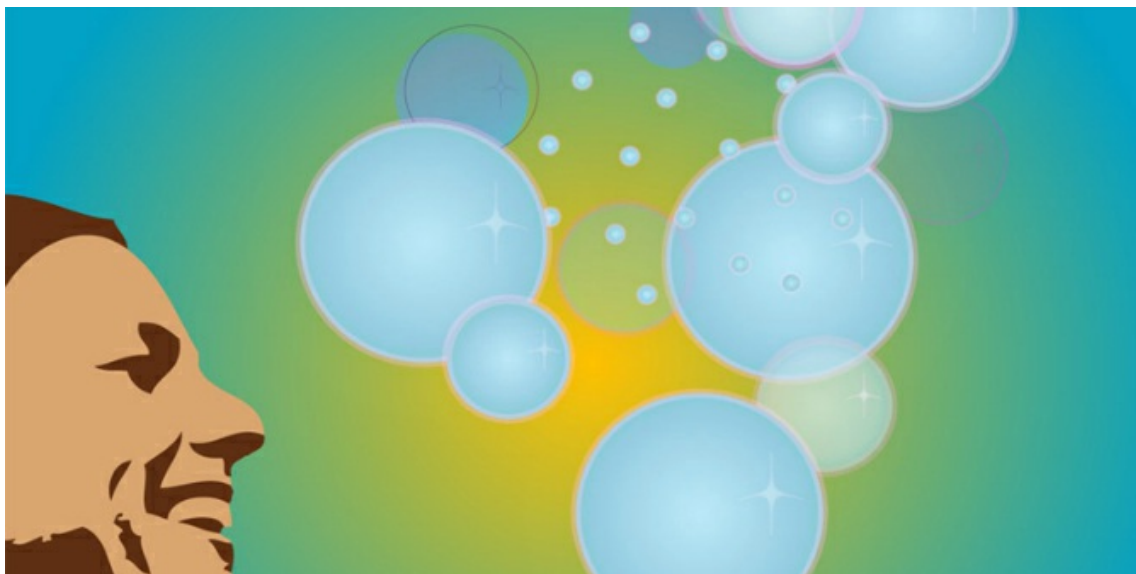


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As predicted by standard analyses, the liquidisation of mass institutions accelerates the complexity of social life, increases the arbitrariness of social meaning and, in turn, provokes various coping strategies. According to Csigó, the main one has been speculation—the reliance on collective sense-making practices such as the aggregation of individual judgments in place of the meaning structures provided by the old mass institutions. However, counter to predictions, instead of ushering in an era of popular participation, reflexive adaptation and greater social agency, Speculative Reason has produced paradoxical results. Due to its diffuse but self-referential and self-justifying character, collective sense-making puts into wide circulation a very limited set of tropes, creating ubiquitous structures of interpretation that are highly rigid in character and unresponsive to external criticism. In short, although collective sense-making, or speculation, does rely more on individual input for its practices of aggregation than did the old mass institutions, the result is the crystallisation of structures of meaning that are no less unyielding than previous ones while being, indeed, far less responsive to forms of control than their predecessors.

*The Neopopular Bubble* makes its second critical incision by expounding in detail the process by which speculation has come to function. Aggregating collective wisdom as a means of handling the increasing complexity and arbitrariness of social life is itself a complicated and resource-intensive mechanism, one that creates a demand for a whole new class of experts, gurus and pundits, whose job, besides simplifying social complexity into easily recognisable codes, is to parse, interpret and extract rules for successful behaviour within the liquidised society.

Csigó names this new institution 'the fifth estate', and by way of example one can think here of the international cadres of election experts, social media professionals, financial investment advisors, credit rating agencies and so forth. Unlike the bureaucratic mass institutions that had top-down power to impose rules, the fifth estate depends entirely on *already-existing* collective norms, and, as such, functions as an echo chamber for the amplification of predetermined stereotypes regarding what constitutes useful strategies for success. Due to the fifth estate's interests of self-preservation, any criticism is dismissed as elitist, outdated or simply a matter of technicality, such as the lack of proper processing power or errors in polling techniques.

Ultimately, Csigó claims, the ascendancy of Speculative Reason, and its respective institutionalisation through the fifth estate, seems to bring to fruition the Adornian prophesy that, at their most intense, practices of rationalisation collapse into mythology. Indeed, what liquidity provokes is a new form of mythmaking—not the Marxist kind premised on the idea of false consciousness manipulated by a ruling class, but a *collective* form of mythmaking, in which the aggregators and interpreters of information are just as much participants in the myth as the average individuals who provide the input and consume the output. The result is increasing proliferation across the entire social spectrum—in economy, politics and media—of rigidly established discursive enclaves that run entirely on their own internal logic, gradually losing any real connection with the conditions of production, consumption and popular opinion that produced them in the first place, yet whose hermeneutic validity is unquestioningly accepted. Within this realm of bubbles, traditional notions of actors and interest groups lose importance in the face of collective forces that operate as if of their own accord.

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*The Neopopular Bubble* arrives at its most innovative moment when it puts forward the idea of 'latent events'—delayed and unpredictable reactions to speculation. In general, the theoretical reworking that Csigó carries out is far more radical than the idea of performativity, which is still one of the leading theoretical frameworks today. Instead, he advances the much more uncomfortable conclusions that, under conditions of liquidity and Speculative Reason, one can no longer assume the basic congruence between thought and its object, or between theory or model on the one hand and the underlying reality it sets out to explain or perform on the other. This is because, due to its collective mythological underpinnings that reject any possibility of falsification, the fifth estate suffers from the aforementioned structural feedback deficiency, creating discursive enclaves that constantly *misinterpret* and *misperform* their intentions. The results of such misperformances, however, are rarely noticed immediately, hence why contemporary society experiences one entirely unexpected crisis after another, or one *latent event* after another, in spite of the fact (or, in truth, *because* of the fact) that only the best and most successful practices—the ones most collectively approved of—are allowed to circulate. Metaphorically, one could say that the collective nature of Speculative Reason creates a fog of war over its own effects.

All things considered, perhaps a more appropriate title for *The Neopopular Bubble* would have been *Critique of Speculative Reason*. Be that as it may, theory has for a long time argued that contingency rather than necessity is the operative factor in the fundamental structures of society. Until now, however, this insight has only had an abstract basis, without an accompanying social theory. What the work of Csigó does is for the first time provide a foundation for a new theory of social *misconstructionism*, one properly suited to the times of liquid modernity.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*