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Populism as an act of storytelling: analyzing the climate change narratives of Donald Trump and Greta Thunberg as populist truth-tellers

Johan Nordensvard [a] and Markus Ketola [b]

[a]Department of Management and Engineering (Iei), Political Science (STATSV), Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden; [b]School of Social and Political Science, Global and International Social Policy, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

ABSTRACT

We propose that populism is a storytelling performance that involves a charismatic 'truth-teller' and a populist narrative frame. Populist narratives are sensemaking devices that guide people in areas of contestation, uncertainty and complexity where decisions cannot solely rely on rational and formal processes. Populist 'truth-tellers' apply a particular narrative frame that pits 'people' against the 'elite' when interpreting complex problems such as climate change. The aim of this article is one of theory generating, using the cases of Donald Trump and Greta Thunberg to illustrate the idea of populism as storytelling. While their climate change stories are very different, both share an approach that relies on the 'truth-telling' character of their hero, applying the same populist narrative frame. These findings add to our understanding of the role emotions and conflicts play in the struggles to make sense of climate change based on particular interests or political agendas.

KEYWORDS Populism; Narratives; Discourse; Climate change; Trump; Thunberg

1 Introduction

Climate change is the most complex problem facing humanity, filled with uncertainty. Stories matter for climate change, because in situations of 'heightened uncertainty' they help to 'form expectations [and] shore up confidence', serving as important sensemaking devices (Beckert and Bronk, 2018, p. 1–2). In this article we interrogate populism as an act of storytelling, exploring how populist tropes and plotlines guide people's sensemaking in policy areas characterised by contestation and complexity. By storytelling we refer to the art of telling a story, where emotions, characters and other details are applied to embellish a narrative. By narrative we refer to the presentation of a series of events in such a way as to promote a particular point of view or set of values. Narratives are therefore a necessary component of storytelling

CONTACT Johan Nordensvard Johan.nordensvard@liu.se

as a particular linguistic pattern. We propose that populism is best understood as an act of storytelling, most often by a charismatic 'truth-teller', that employs a populist narrative frame. We illustrate this by comparing the core features of the narrative frames employed by Donald Trump and Greta Thunberg.

Populism as an act of storytelling helps us understand how the populist logics of climate change are made meaningful, and by so doing it is a perspective that enriches the two dominant schools of thought at the centre of the populism debate. For many, such as Laclau (2005), populism represents a performative and rhetorical logic through which hitherto unheard voices can enter the democratic debate, focusing on the role of social movements in generating contexts for political and policy alternatives to emerge. As Laclau suggests, '[t]he imprecision and emptiness of populist political symbols cannot be dismissed so easily: everything depends on the performative act that such an emptiness brings about' (Laclau 2005, p. 12).

Populism also employs a discursive logic that brings together disparate and disjointed claims in chains of equivalence (Laclau 1985). These are 'discursive chains' where 'initially heterogeneous demands are brought together to constitute a collective identity' (Ungureanu and Popartan 2020, p. 40). By employing 'empty signifiers' such as 'people' and the 'nation,' a rhetorical logic is formulated that is able to 'bind heterogeneous demands together through rhetorical mechanisms in the struggle for hegemony' (Ungureanu and Popartan 2020, p. 40). One way the 'emptiness' of these signifiers garners meaning is through the stories they relate to. Our narrative approach centers on explaining how the rhetorical logic is operationalised, helping to contextualise the emptiness of Laclau's populism in practice.

Others, such as Mudde (2004) focus on the substantive aspects of populism and see it as a thin ideology, which largely lacks in content beyond its distinction between the pure people and the corrupt elite. The populist argument is therefore based on politics as an 'expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde 2004, p. 543). Mudde and Kaltwasser describe the thin-centeredness of populism as an ideology with 'an identifiable but restricted morphology that relies on a small number of core concepts whose meaning is context dependent' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, p. 150–151). This leaves populism the space required for adjustment and adaptation based on changing perceptions, practices, and needs of different societies (Freeden 1998, p. 751). The need for populism to be attached to ideologies, together with the lack of content beyond the relationship between two homogeneous and antagonist groups, imbued with a sense of crises, could lead to simple black-and-white relationships and result in a 'one dimensional' understanding that 'does not grant sufficient importance to the centrality of the narrative patterns, myth making and political emotions' (Ungureanu and Popartan 2020, p. 41). The

ideological perspective therefore has limited purchase in explaining how populism is enacted in different country or policy contexts, or among different actors. Storytelling that utilises a populist narrative frame offers a way to think about how the core concepts of populism are interpreted in different contexts.

A storytelling approach to populism therefore differs from one based on an empty vessel for social mobilization or a thin ideology. We do not wish to sidestep the Laclauian or Muddean perspectives but argue that these approaches say relatively little about the practice of populism, something that populism as storytelling provides. The notion of 'people', that central tenet of populism, is constructed and sustained through the stories of peoplehood told by political leaders (Smith 2003). These stories of peoplehood possess what in narratology is referred to as 'tellability' (Shenhav 2004, Ryan 2005). Tellability may be linked to an emotional response (Koschorke and Golb 2018), or to assurances of forthcoming political power or economic success (Smith 2003). Populist politics is therefore about storytelling (Compare Polletta *et al.* 2011) where the tellability of the 'core populist narrative about good people reclaiming power from corrupt elites is rooted in evocative stories drawing on mythical pasts, crisis-driven presents, and utopian futures' (Taş 2020, p. 2). Populism is less about great ideas and more about spinning a good yarn containing heroes, villains and plotlines promising change.

The cases of Donald Trump and Greta Thunberg present us with two contrasting populist storytelling logics that both challenge the mainstream policy discourses of climate change mitigation. While some argue that Thunberg should not be described as a populist because her message 'abides by a substantially different set of ideas' (Zulianello and Ceccobelli 2020), the tellability of her story nevertheless relies on a populist narrative structure. We argue that both Trump and Thunberg can be described as populist truth-tellers who apply a particular narrative frame that pits people against the elite when interpreting highly complex problems, such as climate change. This helps to generate a story with a clear plotline containing emotions, agency, antagonism, heroes and enemies, resulting in a high degree of tellability. The purpose of this article is therefore one of theory generation in relation to populist truth-tellers and populist narrative frames, illustrated by the two cases in focus.

This approach adds value to the existing literature on populism by developing a framework for analysing the populist narrator and the narrative structure as an analytical unit, and contributes to our understanding of populist narratives frames can be adapted by storytellers approaching an issue from opposite points of view. A storytelling approach to populism highlights the role of emotions and affect in how values and interests are employed in making sense of the complexity of climate change. It

demonstrates how the idea of climate change acquires its 'plasticity' and the quality that allows it to be moulded around conflicting viewpoints (Hulme, 2009: xxvii)

It is also an approach that enables us to show how, despite highly contrasting approaches, both Trump and Thunberg in fact practice similar forms of populist storytelling that rely on acts of truth-telling by the hero, applying the same populist narrative frame. Populism and climate change, therefore, have a varied relationship that extends far beyond climate change denialism and our findings suggest that populist storytelling, by connecting emotions and affect with highly complex policy problems, has more to do with our political engagement with climate change than we might have otherwise assumed.

2 Narratives as political discourse

Narratives constitute a particular form of discourse that does more than depict reality; narratives suggest, through linguistic patterns, what reality ought to be. Common to all narratives is a plotline that is organized in three parts: a beginning, middle (where the state of affairs changes), and an end (Kaplan 1993). The plot explains why change is happening and makes sense of change through characters that are given meaningful positions in the narrative, either as heroes or villains. We use narratives to construct a version of reality, making it possible to rewrite them with a new plot, leading to a whole new narrative (Czarniawska 2000, p. 14–16).

Narratives also make sense of the complexity of human life and social events, where the 'narrative knowledge tells the story of human intentions and deeds, and situates them in time and space' (Czarniawska 2000, p. 2). Narratives simplify complexity, by selectively appropriating characters and events 'that are ordered and related to one another temporally' (Ewick and Silbey 1995, p. 200). Psychological research has shown that language in general and narratives in particular are a central tool through which humans make sense of their social world (Bruner 1991, McAdams 2011). Indeed, children begin to tell stories before they learn to understand logical arguments (Bruner 1990). Sociologists and narratologists also point out how people create meaning in their social environments by constructing narratives (Somers 1994, Sommer 2017). Narratives function as 'sense-making devices', where 'people encode into narratives the problem that concerns them and their attempts to make sense or resolve these problems' (Gee 1999, p. 134). As Ricoeur has observed, a narrative as a sensemaking tool 'does not simply consist in adding episodes to one another; it also constructs meaningful totalities out of scattered events' (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2003, p. 92–

93). Acts of storytelling are therefore highly effective in making sense of complex events and facts that do not naturally cohere to rational and logical patterns, as in the case of climate change.

In their core, narratives are also a political activity. According to Ochs, while storytelling is 'crucial to the construction of a self, an "other", and a "society"', and it 'allows members of communities to represent and reflect upon events, thoughts and emotions', the rights to official storytelling are 'asymmetrically allocated, granting reflective rights to some more than others' and more importantly 'the meaning of experience and existence … tends to be defined by some more than others' (Ochs 1998, p. 202–203). It therefore matters who the storyteller is.

Perhaps most importantly, narratives must show a change of state, a 'temporal transition from one state of affairs to another' (Ochs 1998, p. 189). All narratives need a 'key event that disrupts equilibrium of ordinary, expected circumstances' (Ochs 1998, p. 197), and which enables the transition of state from a broken equilibrium to a new one, through twists and turns in the plot. A plot needs characters and forces that are pitched against each other. As Todorov argues, characters are not only human subjects, but can include 'nature', 'animals', or 'time', for example (Todorov 1977, p. 111). There are three key steps to construct characters and a plot: 'introducing legible differences between the actors (a hero and an opponent); attributing a function to single events; and finding an interpretive theme that subsumes the events and links them in a meaningful sequence ("near success", "near failure", etc.)' (Czarniawska 2000, p. 10). However, it is also important that the link between narratives of peoplehood and peoples' everyday experiences does not become too artificial or tenuous, in which case the tellability of the narrative suffers and other, competing narratives will be found more convincing (Hase, 2021)

Our aim is to create a theoretical understanding of populism as a narrative linguistic pattern (elite vs. people in a crisis situation) that could be used in populist storytelling around issues such as climate change policy to convince people of a particular understanding of climate change and what ought to be done.

3 Populist narratives as theory and methodology

Populism can therefore be seen as a form of a storytelling that centers around the performance of a charismatic 'truth-teller' applying a populist narrative frame. By applying this frame, a populist truth-teller pits the 'people' against the 'elite' in a contested area of political discourse, such as climate change. We will first conceptualise this narrative frame before discussing the role of the populist truth-teller in populist storytelling. We use a theory-developing case study approach to develop a populist narrative

frame as something performative that storytellers use to engage with both a contested issue, such as climate change, and their audience. Theory building from case studies often aims to develop or refine particular theoretical concepts by relying on empirical case(s) (compare Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). 'By digging into complexity the core of a phenomenon can be found and valid and relevant theory based on real world data can be designed' (Gummesson 2014, p. 12). Eisenhardt further argues that theory-developing case studies are 'particularly well-suited to new research areas or research areas for which existing theory seems inadequate' (Eisenhardt 2002, p. 32).

3.1 The framing of populist narratives

Populist narratives are built around a generic narrative frame of betrayal by the elite, at the expense of the interest of the people. The elite are depicted as corrupt, selfish, and colluding against the interest of the people, while the people are its counterpoint: an uncorrupt and unified entity, legitimated to challenge elite rule by representing the majority interest (the general will) (Mudde 2010). This leaves us with four core concepts of populist narratives: 1) the people and the elite as two homogenous units, 2) an antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite, 3) the idea of popular sovereignty, and 4) valorisation of the people and denigration of the elite (Stanley 2008, p. 102). To these we add a fifth, following Roodjuin who sees 'crisis' as another core concept (2014, p. 573), and Moffitt who gives crises a central role in populism in the sense that 'populist actors actively perform and perpetuate a sense of crisis' (Moffitt 2016, p. 195).

These help to formulate what Sudgen calls 'quest narratives' that promise a return to 'a simpler, more glorious past' or a way to an even more glorious future (Sudgen 2019). The tellability of a narrative of peoplehood may be grounded, for instance, in evoking emotions (Koschorke and Golb 2018, p. 80–82), or in promising political power, economic success and ascribing an inherent normative value to a political community (Smith 2003, p. 59–71).

3.2 The charismatic truth-teller

The importance of the performative element of populism has been the focus of Benjamin Moffitt, who puts forward a framework that depicts the populist leader as the 'performer' and the people as the 'audience', while crisis and media are the 'stage" on which populists enact their drama (Moffitt 2016, p. 5). Moffitt defines political style as 'the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the field of power that comprise the political, stretching from the

domain of government through to everyday life' (Moffitt 2016, p. 38). For Moffitt, the three key features of populism are 'people versus the elite'; 'bad manners'; and 'crisis, breakdown or threat'.

The role of performance in populist storytelling centers on a charismatic truth-teller who puts the corrupt elites to shame and reveals their betrayal. As Ungureanu and Popartan argue, 'current populism is usually characterised by the presence of a charismatic or messianic leader (usually a man) claiming to express the real will of the people' and that the 'leader is brave, sincere and able to unmask with his straight talk the elite hiding hypocritically behind the veil of political correctness. The leader is the supreme unmasker' (2020, p. 42). This is not to say that populist truth-telling could not happen without a charismatic leader, but that this remains by far the most common scenario.

The purpose of such storytelling might be understood in terms of a 'narrative coup', an 'epistemic takeover' aimed at the 'capturing, reorienting, and subverting [of] the normative frames with which voters interpret events and construct evidence needed to make decisions' (Bronk and Jacoby 2020, p. 25). We can see that the performance of the storyteller as a truth-teller unmasking the corruption of elite is an important aspect of studying populist narratives.

3.3 The empirical study of populist storytelling in climate change policy

Storytelling in the context of climate change is particularly powerful, because stories offer the potential to address ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity. As Smith and Howe point out, narrative theory helps us understand climate change as existing within a 'complex field of stories defined by multiple, competing genres' (Smith and Howe 2015, p. 16). Narrative theory also decouples the rhetoric of populism from the actual message or ideology. We have selected the storytelling of Donald Trump and Greta Thunberg as two contrasting examples of how populist practices of sensemaking imbue both of their stories about climate change. In each case we have focused on sources that serve as the most prominent examples of their storytelling, but given the different audiences whom these stories serve, we have chosen to focus on different types of mediums. In the case of Trump, we have analyzed four major speeches, two interviews, and 74 tweets. In the case of Thunberg, we have focused on the six most prominent speeches, by which we mean those she has delivered on the global stage – at the United Nations, Davos or COP summits. We selected these sources, because they are a set of well-known examples of Trump's and Thunberg's storytelling.

Through multiple readings we conducted a detailed narrative frame analysis of these sources. We analysed each of these speeches against the narrative plotline, which consists of a beginning, middle, and an end. This meant

analysing the main characters along with the key events that form the central plotline of the narrative, and identifying the first broken equilibrium, the disruption that creates change and the new equilibrium. In addition, we identify the performance style for each narrative, and how the truth-teller tells their story (see Table 1) and focus on the populist tropes – the metaphorical use of often-used expressions to convey meaning that makes sense within that story.

The case selection follows a certain order and logic when the aim is to develop theories. Case studies of theory development are not aiming to be representative, which means that a sample of analyzed material follows a different logic. Such theoretical sampling means that 'cases are selected because they are particularly suitable for illuminating and extending relationships and logic among constructs' (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007, p. 27). The selection of cases is not dependent on being comparative in any orthodox sense, as the point lies in illustration. The sample depends on the requirement of the research purpose, research questions, and the overall design of the study (compare Stake 1994). We argue that by choosing Trump and Thunberg we can analyze the rhetorical similarities in their use of populist narratives and tropes while highlighting their antagonistic positions in the climate change debate.

4 Results: Trump and Thunberg as populist truth-tellers

Our analysis focuses on understanding the speeches and other public statements of Donald Trump and Greta Thunberg as acts of storytelling 'unmasking the truth' about climate change through a populist narrative frame. In both cases we first draw out the principles of their storytelling approach before outlining the plotline of the narrative and how each storyteller attempts to unmask the truth about climate change from a different perspective. In so doing we demonstrate how Trump and Thunberg both tell their story about climate change by applying the same populist narrative frame in different ways. They are both able to tell their own distinct and very different version of the story by adapting the same populist narrative frame to interpret the crisis, characters, events and the plot in opposing ways. Our findings are summarised in Table 2.

4.1 Delivering narratives: Donald Trump

Donald Trump uses both speeches and tweets to tell his story about climate change, which serve as parallel avenues for his unmasking of the truth. Trump's speeches, such as the 'Rose Garden' speech (Trump 2017) where he outlines the logic behind the decision to step away from the Paris Agreement, offer the more formal version of the story. These more formal interventions recognize climate change as a real issue, accept

Table 1. Researching populist narratives – the narrative frame and the role of the storyteller.

	Populist narrative frame	The unmasking role of the truth-teller
Characters	Pitting a protagonist and antagonist against each other, e.g.: • People vs. Elite • Individuals vs. Institutions • Local vs. Global • Young vs. Old	The truth-teller exposes the antagonists as corrupt and undeserving of respect or trust.
Plotlines		
EQ(A): What is the first equilibrium of the story?	The interests of the protagonists are compared with the current situation, which is understood as a crisis.	The truth-teller exposes the betrayal of the protagonists by the antagonist, and the terrible way this will end unless change is realised.
Change: What disrupts EQ(A) and creates change?	The solution to the crisis is simple and can be achieved through black-and-white answers.	The truth-teller shows how they have the keys to finding a path to success.
EQ(B): What is the next/last equilibrium of the plot?	The protagonists achieve sovereignty and challenge the antagonists' betrayal.	The truth-teller depicts a utopian future that is only possible through the path they have charted and by challenging the antagonists.

Table 2. Applying the populist narrative frame in the climate change storytelling of Trump and Thunberg.

	Trump	Thunberg	
Characters	China is crippling US competitive edge in an unfair way Liberal media/fake news exaggerate climate change in order to regulate more US industry suffers under the red tape of climate change mitigation. To save jobs and the economy, the US has to leave the Paris Agreement. The UN is biased against the US and needs to be rolled back.	Corporate elite are destroying the planet for profits and to give rich people a better lifestyle. Politicians and media let this exploitation happen without acting and are therefore responsible. The adults are responsible through lifestyles and everyday life consumption. They must make choices in the name of youth and a future generation that cannot vote. The youth, future generations, ecosystems, and other victims are hailed as the true people, who will rise up against the system, demanding a revolution.	
Plotlines			
EQ(A): What is the first equilibrium of the story?	An imagined past when America was great and the country could exploit fossil resources without concern for environmental protection and climate change.	It is the story of a disaster that is happening, and the writing is on the wall. The global elites ignore the 'facts' that climate change is creating a disaster that will sacrifice future generations. The story focuses on the betrayal of elites in ignoring facts and betting on innovative future technologies and on the adult population who keep on living unsustainable lives.	
Change: What disrupts EQ(A) and creates change?	Liberals and activists at home and competing countries all use climate change and environmental protection as a way to cripple the American economy and give others a competitive advantage.	Thunberg paints *two different scenarios* that could happen. The *negative plotline*. Business as usual leads to a disaster that ruptures the future of the youth, coming generations, and ecosystems. This change will come due to the unwillingness to take action and follow the science. The *positive plotline*. Aggressive reduction of global carbon emissions to keep below key thresholds is not only possible but depicted as a simple solution. It is so simple that even a child can understand the solution.	
EQ(B) What is the next/last equilibrium of the plot?	All regulation and red tape that burdens the American economy must be removed. Rolling back environmental regulations on one side and withdrawing the US from poisonous international agreements is at the center.	Negative EQ(B): There is particular point of no return, a tipping point, that will lead to changes that will be beyond human control and a time when the changes become irreversible.	Positive EQ(B): People will rise up against the elite and challenge business as usual. The power lies with the people, and all depends on whether people will stand up and demand change.

elements of the scientific and mainstream narratives, but fall short of fully acknowledging the man-made origins of climate change. Their focus is on the allegedly unfair processes and distribution of responsibilities associated with climate action that disadvantage the US and benefit its competitors, with a view to supporting policies of greater deregulation of environmental and energy policy. Moreover, the story frames the global elite benefiting at the expense of the American people. Trump's interviews serve a similar purpose in the development of this narrative, falling short of denying climate change but casting doubt on its uniqueness and significance. These formal routes to narrative development are further supplemented by social media that complement and enhance the formal narrative. The Twitter storyline dovetails with the formal narrative's intent to unmask the hidden purpose of climate change policies in general and the Paris Agreement in particular, but it also questions global warming as a scientific fact and draws on lay experiential knowledge instead as the truth.

> The agreement is a massive redistribution of United States wealth to other countries. (Trump 2017)
>
> It is time to exit the Paris Accord and time to pursue a new deal that protects the environment, our companies, our citizens, and our country. (Trump 2017)
>
> Well, it happened again. Amy Klobuchar announced that she is running for President, talking proudly of fighting global warming while standing in a virtual blizzard of snow, ice and freezing temperatures. (Trump, Twitter, 10 February 2019)
>
> Be careful and try staying in your house. Large parts of the Country are suffering from tremendous amounts of snow and near record setting cold. Amazing how big this system is. Wouldn't be bad to have a little of that good old fashioned [sic] Global Warming right now! (Trump, Twitter, 20 January 2019)

The combined effect of the formal and informal aspects of Trump's climate change story is one that allows him to develop an alternative that questions less the fact of climate change but that exposes the unfairness of the mechanism by which the issue is being dealt with. We can think of these as two parallel truth-telling performances: one a more formal presentation of the climate change debate that is framed as a black-and-white choice between American vs. global interests and where the science of climate change is uncertain, the other as utilising the shared experiential knowledge of cold weather to unmask the truth about climate change.

4.2 Trump's story about climate change

The story told by Trump about climate change aims to break down all limits to capitalist accumulation created by efforts to address climate change. It sees climate change as an excuse to impose regulation and red tape that hinders capitalist growth and weakens the US. Moreover, the story challenges climate change not only because it is a threat to capitalism, but also because climate change itself is seen as meaningless and so uncertain as a process that it is best to simply ignore it. Any global efforts at regulation are only going to hurt American interests, and we should leave any response to climate change to the global markets.

The plotline within which this story garners meaning harks back to an imagined past where exploitation of fossil fuel resources was unproblematic. At this time coal, oil, and gas resources could be fully utilised to benefit the capitalist project without recourse to environmental protection or climate change mitigation policies. Reference to this first equilibrium in the story is apparent in the way Trump regards the role of historical emissions in the climate change debate: they simply do not count. These emissions were produced innocently at a time when there was no knowledge of the contribution of carbon emissions towards climate change and belong to an era when America was great because it did not have the regulatory challenges of climate change to handicap progress. This aspect of the plotline is clearest in the complete disregard for responsibility over historical emissions in the global regulatory debate, including the Paris Agreement.

This past equilibrium is contrasted with the current situation, where a range of internal and external forces collide to disrupt the equilibrium. The disruption has been caused by liberal forces within the US, including the political left, scientists, and much of the cultural elite, and further supported by external efforts to cripple American productivity led by international organisations, the EU, and China as well as other global competitors. Together they have devised ways, under the guise of climate change, to impose restrictions on the US that shift the competitive advantage to China, the EU, and others.

> This agreement is less about the climate and more about other countries gaining a financial advantage over the United States. The rest of the world applauded when we signed the Paris Agreement—they went wild; they were so happy—for the simple reason that it put our country, the United States of America, which we all love, at a very, very big economic disadvantage. (Trump 2017)

The developing economies – China and India in particular – are presented as the main beneficiaries of the arrangement, as they reap the rewards of the unfair system where regulations imposed on the US are more rigorous and crippling than those of their developing country competitors.

The resolution, or the achievement of a new equilibrium, is to be realised by recreating a level playing field, which is understood in terms of removing all regulatory structures and red tape that might hamper American productivity. The end goal here is to return to the imagined past equilibrium in the sense that it should be possible to prioritise economic growth and wealth in the same way as before, without a proportional share of responsibility for the carbon emissions associated with this progress. It is also predicated on a utopian balancing act where it is possible to calibrate the almost complete absence of environmental or carbon emission regulations with a system that also guarantees the 'cleanest environment, air and water'.

> The United States, under the Trump administration, will continue to be the cleanest and most environmentally friendly country on Earth. We'll be the cleanest. We're going to have the cleanest air. We're going to have the cleanest water. We will be environmentally friendly, but we're not going to put our businesses out of work and we're not going to lose our jobs. We're going to grow; we're going to grow rapidly. (Trump 2017)

4.3 Trump's populist tropes and narratives

The story presented by Trump draws on a wide range of populist tropes, particularly those of people vs. the elite, crisis, simplification of the issues to a black-and-white choice between two options and 'bad manners.' The sense of a broken equilibrium is enhanced by a depiction of the bad deal for American blue-collar workers, who will lose out when the full impact of climate regulation is felt within the American economy: factories will close and wages diminish. The unfair redistribution taking place transfers wealth from the hard-working American industrial workforce to the global elite, and decisive action to resist climate regulation is primarily about protecting the people's interests. The truthfulness of his populist storytelling is also enhanced by offering a people's perspective on climate change in general: Trump shares his own experience of cold spells of weather as both a shared experience with people and as a truth that is seen to problematize climate science.

This people vs. the elite juxtaposition is further embedded in a discourse of crisis. The extent of the damage to the American economy is going to be disastrous for the working class, and this is further exacerbated by the global efforts at redistribution, which creates further disadvantage and precarity. Moreover, the highly complex problem of climate change is reduced to a simple trope of a zero-sum 'deal' – a type of negotiation most closely associated with Trump – where the focus is purely on the financial transactions associated with the climate deal. Winners and losers are clearly

delineated. The narrative also relies on tropes that describe other countries as behaving inappropriately and expressing bad manners in their own efforts to curb climate change.

> For example, under the agreement, China will be able to increase these emissions by a staggering number of years—13. They can do whatever they want for 13years. Not us. India makes its participation contingent on receiving billions and billions and billions of dollars in foreign aid from developed countries. (Trump 2017)

The populist tropes employed in the story depict a situation where Americans are dealt a bad deal, with a negative impact on blue-collar workers in particular. The deal will lead to an economic crisis for America because of its unfairness and the bad manners the other actors are expressing through their own behavior. The story unmasks the betrayal of the American people by the political elite and the international community, while also showing a way out from the broken equilibrium: leaving the Paris Agreement, protecting the interests of American workers through deregulation and creating economic opportunities that fully utilise environmental resources for the benefit of the American people.

4.4 Delivering narratives: Greta Thunberg

Formal speeches play a significant role in Greta Thunberg's climate change storytelling, leading to a more consistent and less reactive story than Trump's. The story frames climate change as the most important problem facing humanity and focuses on the magnitude of the problem. It targets the role of the elites – economic and political elites in particular – and their culpability in making the climate crisis worse through their inaction. This lack of action by the elites is further portrayed as a source of global inequality, because the negative effects of climate change are distributed in such a way as to have a greater negative impact in the global South than the global North. Although the story draws on scientific facts, it is primarily a moral story with a clear sense of right and wrong, where the actors are located on one side or the other of the climate debate.

Our analysis shows that Thunberg's speeches are very consistent in their use of populist narrative techniques, appearing in all of her high-profile public statements, such as the speeches at the United Nations Climate Conference in 2018 (COP24) and 2019 (COP25), and the World Economic Forum in 2019 and 2020. As the analysis below shows, these combine populist narratives with a focus on a small number of scientific facts that pivot around the symbolic significance of a 1.5 C-degree temperature rise.

4.5 Two stories about climate change

The story of climate change Thunberg tells is twofold, depicting two possible future trajectories: a positive one and a negative one. The fact that climate change is real and that the world is on the brink of disaster is ever present in the narrative. It recognizes the slow impact of climate change policy on the climate and therefore presents the problem through a generational narrative that pits the old against the young and current generations against imagined future generations.

The starting point for the narrative, the broken equilibrium, is the one drawn up from contemporary climate science. This tells the story of the climate facts: the impact of a 1.5 C-degree rise in temperature on sea levels and the remaining global allowance of carbon emissions before we exceed the 1.5 C barrier. It is a story of imminent crisis, where humanity is betting – foolishly – on the ability of future generations to solve the problem through technological innovation and low carbon growth. The story is further embellished by the simple arithmetic of scientific facts:

> To have a 67% chance of staying below a 1.5 degrees global temperature rise—the best odds given by the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change]—the world had 420 gigatons of CO2 left to emit back on Jan. 1st, 2018. Today that figure is already down to less than 350 gigatons. (Thunberg 2019a)

The story is framed as a choice of putting action before profit, that any further postponement of action is motivated by profit and accumulation at the expense of the climate crisis, where future generations will be hardest hit.

From here the story of how this first equilibrium is disrupted takes two different directions. The most prominent of these is the plotline that outlines negative change. Despite the clear scientific evidence that demonstrates the realities of climate change and what needs to be done, the global elites fail to act on this information and exacerbate the climate crisis. Given the generational time frame over which climatic effects take place, the change depicted here is also about generational change: the guilty older generations responsible for the disastrous inaction hand over to the innocent younger generations whose responsibility it will be to deal with the reality of mass extinctions and broken ecosystems. This is best captured in Thunberg's frequent references to how the elites are stealing the 'dreams and childhoods' of the current young generation.

> You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you! (Thunberg 2019a)

The next equilibrium of the plotline is reached once we pass certain thresholds from which there is no turning back. These are tipping points that trigger feedback loops, leading to climatic effects that can no longer be controlled or mitigated by humans. The end point of this story is, crudely put, civilizational ruin: through inaction we are in essence risking not just the fate of ecosystems or certain geographic regions that are likely to be worst affected, but humanity as we know it. This enormous cost is exacted for the benefit of the few in the global North today, who are likely to be shielded from the worst effects of the negative impact their actions are causing.

> I care about climate justice and the living planet. Our civilization is being sacrificed for the opportunity of a very small number of people to continue making enormous amounts of money. Our biosphere is being sacrificed so that rich people in countries like mine can live in luxury. It is the sufferings of the many which pay for the luxuries of the few. (Thunberg 2018).

The second story focuses on disruption that takes a positive direction. The simplicity of this positive solution contrasts with the complexity of the problem. It is a question of a simple choice between continuing with business as usual or stopping our emissions of greenhouse gases.

> You say nothing in life is black or white. But that is a lie. A very dangerous lie. Either we prevent 1.5C of warming or we don't. Either we avoid setting off that irreversible chain reaction beyond human control or we don't. (Thunberg 2019b)

The story draws on the notion of people power, where people can reach positive outcomes by defying the wishes of the elite and by taking progressive action by challenging corporations and governments that ignore the realities of climate change.

> Well, I'm telling you, there is hope. I have seen it, but it does not come from the governments or corporations. It comes from the people. The people whohave been unaware, but are now starting to wake up [. . .] In fact, every great change throughout history has come from the people. We do not have to wait.We can start the change right now. We the people. (Thunberg 2019b)

The new equilibrium that follows this disruption is arguably the least clearly articulated aspect of Thunberg's narrative. While she is very clear on the need for aggressive and immediate reduction in carbon emissions and consumption habits, she remains quite ambiguous in terms of what this might mean.

> Let's be clear. We don't need a 'low-carbon economy.' We don't need to 'lower emissions.' Our emissions have to stop if we are to have a chance to stay below the 1.5 degrees target. And until we have the technologies that at scale can put our emissions to minus then we must forget about net zero—we need real zero. (Thunberg 2020)

In this way there is limited space in Thunberg's story to engage with what the imagined future might look like. The focus is primarily on imagining the consequences of the negative scenario, as this focuses the story on the failures of the contemporary elite.

4.6 Thunberg's populist tropes and narratives

Overall, the populist tropes that Thunberg engages with are perhaps surprisingly similar to those employed by Trump. These also include the pitting of people against the elite, crisis, black-and-white simplification of the issue, and 'bad manners.' The extent of the disruption to the equilibrium is demonstrated through the multiple inequalities present in the story – the capitalist elite vs. people, global North vs. global South, regions differently impacted by climate change, and different generational experiences and responsibilities. Such antagonistic tropes that pit various actors against each other are ubiquitous in this narrative.

Similar to the Trumpian story, the fraught relationship between the people and the elite is further framed by a discourse of crisis. The way the various antagonistic relationships are currently unfolding means that the climate crisis is going to be exacerbated. Yet, despite the complex mesh of relationships and interest groups involved, the policy choice Thunberg presents is a quite simple one that explicitly plays on the trope of a 'child's logic': either we continue to increase our greenhouse emissions, or we do not; even a small child can understand the choice:

> Solving the climate crisis is the greatest and most complex challenge that Homo sapiens have ever faced. The main solution, however, is so simple that even a small child can understand it. We have to stop our emissions of greenhouse gases. (Thunberg 2019c)

The story further places the trope of bad manners upon the behavior of the elite. They are behaving in a selfish and immature manner and dare to ignore the problem.

5 Conclusion

Wicked problems, of which climate change is a prime example, are characterized by fiendish complexity and uncertainty, lack simple policy responses, have no end point, and involve competing interpretations of risk. They lack neutral, consensual solutions and instead are prone to generate disagreements and conflict. Some go as far as defining climate change as a *super*-wicked problem, pointing out that time to deal with the problem is running out, there is an absence of central authority, and decision making reflects extremely short time horizons despite the highly probable, catastrophic impacts in the long term

(Levin et al. 2012). It follows that no policy intervention is going to be elegant enough to cope with this level of complexity. All interventions will have some iatrogenic effects somewhere down the line and 'act as attractors for vigorous disagreement' (Hulme 2009, p. 335). Stories matter for climate change because they help us make sense of the complexity and ambiguity of the issues. Climate change is characterised by uncertainty, which means that policy actors need to rely on imaginaries, narratives, and calculation to create expectations of what will happen, create confidence among people and to plan for the future (Beckert and Bronk, 2018).

Climate change policy is often described as a knowledge-intensive and expert-dominated policy field (Bäckstrand 2004), yet citizens' support is essential for bringing about new climate policies (Höppner and Whitmarsh 2011), prompting in turn debates on the importance of public participation in decision making about climate change (Bäckstrand *et al.* 2010). The uncertainty around best practice and whether the current models will work in the future makes it hard to link expectations to objective probability functions (Bronk and Jacoby, 2016). While scientific facts and data are crucially important, these alone cannot formulate policy, as we cannot make sense of them in isolation. Stories, therefore, play a key role in how complex climate change data is made meaningful to a non-expert audience, helping us better understand how politicians and policymakers go about winning over citizens' support for their policies.

However, a storytelling perspective also shows us how climate change can be framed in many different ways or moulded to fit a variety of perspectives and offers new analytical ways to think about the 'myth of consensus' and the questionable assumption that political consensus is a prerequisite for climate action (Machin 2013). As Marquardt shows, even within the Fridays for Future movement inspired by Thunberg's activism it is possible to identify significant internal struggles between visions inspired by moderate 'techno-optimists' and radical, fundamental transformation of systemic scale along anti-capitalist lines (Marquardt 2020). The power of stories lies in their fungibility, which in turn fuels disagreement, difference and agonism around climate politics (Machin 2020). In the preceding sections we have put forward a framework of populism as an act of storytelling that involves a populist narrative structure and a credible populist narrator – a truth-teller. Narratives can be understood to function as tools of sense making that imbue events with meaning and allow facts to be reinterpreted or embellished (Gabriel, 2004; Gee 1999). Populist narratives are antagonistic, affective and anthropocentric sensemaking devices that highlight the emotional appeals of populist discourse (Rico *et al.* 2017, Salmela and Von Scheve 2017). They are premised on the construction of the 'good and true' people, which is an emotional commitment. In the end, populist narratives are not about great ideas, but about telling a good story. As Stenmark argues '[d]ealing with wicked

problems, and mobilizing a response to them, requires stories and storytelling' because stories '[help] us live with ambiguity' (Stenmark 2015, p. 931). We might say that the more complex the issue, the more important the story, and in climate change we have most complex issue of them all.

The main contribution of this article lies in developing the theory and practice of populist storytelling as an alternative to an empty rhetoric or a thin ideology, and in presenting populism as an essential tool connecting emotions with complex political issues such as climate change. Populist narratives transform complex issues by adding a clear plot, friends, heroes and enemies. In this article we give examples of how populist storytelling – by applying the populist narrative frame – connects emotions with values and interests, generating various discordant voices, be that as attractors for vigorous disagreement (Hulme 2009), dismantlers of the myth of political consensus (Machin 2013) or sources of internal struggle among climate activists (Marquardt 2020).

In populism research, the prospect of 'exposing' elites speaks to our emotions. When a schoolgirl speaks out against world leaders, asking 'how dare you' risk the fate of future generations, it is a strong populist moment, as it describes the elites as reckless in a crisis where they only care about profits and easy fixes. It symbolizes the child in H.C. Andersen's fairytale 'The emperor's New Clothes', whose role is to expose pretense and call out the truth. Similarly, Donald Trump has been hailed by some as the lone fighter exposing the liberal elites' lack of care for peoples' concerns. Trump has become an alt-right hero of diverse conspiracy theories where he will expose the enemies of the people within the deep state. This is missed out in an ideological approach. Populist narratives are not about ideas but emotional and affective approaches to complex issues with a clear plot, friends, heroes and enemies. When interpreted through a populist narrative frame, climate change is no longer an abstract phenomenon but a struggle between good and bad where a heroic storyteller unmasks the betrayal of the corrupt elites whose actions will lead to dystopian futures, lest they be stopped. Populist narratives are therefore about steering the populace through affect rather than ideological or intellectual content. The fear of elites leading acting against your interests and down the wrong path, towards doom, is a strong emotional narrative to mobilize people and one that could be employed in support of any chosen ideology, populist or otherwise. It is just that not everyone chooses to use populist narrative structure to mobilize the masses, and not all public personas see themselves as truth-tellers exposing elites.

The article therefore concludes that, despite highly contrasting approaches, both Trump and Thunberg in fact practice similar forms of populist storytelling that rely on acts of truth-telling by the hero, applying the same populist narrative frame. Populism and climate change, therefore, have a varied relationship that extends far beyond climate change denialism

and our findings suggest that populist storytelling, by connecting emotions and affect with highly complex policy problems, has more to do with our political engagement with climate change than we might have otherwise assumed.

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ORCID

Johan Nordensvard http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8508-4212
Markus Ketola http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2958-6255

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