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Post-Truth Populism

A New Political Paradigm

Edited by
Saul Newman · Maximilian Conrad



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Introduction

Saul Newman and Maximilian Conrad 

It is now a common place to say that we live times of post-truth *and* populism. Everything that has happened since that fateful year, 2016—when ‘post-truth’ was named the OED word of the year; when the Brexit referendum, notoriously characterized by lies, mistruths, and disinformation coupled with populist messaging, was held; and when the archetypal populist and liar-in-chief Trump, was elected as US president—suggests a convergence between the politics of populism and the paradigm of post-truth. While post-truth and populism are highly contested terms, the vast academic literature that has emerged in recent years on both concepts—and particularly in reference to the recent ‘epistemic turn’ in populism studies (see Müller, 2023; Nawrocki, 2023; Ylä-Antilla, 2018)—points to the ways in which these two, often disparate, phenomena are together transforming the contemporary political landscape.

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Today disinformation and ‘fake news’ are widely and deliberately disseminated by populist politicians and political entrepreneurs who, at the same time, accuse the ‘mainstream’ media of doing the same. Outlandish conspiracy theories resound throughout the echo chambers of the internet and on social media, often spilling out into the ‘real’ world, as happened when a mob of QAnon followers and Trump supporters tried to stage an insurrection in 2021 to overturn the results of the 2020 election, convinced, against all evidence to the contrary, that Trump had won. Internet algorithms shape political preferences, Russian bots and disinformation farms interfere with election outcomes; and the brave new world of AI and deep fakes will pose intractable future challenges to democratic debate and decision-making. Far-right populist movements, parties, and governments are now a permanent feature of the political landscape, their discourses and policies having a distorting influence on public debate and profoundly reshaping the political agenda.

Never has there been such distrust of the political ‘establishment’ and official sources of knowledge and information. Never have elected representatives, government officials, and journalists of the mainstream media been held in greater contempt and regarded with greater incredulity—denounced by populist politicians as ‘enemies of the people’, agents of the ‘deep state’, and as disseminators of ‘fake news’. Never has our political space appeared so fractured and polarized, divided into two antagonistic camps who live in completely different and opposed epistemological universes; a division exacerbated by populist politicians who deliberately stoke the ‘culture wars’ in the attempt to gain political advantage and to galvanize key constituencies. Scientific expertise—particularly relating to issues around climate change, pandemics,¹ and vaccines—is derided

¹ Indeed, the recent experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the political response to it might be regarded as a paradigmatic case of post-truth populism at work. Not only did it give rise to outlandish conspiracy theories around the existence of pandemic and measures employed to deal with it, including the deployment of vaccines; but, when populist leaders were in government—as was the case with Trump in the US, Johnson in the UK, Bolsonaro in Brazil, etc.—they deliberately spread misinformation about coronavirus, downplayed its significance, went against scientific expertise and undermined the authority of their chief medical advisors, and recommended completely untested drugs and remedies—in one case Trump even advocating drinking bleach as a preventative measure. This completely irresponsible handling of the pandemic on the part of some populist leaders was intended as a means of gaining political advantage and intensifying political polarization, even at the cost of public health. It fitted exactly into the populist playbook of pitting the ‘common sense’ of the people (as articulated by the leader) against the

by populists as obfuscating, misguided, or as an attempt on the part of nefarious elites to deceive ordinary people, control their lives, and erode their living standards. Simplistic slogans, like ‘Get Brexit Done’, ‘Take Back Control’ or ‘Build that Wall’ and ‘Make America Great Again’, are hurled against the bastions of technocracy and the ‘administrative state’. Outlandish promises are made without any acknowledgement of the complexity of policy. Populist movements become political cults that form around the figure of the leader, who is seen as infallible by his or her supporters and as always articulating *their* truth. Political lying becomes prolific, to the point where the line between truth and falsehood becomes all but indiscernible. Factual truth is secondary to emotional affect and ideological alignment. Public discourse becomes increasingly antagonistic and obscure; political debate becomes ever more fractious and uncivil. Rational deliberation and communication between participants in the public sphere—crucial to functioning democracies—seems all but impossible. Liberal democracies, under the pressures of right-wing populism and post-truth, sometimes morph into illiberal ‘hybrid’ regimes—part democracies/part dictatorships, or ‘democratorships’ to use Pierre Rosanvallon’s expression (see 2021)—in which media manipulation and the control of information are the main tools of power.

Such phenomena have become the all too mundane face of democratic systems everywhere. They tell us that a major transformation has taken place in our political world—to the extent, perhaps, that we can no longer refer to a common political world at all, but only to an antagonistic and fragmented space of what Jürgen Habermas (2022) has called ‘semi-publics’.

These changes reflect the resonance between, particularly, right-wing populism²—which weaponizes ‘fake news’ and conspiracy narratives—and

‘technocratic knowledge’ of the experts. While there was of course a legitimate political debate to be had about the appropriateness and proportionality of lockdowns, social distancing, and even vaccine mandates and mask wearing policies, the dismissal of the scientific evidence upon which these decisions were largely based is illustrative of the way that populist politics can easily converge with post-truth narratives (see also Ólafsson in this volume).

² There are, of course, left-wing populisms and populists—SYRIZA in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Correa in Ecuador, Sanders in the US, Corbyn in the UK, etc.—but we consider this a very different phenomenon to right-wing populism: while it still has as its central narrative the opposition between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’, its economic policies tend to be social democratic and redistributionist, rather than neoliberal, and it does not seek

the general epistemic crisis referred to as post-truth. This is no doubt a complex relationship, but it seems clear that there is an important, perhaps necessary, connection to be explored here. Populism, as we know, is a form of political discourse or ('thin-centred') ideology (see Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017) based on the central opposition between 'the people' and 'elites'. But this is not only a moral and political antagonism—where the people are constructed as honest, hardworking, and morally pure, while the elites are seen as 'corrupt', 'out of touch', and as having betrayed the national interest to a liberal, globalizing and multicultural agenda. It is also an *epistemological* opposition: the 'honest' people are deceived by the duplicitous elites, who lie to them, who pretend to represent their interests, all the while selling them out. Hence, the truth of the people—best articulated by the populist leader—is pitted against the lies and obfuscations of the elites. The 'common sense' wisdom of the people contrasts with the overly technocratic and obscure knowledge of the experts and the 'establishment' whose interests they really serve. Thus, what we find in populism is a clash between two discourses of knowledge—the knowledge of the people and the knowledge of the elites—and thus a fundamental opposition between the people who embody the truth, but who are denied it, and the establishment which conceals the truth from them.

The most exaggerated and hyperbolic expression of this kind of narrative is the conspiracy theory, which posits a shadowy elite orchestrating a global plot to manipulate the lives of ordinary people (see Bergmann, 2018; and in this volume). Every conspiracy theory is, at its most basic level, a form of populism (see Harris, 2023) and, while not all populisms indulge in conspiracy thinking, many of them do. Indeed, there is a growing convergence between right-wing populisms and conspiracies around vaccines, climate change, and immigration. The mobilization of these narratives is used to deliberately undermine the credibility of the political establishment, the mainstream media, the judiciary, and other institutions, and to further polarize the political field. Populists thus reproduce and exacerbate a political culture in which factual truth no

to exclude minorities in the same manner as the populism of the right, which tends to be associated with a concept of national identity narrowly defined in cultural or ethnic terms. More to the point, we would propose that the deliberate mobilization of post-truth discourses (disinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories) is found more in right-wing populism. This is a point made by a number of contributors to this volume (for instance Venizelos).

longer seems to matter or matters less than emotional appeals—playing on fear, paranoia, resentment, enmity, and aspiration—and the desire for identity. Indeed, playing fast and loose with the truth is often part of the appeal of populist politicians, who like to style themselves as unconventional ‘outsiders’ not bound by the norms and rules of the political game. The personality of the populist leader becomes the galvanizing force around which the movement is organized, in which adherence to truth is much less important than the extent to which the leader reflects the identity and values of his/her followers. It is not so much that followers of post-truth populists are deceived—supporters of Trump say they take him ‘seriously, not literally’—but rather that they no longer care about the factual accuracy of what they say.

How should such developments be understood in the broader context of post-truth? Are populists deliberate manipulators and propagators of the post-truth condition, or are they themselves a symptom of it? Or are they both? While it seems that there is a clear connection between populism and post-truth, the precise nature of their relationship has not hitherto been fully explored. Aside from a few investigations into specific aspects of this relationship—such as gender politics (see Burke et al., 2022; Harsin, 2018), media communications (see Conrad, 2022; Tumber & Waisbord, 2021; Waisbord, 2018), public health and climate change policy (see Fischer, 2022; Speed & Mannion, 2017)—there have been relatively few works that comprehensively deal with the different dimensions of an emerging political paradigm: PTP or Post-Truth Populism. This volume is aimed at understanding the ways in which populism and post-truth discourse work together in the contemporary political landscape, and the effect this has on liberal democratic institutions and norms.

Post-truth has been defined in various ways, including by the OED which characterizes it as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’. Generally speaking, post-truth refers to the preponderance of lies, mis-/disinformation, ‘fake news’, ‘alternative facts’, conspiracy theories, and the breakdown of trust in once established sources of knowledge and information (see Bennett & Livingston, 2021). Post-truth is a condition in which truth has lost its symbolic value in political life (see Newman, 2019) and where it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between factual truth and falsehood. Post-truth might be understood, then, as a transformation in our political culture, where truth is no longer valued in public debate, where

the norms of factual accuracy become less important, and where traditional sources of knowledge and information—the legacy media, scientific authority, public institutions—are no longer trusted. Post-truth, in this sense, refers to more than just political lying, which, in its transgression of the truth, can also affirm truth’s symbolic authority. It is a rather more serious phenomenon whereby we have become *indifferent to truth* as such; speech in the post-truth condition becomes *careless* with regard to factual truth (see Hyvönen, 2018). The emergence of post-truth political culture is only possible with digital communication technologies and social media, which have largely supplanted traditional sources of information and knowledge like the mainstream media, creating echo chambers and filter bubbles that act as a vector for mis- and disinformation and wild conspiracy theories.

It is clear why post-truth political culture poses such a threat to the institutions and norms of liberal democracy. Central to the functioning of democratic life is the possibility at least of free and relatively undistorted communication between citizens in the public sphere—a form of rational deliberation out of which public opinion can be formed. This in turn implies some consensus around basic facts. As Hannah Arendt observed long ago, while truth and politics have never been on good terms—the notion of absolute Truth being antithetical to the plurality of opinion characteristic of the political world—nevertheless, the very possibility of political disagreement itself presupposes some agreement over objective reality. Post-truth erodes the common world upon which political life is founded. Not only do lies, mis-/disinformation, and ‘fake news’ disrupt and distort communication, making rational deliberation between citizens virtually impossible (see Chambers, 2021), but their prevalence today works to create a sense confusion of about the nature of reality itself. The inability to distinguish between truth and falsehood makes any kind of cognitive mapping of the world extremely difficult. As Arendt (1967, p. 15) said:

the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed... Consistent lying, metaphorically speaking, pulls the ground from under our feet and provides no other ground on which to stand.

Moreover, post-truth produces a political space that is utterly polarized, leading to the further erosion of democratic life. While democratic politics presupposes a pluralism of perspectives and opinions—and indeed genuine disagreement—it is assumed that participants will at least agree on the rules by which they disagree. Yet, under the post-truth deluge this common agreement—this basic civility between political adversaries—seems to have disappeared altogether. Our political world appears irreconcilably divided between two hostile camps—left and right, progressive and conservative—who not only have nothing in common but openly despise one another, constructing their identity and values through their fundamental enmity towards the other, much along the lines of Carl Schmitt’s (2007) ‘friend/enemy’ opposition. As philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2022) says, ‘the disappearance of the drive for truth and the disintegration of society cause each other. When society disintegrates into groups or tribes between which no understanding is possible, which share no sense of the binding signification of things, the crisis of truth spreads’.

We must be clear—and this is one of the contentions of this volume (see for instance Mahamutovic and Lovec)—that ‘post-truth’ does not mean that ‘truth’ is no longer a referent in the world of politics. On the contrary, truth claims are made all the time, especially by populist politicians who proclaim their own version of the truth in opposition to the truth of the elites. Politics today is not absent of the signifier ‘truth’. Rather, truth becomes *hyper-politicized*, which, at the same time, accounts for the erosion of its efficacy and authority in the political domain. Where truth is invoked everywhere, and by everyone, then it is effective *nowhere* and commits *no one*. Despite the claims of some commentators (see d’Ancona, 2017; Latour, 2004; McIntyre, 2018) who have laid the blame for post-truth at the door of postmodern theory, post-truth has nothing to do with any kind of hermeneutical playfulness or postmodern ‘relativism’. Indeed, postmodern theory—particularly J.-F. Lyotard (see 1984)—served as a useful warning and critical diagnosis of the coming post-truth condition, pointing to the way in which discourses of truth are bound up with power (Foucault refers to ‘regimes of truth’ for instance); and it may even contain conceptual tools to combat post-truth populism.³

³ Elsewhere I have proposed that Foucault’s later work on the Greek concept of *parrhesia*—the ancient practice of speaking truth to power as an ethical requirement of the ‘care of the self’—serves as an alternative political model for the deployment of truth to that of post-truth populism (see Newman 2021, 2022).

In stark contrast to postmodern and poststructuralist theorists, today's propagators of post-truth insist on the absolute veracity and authority of their own narrative and the falseness and illegitimacy of those they oppose. Post-truth is not relativism but a new kind of *fundamentalism*—one that seeks to impose an authoritarian order of truth based on socially conservative values. As such, it is utterly hostile to political pluralism, not to mention the rights of minorities. Post-truth is therefore not something to be celebrated, and it cannot be seen, as some like Steve Fuller (see 2018, 2020) propose, as an emancipatory democratization of knowledge and as a challenge to power. The weaponization of truth and the populist challenge to 'elites' is part of a project of power and domination, propagated by right-wing political and media networks. The post-truth populist challenge to the 'elites' simply puts in place a new kind of elite. Post-truth populism aims at the construction of a new kind of post-liberal ideological hegemony.

At the same time, we need to recognize the emergence of post-truth populism as symptomatic of the breakdown of the existing liberal political order and of the highly dysfunctional state of liberal democracies today (see García-Gutián, and Ólafsson, in this volume). That many people in liberal democracies profoundly distrust their elected representatives, not to mention the mainstream media and other traditional forms of knowledge authority, turning instead to alternative political voices and sources of information, should not surprise us. The steady erosion, since the 1980s, of state institutions and the democratic public space under the market-driven logic of neoliberalism (see Brown, 2015, 2019), the global banking crisis of 2008 and the two decades of austerity policies that followed, and the inability of governments today to effectively manage the many manifold crises of economics, public health and the environment and to satisfy the desires and expectations of their citizens, has led to the current 'legitimation crisis' of liberal democratic capitalism (see Streeck, 2017). As such, we acknowledge, as one of the contributors argues in this volume (see Venizelos; see also Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis, 2022), that the danger of a too-easy association between populism and post-truth is that it becomes part of a liberal establishment discourse of *anti-populism* that is mobilized in defence of the status quo. As part of this discourse, any kind of populist challenge to the liberal order is dismissed as 'unscientific' and 'irrational', and therefore lacking any kind of legitimacy. Truth, as it operates in the political world, is socially constructed and therefore contested and contestable. It is inevitably part of power struggles. The

once dominant liberal ideology constructed its own narrative of social relations, just as those who challenge it—from both the left and the right—do today. We thus need to think critically about the way in which the discourse around post-truth/populism, and the threat it is said to pose to liberal democracy, is framed. Francis Fukuyama once pithily defined ‘populism’ as ‘the label that political elites attach to policies supported by ordinary citizens that they [the elites] don’t like’. To some degree the same could be said about post-truth.

At the same time, we do need to take this threat seriously. As Arendt has argued, unless there is some acknowledgement of basic facts, political life itself becomes profoundly endangered. And this is precisely what is happening now. In other words, the ‘post-truth’ age is really the ‘post-factual’ age, in the sense that even empirically verifiable facts—such as the causes and impacts of climate change, or the size of the crowd at a president’s inaugural address, or the outcome of an election, or the efficacy of vaccines—are in dispute. Basic facts get drowned out in a cacophony of competing perspectives; they become relativized and weaponized (‘my facts against your facts’). Arendt’s idea that facts are vulnerable to organized and systematic lying (see Harsin; and Garcia-Guitian in this volume) is borne out today under the post-truth onslaught. Thus, the possibility of a common world which serves as the foundation of political life—with its regard for pluralism and the recognition of difference—is severely eroded. To point to the threat posed by post-truth, and the way it is mobilized by populists in order to establish a new kind of truth order, is not to express a nostalgia for a golden age of truth in politics (there never has been such a time) (see Kalpokas in this volume), nor is it to defend the liberal status quo as such (although there are indeed important aspects of liberal democracy that are under attack by right-wing populists and are in need of defending, such as the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and the respect for the rights of women and minorities). Rather, we see post-truth populism as in some ways a useful diagnostic tool for thinking critically about the limitations of liberal democracy and as an opportunity to renew it (see Ólafsson in this volume; see also Farkas & Schou, 2024).

APPROACH, METHODOLOGY, AND STRUCTURE

This book is an investigation of the different dimensions of what we see as an emerging political paradigm: post-truth populism. It explores its origins, operation, and dynamics, and its impact on politics today,

particularly on liberal democracy. We take the position that post-truth populism involves a transformation of contemporary political culture, with far-reaching effects on key areas of political life, from government policy to the consumption of media, political communication, electoral outcomes, public debate, and the treatment of minorities. Post-truth populism is a complex phenomenon with many different sides: the weaponization of conspiracy theories; the denigration of the mainstream media and the intimidation of journalists; the deployment of populist ‘counter-narratives’; the role of technology and social media in populist disinformation campaigns; and the assault on the institutions, norms, and procedures of liberal democracy. Bringing together theoretical perspectives, and empirical case studies of the specific impacts of post-truth/populism, this book develops a systematic analysis of the ways in which PTP is transforming our political reality.

The volume is divided into four main sections that study different aspects of this phenomenon: (1) *Debating PTP*, which explores a number of key conceptual and theoretical questions around the meaning of the term, its origins, and how it is deployed in contemporary political debates; (2) *Political communications and the media*, which looks at the specific impact of PTP on media consumption, opinion formation and the role of journalism; (3) *Counterknowledge and conspiracy theories*, which examines how PTP discourse operates in making counter-truth/knowledge claims intended to undermine the dominant ‘elite’ narrative; and (4) *PTP and democracy*, which investigates the fundamental questions it poses and challenges it presents particularly to liberal democracies.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Debating PTP

Chapters in this section examine and critically reflect on contemporary debates about post-truth populism, highlighting the somewhat problematic and contested nature of this term and the way it reflects certain epistemic assumptions and ideological biases that should be challenged. Central questions that are considered here are: is post-truth populism simply an epistemic problem—to do with a deficit of truth and knowledge—or is it symptomatic of a deeper crisis within our digital and political culture; and do concerns about post-truth populism belie an unrealistic nostalgia for a golden age of truth in politics, which also

reflects an anti-populist prejudice on the part of liberal elites who are threatened by this challenge to their authority?

In the chapter ‘[Post-truth Politics and Epistemic Populism: About Forming Facts, Not Dis/misinformation](#)’ Jayson Harsin reflects on current research on post-truth politics and populism studies, with an emphasis on epistemic questions (especially those focused on ‘disinformation’/‘misinformation’). He critically analyses usual approaches to post-truth that see it in terms of lying and deception, proposing instead a different conceptualization, which is only secondarily epistemic. Arendt’s concept of public truth is proposed as a better starting point, with the caveat that current treatments of post-truth misunderstand how public truth can be known (since it is not ‘scientific’ truth), something that requires acknowledging its crucial technologically and socially mediated status depending on performative trust. Thus, post-truth is an affective state, an anxious and future-looking public mood about the difficulty of trust-making for securing publicly accepted facts. Harsin then proceeds to explore a potential theoretical overlap between post-truth and populism studies, reversing the epistemic focus of from populist ‘counter-knowledge’ problems, which is taken as self-evident by researchers. Instead, Harsin explores epistemic problems in populism studies *on the researcher side*: the epistemic risks built into the ‘ideational’ definition of populism; and in the tacit understandings of political rhetoric reduced to ‘information’ (transmission and reception) at the expense of more complex notions of mediated communication as performance or ritual, speech acts, and, especially, political rhetoric.

In the chapter ‘[Nostalgic Post-truth: Towards an Anti-humanist Theory of Communication](#)’ Ignas Kalpokas also argues that post-truth cannot be understood as an epistemic problem, to do with a lack of knowledge or our propensity to be deceived. Taking issue with the way debates on post-truth populism are framed, he suggests that they belie a kind of nostalgia for a lost golden age of truth—based on Enlightenment rationality and the idea of the disembodied and detached Cartesian subject—something that has supposedly been lost amidst the current climate of cognitive and moral decay and the manipulations of populists. Rather than diagnosing the problems facing today’s societies, the mainstream discourse on post-truth ironically bears close resemblance to its own object of critique, populism, which is also nostalgic for a lost golden age. The mainstream discourse on post-truth might thus be summed up in the slogan ‘Make Truth Great Again!’ However, to imagine that there

ever was such a golden age in which truth was unquestioned, or to seek to restore the centrality of truth to the world of politics, is a disavowal of what Kalpokas sees as the necessarily tragic dimension of the political. The author sees the politics as a landscape populated by a multitude of truth-utterances, interrelating with each other on a groundless terrain without the possibility of an ultimate fixed order or grounding truth. Politics, in other words, must reconcile itself with uncertainty and plurality, and abandon any quest to anchor itself in an ultimate truth. Arendt herself would not disagree with this. And, indeed, acknowledging and affirming the fundamental contingency of political life might be the most effective way of countering the *truth absolutism* of the populists, who seek to anchor social relations in their own version of the truth.

Yet, is there a *necessary* relationship between post-truth and populism? This is a question raised in chapter '(Anti-)Populism and Post-truth' by Giorgios Venizelos, who argues that the facile association of populism with post-truth overly simplifies a complex phenomenon and reflects the anti-populist prejudice of mainstream discourse. 'Post-truth populism' is the bugbear of liberal elites, and the deployment of this term thus becomes a way of dismissing populist challenges to the liberal political order as 'irrational', 'emotive', and 'unscientific'. As Venizelos argues, the elitism prevalent in expert discourse *about* post-truth and populist politics may explain why experts and policymakers are subject to growing distrust; why they fail to effectively communicate their agendas to citizens; why they meet resistance; as well as why fake news and conspiracies resonate with people even against a background of scientific facts disproving post-truth narratives. Furthermore, it is argued that the elite discourse of anti-populism, in grouping all opposition under the same catchphrase, conflates populism with the extreme right, thus overlooking the specific threat of reactionary politics. Rather than sounding the alarm over 'post-truth populism', the chapter suggests that it is more productive to observe the language games around 'truth' and 'populism' and the ways elites employ them to dismiss challengers through rhetorical mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion.

Political Communications and the Media

This section explores post-truth populism as a *strategy* and *style* of political and media communication—based on the central division between the 'honest people' and the 'lying elites'. This framework, it is proposed,

exacerbates the effects of post-truth culture by provoking citizen distrust and hostility, particularly towards the mainstream media and journalists, and intensifying political polarization, thus distorting communication in the public sphere.

In the chapter ‘[The Epistemic Dimension of Populist Communication: Can Exposure to Populist Communication Spark Factual Relativism?](#)’ Michael Hameleers draws a link between the post-truth condition—characterized by widespread mistrust, political polarization, and the preponderance of ‘alternative facts’ and ‘fake news’—and the populist style of communication—which emphasizes the moral and causal divide between ordinary, honest people and corrupt, duplicitous elites. Whether this is either cause or consequence of the post-truth, it is hypothesized that epistemic populism exacerbates the effects of this condition. The chapter empirically investigates the extent to which beliefs related to the relative status of factual knowledge can be primed by exposure to populist communication. It explores, firstly, how online populist messages create an antagonism between congruent and incongruent elitist truth claims. Based on the qualitative inventory of delegitimizing populist narratives, it reports on the findings of an experiment in which participants were exposed to populist messaging from the right-wing media outlet, Breitbart. Specifically, people saw political messages in which scientific knowledge and expert evidence were attacked and contrasted with people-centric claims on reality. The experiment was conducted to see if the emphasis on a binary divide between the people’s honesty and the deception of elites can fuel the perception that truthfulness has become relative, debatable, and polarized. As a well-functioning deliberative democracy should be founded upon a shared understanding of basic facts, Hameleers argues that the rise of epistemic populism across democracies further erodes trust and makes people open to counter-factual evidence that resonates with their existing beliefs. Hence, when populists deliberately target science and mainstream media with accusations of disinformation and bias, the public may become increasingly polarized on an epistemic level. As a consequence, citizens may come to distrust democratic institutions and media, and may instead gravitate towards counter-factual alternative media sources and conspiracy theories.

In the chapter ‘[Refusing to Be Silenced: Critical Journalism, Populism and the Post-truth Condition](#)’ Maximilian Conrad explores the assault on mainstream journalism (accusations of ‘fake news’ and ‘liberal bias’, etc.) as a fundamental aspect of post-truth populism. These attacks go beyond

a potentially legitimate critique of mainstream journalism, and constitute a more fundamental effort to *delegitimize* the very existence of mainstream media. Populist actors construe mainstream media as part of a corrupt liberal elite that is out of touch with reality as it is experienced by the pure/authentic people. In this chapter, Conrad focuses on the experiences of journalists of the mainstream media themselves, who are subject not only to constant denigration by populists, but in some cases physical and/or verbal intimidation. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with journalists from prominent German media outlets, the chapter explores journalists' experiences in this regard and analyses how such abuse contributes to the development of a post-truth political culture. Based on the intimate link between post-truth politics and populism, the main argument developed here is that the delegitimation of mainstream journalism has created an increasingly hostile climate for journalists. The increasing frequency of verbal and physical attacks on journalists has to be understood as part of an effort to *silence* the voice of critical journalism. In the context of post-truth politics, this effort clearly does not contribute to establishing the truth, but rather aims to impose a specific version of the truth. Due to the fact that (liberal) democracy requires that citizens have access to reliable sources of information, efforts to silence the voice of critical journalism therefore need to be seen as a crucial step in the creation of—rather than as the symptom of an already existing—post-truth condition..

Counterknowledge and Conspiracy Theories

This section investigates tropes and narratives central to post-truth populist discourse—particularly the rhetorical tools employed by populist actors to delegitimize and demonize opponents, galvanize political constituencies, and to consolidate power. Among these are ‘counter-knowledge’ claims, which invoke alternative narratives that purport to be grounded in science and factual evidence, in opposition to the dominant narrative; and the use of conspiracy theories to generate a climate of mistrust, paranoia, and hostility towards the ‘enemies of the people’, both external and internal.

The chapter “[‘The First in the Service of Truth’: Construction of Counterknowledge Claims and the Case of Janša’s SDS’ Media Outlets](#)” investigates the interplay of populism, on the one hand, and truth and knowledge production, on the other, in the context of the post-truth

condition. Here, authors Melika Mahmutović and Marko Lovec emphasize that such an inquiry must begin by clearly delineating the meaning of populism as such and by applying that understanding to the populist relation to truth and knowledge production, without essentializing or simplifying the relation between the two. To illustrate this point, they assess the case of the populist politician and (former) Slovenian PM, Janez Janša, and the Slovenian Democratic Party to show how they employ the strategy of ‘counterknowledge’ to assert their belief in truth supported by alternative inquiry. Mahmutović and Lovec’s findings suggest that Janša and SDS do not necessarily oppose science or expert knowledge as such, nor do they solely privilege folk knowledge. Rather, they advocate a particular kind of counter-expertise arising from their own epistemic community, in which SDS works to portray itself as the only reliable authority on truth. In this way, SDS’s truth claims are part of their hegemonic struggle to solidify political antagonisms through a hybrid strategy of political cognitive relativism. The analysis thus shows that populists are not necessarily irrational actors who negate scientific epistemology, but rather issue truth claims as a way of consolidating their political agenda.

In the chapter ‘[A Three-Step Rhetorical Model of Conspiratorial Populism](#)’, Eirkur Bergmann focuses on conspiracy narratives as a rhetorical tool—a particularly powerful one—used increasingly by populists. Here Bergmann identifies and examines a threefold claim that nativist populists put forth in their support of the people via conspiracy theories. First, they tend to create an external threat to the nation discursively. Second, they accuse the domestic elite of betraying the people, often even of siding with external aggressors. Third, they position themselves as the true defenders of the ‘pure people’ they vow to protect against both the elite and these malignant outsiders, that is, against those they have discursively created. It is argued that populist conspiracy theorists share these traits across both countries and themes. The discussion here focuses on three prominent conspiracy theories, each gaining traction in different geographical regions in contemporary times. In Western Europe, the Eurabia conspiracy theory has found favour among many nativist populists. It has been leveraged to incite actions against those labelled as ‘dangerous others’—in the present context, often Muslims. In the US, the Deep State conspiracy theory was vehemently propagated by Donald Trump. This theory posits the existence of a hidden network comprising bureaucrats, professional politicians, and interest agencies, purportedly manipulating society from the shadows. Trump notably invoked this

theory to rally his supporters in his defence following his loss in the 2020 presidential election. Meanwhile, in Russia, Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin have long embraced a variety of anti-Western conspiracy theories. These have been strategically deployed to garner support for actions such as the invasion of Ukraine, demonstrating their use as a tool for geopolitical manoeuvring.

PTP and Democracy

The final section explores the impact of post-truth populism on democracy, particularly on the liberal democratic model. This qualification is important, since populists claim, at least, to speak for the ‘real people’ and for a ‘real democracy’—based on popular sovereignty and direct representation—against the liberal elites and the distorting and mediating influence of liberal institutions (like the independence of the judiciary and the role of intermediary bodies); they thus proclaim a model of ‘illiberal democracy’, or democracy shorn of its liberal features. But can democracy really be separated from liberalism in this way, or are the mediating institutions of liberalism an essential part of modern democracy, without which democracy would no longer be democratic? Is the populist critique of liberal democracy—and the alternative forms of democracy it proposes—necessarily authoritarian, or do they, at the same time, serve as a useful diagnostic tool for thinking about, and beyond, the current limitations of liberal democracy?

In the chapter ‘Populisms in Democracies Under Post-truth Pressure: Giving New Life to Public Debate or Blurring It?’) Elena García-Gutián explores some debates that underlie the perception that we are inhabiting a post-truth context in relation to the spread of populist movements and leaders that are challenging our understandings of democracy. Following the work of Pierre Rosanvallon and Nadia Urbinati, García-Gutián reflects on the common traits of contemporary populism despite its important cultural, ideological, and contextual differences. For these authors, populism involves an understanding of democracy that takes it to its limits and has authoritarian traits. Secondly, García-Gutián assesses the claim that we are living in a post-truth context, highlighting the different approaches to ‘post-truth’ and their political implications. This is related to the debate about facts and opinions and the way we envision the epistemic character of democratic politics. And the key point

is the acceptance (or denial) of the normative content and presumption of rationality of the outcomes of democratic procedures approached from a systemic perspective. Third, she concludes that populism, understood as an alternative model of democracy, damages some of the core elements of liberal democracies, disregarding forms of complex representation provided by intermediary bodies and their role in the formation of better decisions, which is one of the sources of democracy's legitimacy. In this sense, one of the principal traits of populism is the distrust of intermediary bodies, which has an impact on the social and political status of scientific knowledge and the relative weight it should have in political decisions. Such changes—disruption, polarization, fragmentation—challenge the liberal democratic imaginary, relating to a certain way of producing scientific knowledge and using it in the justification of political decisions in the context of deep socioeconomic structural changes. García-Gutián contrasts populist claims with those of authors adopting a systemic view of democratic deliberation, to redescribe the idea of the public sphere in contemporary democracies, as well as its proper relations with representative institutions, offering normative criteria to orient political regulations.

In the chapter ‘[New Turn Populism: Ideological or Epistemic? An Inquiry into Explanatory Models of Populism and the Meaning of ‘Post-truth’](#)’ Peter Strandbrink outlines the contours of a new form of post-epistemic, post-ideological form of politics—what he terms NTP and New Turn Populism—which, he argues, we lack the tools to properly diagnose, let alone contest. What is unprecedented about contemporary or ‘new turn’ populism—what differentiates it from past forms of ideology-based politics, even those of the extreme right—is its complete indifference to standards of objective truth and veracity, to any notion of ideological coherence and, therefore, to our knowledge-building assumptions. It is therefore impossible to explain using normal political scientific methods and conceptual frameworks. NTP is unconcerned with the role of truth, evidence-based deliberation, and reason in political talk—all the elements that are central to the functioning of the public sphere. New turn populists—Trump and his supporters being the paradigmatic case—do not care if we accuse them of lying, or point out the inconsistency of their statements or the gap between their claims and objective reality. To do so is to insist on certain standards and expectations of truth, rationality, and coherence in political discourse that NTP is entirely indifferent to. We liberal democrats, who adhere to the rules of political game, thus

fight the battles of today with the weapons of yesterday. NTP—which has now moved from fringes to the political mainstream—therefore presents specific challenges to the liberal democratic political model, not simply because it rejects its norms, values, and institutions, but more so because it disavows our basic assumptions about rational deliberation in the public sphere.

Finally, in the chapter ‘[Populist Democracy and the Post-truth Condition](#)’ Jón Ólafsson understands the ‘post-truth condition’ as the commonly experienced situation where open and free discussion is no longer oriented towards the truth—something that produces specific challenges for liberal democracy. Exploring its relationship to populism, Ólafsson argues that in order to better understand the post-truth condition, it is helpful to construct two different, but ultimately equally valid, narratives of its origins. The first narrative characterizes it as a reaction to liberalism’s epistocratic tendencies, which have placed expert knowledge at the forefront of policy-making, thereby making the inclusion of ordinary citizens in policy discussion and their policy engagement very difficult. The second narrative constructs ‘post-truth’ as an integral to populist politics and as being promoted by it. Populism, in rejecting what Nadia Urbinati calls ‘intermediary bodies’, places the claim to truth in the voice of the leader, whose relationship to a particular audience presents it as an incarnation of the public as a whole. Yet, regardless of whether the post-truth condition is a reaction to elitist epistocracy, or whether it is actively promoted by populists to undermine the current order—whether, in other words, post-truth is a cause of populism or whether populism is a cause of post-truth—their convergence today tells us something important about the current limitations of liberal democracy and serves as an invitation to think beyond them. Ólafsson suggests that the resistance to populism—prevalent in liberal and academic discourse—conceals a reluctance to engage in a robust re-examination of liberal politics, something that makes it difficult to identify exactly what the crisis of democracy consists in or how to articulate it. In considering some alternatives to liberal democracy—such as the model of deliberative and epistemic democracy—he suggests that democratic reform should aim, firstly, at a fuller understanding of liberal democracy’s shortcomings: epistocratic liberalism and liberal indifference.

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Debating PTP



Post-truth Politics and Epistemic Populism: About (Dis-)Trusted Presentation and Communication of Facts, Not False Information

Jayson Harsin

INTRODUCTION

When should scholars beware of dictionary definitions of the terms they use to do more robust conceptual work? Post-truth, truth, facts, communication, and, perhaps most unassumingly of all, information, are frequently used without definition or simply by citing, say, Oxford online dictionaries' 'word of the year.' Populism fares better within populism studies itself, but one can find many casual uses of the term outside it. Casual use of these terms has repercussions for what we think we know about post-truth politics and populism, both of which are academically mediated by an information-reductive or 'infocentric' conceptualization of perceived public epistemic problems.

Nawrocki (2023) has recently heralded an 'epistemic turn' in populism studies, and given this terminology, one might assume there is an automatic and proximate relationship with post-truth politics. Perhaps there is, but on more rigorous examination, the relationship is conditional:

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primarily regarding epistemic populism studies' implied conceptualization of communication and information.

My argument will proceed in two main parts, one for post-truth politics and the other for populism, especially 'epistemic populism.' In the first part I draw on my theory of post-truth politics and culture, which I have elaborated in several key steps over roughly the last twenty years (2006; 2014; 2015; 2018; 2021; and 2024). I discuss and critique common public and academic uses of the term 'post-truth,' before arguing that it is best understood as an *anxious public mood about a fragile public epistemology*—about the difficulty of securing publicly accepted facts. But 'truth' and 'facts' are taken-for-granted in most of the literature, which is problematic. The public realm and its 'epistemology,' as Arendt observed, lacks sufficiently rigorous collective knowledge and methods to scientifically prove much of anything, relying necessarily, instead, on trust, which is in short supply, for several empirically grounded reasons.

Next, I ask, if one agrees that post-truth is not in the first instance an epistemological problem but one of affect, perception, and trust, then what kind of concept of populism would allow a relation with post-truth to be established? In both phenomena, there is no 'generalized trust' in traditional news media, social media, government, political parties, and so forth; codes of *mediated* trustworthy authority must be performed—again and again (Giddens, 1994). Both post-truth and populism studies tend to overlook the influence of more popular cultural infrastructures of post-truth, which, it can be argued, structure a habitus transposable to political participation (Harsin, 2021). However, both post-truth and epistemic populism studies reduce communication and, more importantly, political rhetoric to information, which eclipses the rhetorical function of shaping and presentation. The performative turn in populism studies would seem to hold great promise in nuancing analyses of epistemic populism. However, even there, performative approaches will need to pay as much attention to how culture and rhetorical form influence orientations to facts across a broader field of populist political rhetoric, instead of focusing on the key identity-making of elites/people. The importance of culture should inspire post-truth and populism studies to consider both more macro-social and historical influences on populism as political practice and more micro-rhetorical instances of how populist rhetoric *presents* and *shapes* statements of facts and falsehoods.

POST-TRUTH POLITICS, MEDIATION, AND TRUST

We have heard that truth is dead and buried (Kakutani, 2019), that ‘post-truth’ arrived with Brexit (D’Ancona, 2017). We have also heard from other commentators that there is nothing new here, and that politics has always been full of lies, rumors, and general deception (Finlayson, 2019). The latter claim—it refers to politics from time immemorial—like so many other quick and fast takes, is based on the problematic Oxford dictionary’s definition of post-truth when it awarded it the 2016 ‘word of the year’ as ‘relating to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’ (N.D.)¹ What are the conditional ‘circumstances’ that make ‘objective facts...less influential...’? Objective facts, as opposed to subjective facts? What then are ‘facts’? Does scholarship on public opinion formation support the presumption that in the past, public opinion was demonstrably the product of familiarity with facts? After neuroscientist and philosopher Antonio Damasio’s popular *Descartes’ Error* (1994), and the work of other scholars in his wake, it is problematic to speak of a reason/emotion split in types of cognition. Though there are apparently degrees of emotional intensity at any moment, all types of reasoning are accompanied by emotion; it cannot be ‘shut off.’ Long before, Aristotle was likely the first to have taught us that persuasion works through ethos (character or credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (logic, reasoning). Besides which, how is it possible to measure more or less emotion (or influence of personal belief) in public discourse over past centuries (or even decades) as a function of public opinion formation? The definition does not seem a strong candidate for becoming an academic concept, yet it is almost parasymphatically cited any time a scholar mentions post-truth.

In one of the least rigorous arguments about what post-truth and its causes might be, McIntyre (2018) has speculated that ‘postmodern’ relativism is an important agent. Assuming one charitably agrees with what he characterizes as ‘postmodern,’ it is not obvious how an academic theory somehow crossed over to shape popular culture and the public realm (see also, Ólafsson, this volume). There are more compelling, evidence-based genealogies of post-truth, which demonstrate that it springs partly from

¹ For a genealogy of ‘post-truth’ in academic and popular discourse, see Harsin (2018a, b). For its first sustained use in academic discourse, see Harsin (2015).

the well of liberal democracy itself, or at least from its political and popular culture together (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023; Harsin, 2006, 2015, 2018a, b, 2024; Mejia et al., 2018).

The ‘post-’ in post-truth needs careful attention, since a quick glance may infer that truth has left the building. It is of course a performative contradiction to assert that truth is dead or in eclipse, and all evidence shows that instead of people being disinterested in truth and facts, they are obsessed with them, as are we. While a public and academic discourse circulates broadly, announcing a new age where emotional statements are confused with or take precedence over statements of fact, evidence points to a more complicated public realm where the social and institutional mechanisms (authority and trust) by which public facts that used to be established and mostly accepted have shifted. Thus, the first important question might be that if ‘truth’ has suffered in public life (whose?), why, and most importantly, what kind of ‘truth’ is that? Philosophers, if not theologians and lie-detecting machines, point to its ontological variety. As I have argued for nearly 20 years, cultural shifts, new communication and media technologies, historically new phases of promotional, attentional, and surveillance capitalism, marked by ‘influencer culture,’ media production technologies capable of deepfakes, even accompanied by new digital cognitive habituses, the increasing sophistication and intensity of professional political strategy and consulting that takes ruthless aim at the citizenry as objects to be managed, the breakdown of professional journalism as a gatekeeper for news and public agendas and public truth-telling, the hyper-mediaticization of political communication and the deep mediaticization of everyday digitally embedded reality, and the massive weight of an ever-increasing public distrust of traditional the social and political institutions of liberal democracy itself—these are agents of post-truth politics (Harsin, 2006, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2018a; Kalpokas, 2018, ch. 3). Post-truth, I maintain, is far more complex than a trendy term for those who, with political historical amnesia, don’t realize that politics has always been rife with lies, inaccuracies, and systematic deception. But what, then, is the ‘truth’ in post-truth?

In English, truth has a conceptual advantage over ‘fact,’ when applied to the common political phenomena under analysis here, by having connotations of *both* factuality and honesty. If someone is telling the truth, they are not lying (even though what they’re telling may be inaccurate; it’s a matter of truth as sincerity, honesty). This version of truth in post-truth points to a moral problem—deception. The second use and

meaning of truth in the dictionary sense is what is true, what corresponds to fact or reality, or a fact or belief that is (publicly) accepted as true (Oxford dictionaries, N.D.). As Sissella Bok noted in her landmark work on lying, truth is one of the most mesmerizing, debated, and essential terms and concepts in human history and certainly in philosophy. ‘No concept,’ she writes, ‘intimidates and yet draws thinkers so powerfully.’

Philosophy’s leading theories of truth include correspondence, coherence, and pragmatist theories. Is a belief or proposition true just so long as it coheres with or doesn’t contradict other beliefs and propositions in a shared sphere or system? Is a belief or statement true so long as it corresponds to facts, and if so, how do we know them? Is a belief through scientific inquiry true so long as new evidence doesn’t contradict it, and when it does, what was true then becomes false—truth being the ideal end that inquiry seeks? Do any of these theoretical vignettes sound like the truth or facts that generate so much public and academic concern around ‘post-truth’? As already mentioned, post-truth seems to cover more conceptual ground than ‘post-fact,’ but facts are also conceptually nettlesome. Consider the ‘facts’ entry in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

Facts, philosophers like to say, are opposed to theories and to values ...and are to be distinguished from things, in particular from complex objects, complexes and wholes, and from relations. They are the objects of certain mental states and acts, they make truth-bearers true and correspond to truths, they are part of the furniture of the world. Not only do philosophers oppose facts to theories and to values, they sometimes distinguish between facts which are brute and those which are not. (Mulligan & Correia, 2007)

But in the hurly-burly public realm of clashing opinions and appeals, facts, it would seem, are constantly muddled by language (often deliberately), are modified by values, even if just by cohabiting paragraphs or images, and are narratively placed in relation to other facts and wholes. In fact, it’s not always clear what the statement of fact means, especially without context.

PUBLIC TRUTH/FACTS VS SCIENTIFIC AND MATHEMATICAL, OR RATIONAL TRUTH

In developing a theory of post-truth, I join other scholars (Hyvönen, 2018; Newman, 2019) in adopting Hannah Arendt's influential distinctions between scientific, mathematical, philosophical (dubbed 'rational'), and factual truth (Harsin, 2024).

Arendt's conceptual distinctions may help us avoid the endless debates between these theories of truth or the naïve use of truth in diagnosing different problems regarding deception, error, honesty, and fact. In *Truth and Politics* (1969), Arendt distinguishes between 'rational truth' (philosophical, scientific, mathematical) and the more 'fragile' 'factual truth,' which becomes 'true' in the collective context of the public realm. 'The modern age, which believes that truth is neither given to nor disclosed to but produced by the human mind,' she writes, 'has assigned... mathematical, scientific, and philosophical truths to the common species of rational truth as distinguished from factual truth' (p. 231). Truth in post-truth would appear to be factual truth honestly articulated.

Arendt argues that rational truth has a 'coercive' force, in that I am rationally 'coerced' to acknowledge the mathematical truth that $2 + 2 = 4$; or $2 - 2 = 0$. Try asserting that $2 - 2 = 1$ when I steal your two cookies, leaving you with none. Your unsated sweet tooth and your failure to conjure the one cookie will likely coerce you to accept the mathematical truth. While scientific truth, for its part, is compelling to those who have enough knowledge and training to follow its reasoning, its truth status can shift in a way that mathematical truth cannot, as history of science shows. Science, C.S. Peirce famously noted, 'is not standing on the bedrock of fact. It is walking upon a bog, and can only say, this ground seems to hold for the present' (1998, p. 55). For scientific truth, the present can last for centuries. However, factual truth is different. It is 'fragile,' Arendt says.

Public facts may have a 'stubborn validity' and inform opinions and judgments; however, they are 'no more self-evident than opinion' (Arendt, 1969, p. 343). More 'fragile' than rational or scientific truth, they could always have been otherwise, and given the right context of power, as the historian will note, they can become otherwise; the factual record can be erased or revised. As an example of factual truth, then, Arendt proposes, 'In August 1914 Germany invaded Belgium.' The statement might seem to have the same 'coercive' force as $2 + 2 = 4$. But

that would be a false inference. Factual truth lacks the coercive epistemic force of mathematical truth. Why is it fragile? Because it can be distorted, banished, or erased. ‘A factual statement—Germany invaded Belgium in August 1914—acquires political implications only by being put in an interpretative context,’ she explains, which critically anticipates the widespread but deeply problematic contemporary scholarship and popular discourse that treats post-truth as an information problem, since it systematically abstracts statements of fact (false ones) from their linguistic, rhetorical, cultural, and historical contexts of interpretation. Arendt’s other major example, also historical, is a factual erasure, at least in the Soviet context: ‘the role during the Russian Revolution of a man named Trotsky’ (1969, p. 231). ‘Factual truth’ is no more self-evident than opinion, which is probably why opinion-holders find it relatively easy, depending on the company and situation, to discredit factual truth as ‘just another opinion,’ or ‘just fake news.’

Factual truth’s fragility also stems from its common types of evidence, such as testimony ‘by eyewitnesses,’ which Arendt reminds us, is ‘notoriously unreliable.’ Factual truth’s fragility is demonstrable in other problematic forms of evidence, which we nonetheless have no choice to rely on as we make our way through the world’s uncertainty, not the least of which is political uncertainty: ‘records, documents, and monuments, all of which can be suspected as forgeries,’ again pointing to the fragility of public facts and to the public epistemological tyranny that power may inflict. What is more: ‘In the event of a dispute, only other witnesses but no third and higher instance can be invoked, and settlement is usually arrived at by way of a majority; that is, in the same way as the settlement of opinion disputes—a wholly unsatisfactory procedure, since there is nothing to prevent witnesses from being false witnesses’ (p. 243).

Arendt’s truth distinctions and concept of public truth as ‘factual truth’ helps us see what is at stake at the heart of the documentation of, and panic about, clashing truth claims without commonly respected adjudicators. Importantly, the clashes take place within an immediate context and history of what Arendt calls ‘organized lying.’ ‘Organizing’ points to planning and systematicity, which she associates with totalitarianism, but also with ‘Madison Avenue’ (1972, p. 8), uncannily prescient of arguments that orientations toward political truth-telling and truth in truth-tellers derive from the transposable habitus of promotional and attentional capitalism, and the mediatization of politics, whereby political communication increasingly has adapted to ‘media logics’ or values

and citizens' orientations toward consuming entertainment (Corner & Pels, 2003; Harsin, 2006, 2014, 2021). It is this political strategy of undermining the very idea of publicly accepted factual truths that Linda Zerilli has recently emphasized as a central feature of post-truth politics. Developing Arendt's insights in the context of post-truth questions, Zerilli (2020) compellingly argues that what makes factual truth an especially political problem (just more obvious in the context of post-truth's 'alternative facts') is that it appears to be an increasing struggle to make it 'publicly accepted.' Acceptance is a key condition for political judgments and action, for then, if not as coercive as mathematical truth, perhaps even transitorily, publicly accepted facts become actionable as part of politics (to produce public opinion or policy, to influence voting, etc.) and may also alter social relations, depending on which people or institutions publicly acknowledge them. As Zerilli says, it's the difference between 'knowing (truth) and acknowledging (truth)' (2012, p. 71; see also Harsin, 2024; Newman, 2019; Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis, 2022).

Trust, Mediation, and Publicly Accepted Facts

Arendt, writing in the shadow of the Cold War and the threat of totalitarian fact erasure, focuses on historical examples. However, the factual truths of post-truth are especially about the mediation of, among other things, scientific truth/knowledge in public life. It is there where intermediary truth interpreters' stories, frames, and rhetorical devices struggle to establish (or undermine) 'publicly accepted fact[s]' (Zerilli, 2012). The public realm is a space where scientific truths and opinions are interpreted by cultural intermediaries (including journalists, politicians, and citizens) and re-mixed into various forms of persuasive appeal. Two of the most obtrusively global examples of this unpredictable rhetorical phenomenon are climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic, wherein one has observed not so much a flat rejection of expert truth claims but doubts about the mediation and presentation of those claims, as well as the credibility of intermediaries who present them. While the volatility of public opinion about these crises is disquieting, upon closer consideration, it reveals the peculiar (public) truth-making function of public trust in highly mediated democracies. This is a crucial point about post-truth (and perhaps for populism, to be considered shortly): commentary too often confuses public facts for scientific truth and their validity standards, when in fact,

public facts depend on the weak or ‘liminal’ epistemology of trust.² As I’ve explained elsewhere, ‘in modernity public factual truth is especially professionally produced and machine-distributed, word-of-mouth not serving the needs of scale that characterize modern nation states as imagined communities’ (Harsin, 2024, p. 9). In our epistemological relationship to these mediated facts, as with anything we don’t know directly, we revert to authority and trust, in ways not unlike knowledge available via testimony (Hardwig, 1991, p. 698). As Longino explains, our ‘common knowledge is acquired from others.’ Indeed, ‘[w]e depend on experts to tell us what is wrong or right with our appliances, our cars, our bodies.’ In fact, ‘much of what we later come to know depends on what we previously learned as children from our parents and teachers,’ and via ‘institutions of education, journalism, and scientific inquiry.’ Consequently, ‘we do not know most of what we think we know’ (Harsin, 2024, p. 9; Longino, 2016, para 9).

Thus, ‘if there is a close modern relationship between trust and public facts (also as scientific truths translated into public idioms and shaped for presentation), then post-truth would appear to be partly a problem with distrust in those cultural translators and also at least partly a question of changing codes of competitively performing trustworthiness,’ and the popular validity of public facts would depend heavily on mediated trust (Harsin, 2024, p. 9). These close relationships between trust as a truth-bearer have been emphasized by recent empirical studies. For example, in her recent study of non-vaccinating parents, Diana Popescu-Sarry concludes that such parents’ choices reflect ‘misplaced distrust in testimony, not indifference to facts’ (2023).

Academic and popular critics of post-truth and populism have a habit of emphasizing an ostensibly alarming public stupidity about scientific truth in ways that seem to misunderstand how social epistemology and trust function in modernity, early and late. One hears a refrain in the post-truth literature (and in epistemic populist literature) that people no longer trust experts or science (Nichols, 2017). But how many of us are

² A stimulating body of work on political communication, performances of authenticity, and acceptance of truth claims has emerged over the last fifteen years, though to my knowledge, none of it works through theories of trust, epistemology, post-truth politics, and the influence of popular culture therein as a dynamic. For example, see the discussion of authenticity and populist communication in Sorensen (2024, p. 80; cf. Harsin, 2017, 2018b, 2021).

scientists who can produce, discover, or verify scientific truth? Very few of us ever really understand scientific truth, and while scientific literacy is a noble project, it will not solve the problem of the public realm being fundamentally about doxa (justified beliefs), not episteme (justified true beliefs). We can trust, or not, mediated testimonies of experts, based perhaps on something we ‘know’ about the issue at hand, from pollution and electric cars to climate change; but we can’t engage in scientific verification. Scientific truth is never something discoverable and collectively knowable in the public realm anyway; it does not have means to produce or verify it (Arendt, 1969; Zerilli, 2012). While Arendt, perhaps more than anyone, stressed this point about democratic public life, Plato, from a more anxiously elitist perch, had already made the proposition an object of critical reflection. Of the role of the expert orator, but not epistemologically expert in the subjects with which he may persuade, the sophist Gorgias explains:

You might well be amazed, Socrates, if you knew the whole truth and realized that oratory embraces and controls almost all other spheres of human activity. I can give you a striking proof of this. It has often happened that I have gone with my brother and other doctors to visit some sick person who refused to drink his medicine or to submit to surgery or cautery, and when the doctors could not persuade him I have succeeded, simply by my use of the art of oratory. I tell you that, if in any city you care to name, an orator and a doctor had to compete before the Assembly or in any other gathering for the appointment of a medical officer, the man who could speak would be appointed if he wanted the post, and the doctor would end up nowhere. Similarly, if he had to compete with any other professional worker the orator could get himself appointed against any opposition; there is no subject on which he could not speak before a popular audience more persuasively than any professional of whatever kind. (Plato, *Gorgias*, 456,b-c)

About 2500 years later, these public epistemological (i.e. rhetorical) relations—scientific truth, expertise, mediation, trust, and establishment of public fact—are succinctly captured in a recent French public opinion study, with the title ‘Poll: the French have an excellent impression of science, but they have weak knowledge about it’ (my translation, Fourquet, 2022). The public dilemma of trusting/distrusting intermediary truth interpreters and *raconteurs* about some factual truths isn’t resignation to technocracy. The reliance on mediated trust does not prevent

us from accepting public facts and then potentially using them in public argumentation to produce public opinion.

Both discourse about post-truth and criticism of populism share a feverish concern about public distrust of professional news media, traditionally viewed by liberals as the ‘watchdog,’ or ‘Fourth Estate.’ But that concern would lead to more rigorous theory and analysis if it had a stronger grasp of the role public trust plays in the security of mediatized publicly accepted facts. One can look to one liberal democracy’s pioneering theorists of news, mediation, trust, and public opinion for insight on this problem (which is also a problem of contemporary concerns regarding ‘post-truth’ and populism). For these relations are still today much what they were when Walter Lippmann described them in 1922 as a pillar of his so-called ‘democratic realism’: ‘The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined’ (p. 29). That world is necessarily still out of sight and a matter of imagining through mediated evidence, especially under conditions of what Couldry and Hepp call ‘deep mediatization’: ‘the advanced stage of the process in which all elements of our social world are intricately related to digital media and their underlying infrastructures’ (2018, p. 7).

The process of establishing public trust thus has a fundamentally performative aspect. As Giddens (1994), Möllering (2001), and others have noted, trust is contingently (re-) produced or compromised at the public interface of all modern institutions and their bureaucracies, from banking to healthcare, education, and news media. In her Cold War context, Arendt couldn’t image or didn’t find disquieting the possibility that falsehoods may be accepted as public fact through the performance of credibility. Nor could she foresee how, even in the eerie wake of Goebbel’s systematic orchestration of the ‘big lie,’ in conditions of contemporary social media and digital culture the way falsehoods might be repeated to the point of being publicly accepted facts—though the question of threshold of collective acceptance for the label ‘publicly accepted fact’ is debatable. With these caveats in mind, we can say that ‘truth’ in post-truth is best characterized in Arendt’s and Zerilli’s sense (2012, 2020) of publicly accepted facts, public truth (Harsin, 2024; Newman, 2019); and that it is inevitably a function at least partly of public trust, which is mediated and performative.

Furthermore, drawing from the widespread survey evidence that people are *worried* about fake news, polarization, distrust, and the future

of liberal democracy, I've argued that post-truth—not just 'truth' in post-truth—is best viewed as a concept referring only indirectly to epistemic qualities of political discourse, and that it is a *public mood about that hyperbolic discourse* (Harsin, 2024). It is hyperbolic first because, as I and others have said, there is no compelling sign that people are ready to retire the word truth from the dictionary and the concept from operation in everyday life. Second, there is no way of comparatively measuring deception (falsehoods) or inaccuracies in the public realm in ancient Athens and today. What is clear is that in public discourse,³ including surveys about public perceptions of the issue, people perceive a problem regarding public facts and have strong anxious feelings about it. For example, a 2022 survey-based study by Knuutila, Neudert & Howard sampling more than 150,000 people in 142 countries, revealed that more than half 'worry about misinformation'; 'young and low-income groups most concerned.' They continue: 'Risk perception among internet users varies starkly across regions whereby concern is highest in Latin America and the Caribbean (74.2%), and lowest in South Asia (31.2%). Differences are unrelated to the prevalence of misinformation, yet concern is highest in countries with liberal democratic governments.'

Post-truth refers to something else beyond the mere documentation of widely circulating falsehoods, and it certainly cannot mean that people no longer care about facts in public discourse or that a new relativism has cast a shadow over liberal democracies (and populisms) the world over. Rather: *post-truth is an anxious public mood about an approaching dystopia where publicly accepted facts have no hope of being established—because trust is constantly, even systematically, undermined* (Harsin, 2006, 2024).

POPULISM AND POST-TRUTH POLITICS

If post-truth, then, is not a popular epistemology but a collective affect about the challenges of public epistemology, what about populism? Like 'disinformation' and 'fake news,' it is frequently cited as a 'threat to democracy.' But is there something peculiarly epistemic about populism

³ I view public discourse as a discursive space, fundamentally Deweyan. That is, it is the body of expressions and dialogues organized around what citizens, news media, and politicians have identified as non-private matters of collective concern, and summoning attention for political discussion (Dewey, 1927; see also Warner, 2005).

in the current conjuncture or as a general phenomenon? Do the materialized peoples of populist movements and parties have something like a ‘natural’ or structurally predictable relationship not just to exaggeration and unprovable claims about entire groups of people and histories but to factual claims and authorities? Do they contribute to (a potential causal role) post-truth’s anxious mood that publicly shrouds liberal democracy’s processes, or do they result from it? Both? Neither?

I have argued that post-truth has many convergent causes, but that public distrust in an array of institutions implicated in liberal democracy is the most basic grounds for its emergence and re-production. Publicly accepted facts come from trust in the primary producers of factual knowledge. Distrust is also fundamental to the emergence of populisms. As Margaret Canovan writes, ‘Populist appeals to the people are characteristically couched in a style that is ‘democratic’ in the sense of being aimed at ordinary people. Capitalizing on popular distrust of politicians’ evasiveness and bureaucratic jargon, they pride themselves on simplicity and directness’ (1999, p. 5). Others note how populism is partly a response to dissatisfaction with mainstream political parties and journalism (Broersma, 2012).

Thus, we might acknowledge the historical specificity of post-truth politics and particular populisms. Post-truth refers (upon any extended reflection) to a historically specific set of trust-making relations, styles of political discourse, which are facilitated by convergent developments: digital media, the attention economy, and contemporary promotional culture in which mediated political communication and news is embedded; the hyper-development of instrumentalist persuasive industries driven by political consultants; mediatized politics; and infotainment trends in journalism as well as its loss of monopoly on news gatekeeping, attention, and agenda-setting—now shared with social media—which seemed to create conditions ripe for the frequent generation and wide circulation of rumors, conspiracy theories, and ‘fake news’ (identified as such as early as 2004; Harsin, 2006, 2023)—to name just a few forces driving the epistemic malaise. Who could adjudicate the constant swarm of controversial truth claims? A major cultural effect of these conjunctural forces is collective anxiety but also distrust or loss of confidence, including for liberal democracy’s institutions and processes: elections, representation, the function of journalism, public opinion formation, ‘citizen efficacy’ (Calhoun et al., 2022).

In another sense, exploring potential connections between post-truth politics and populism seems like a rendezvous with redundancy. While populism may have some basic distinguishing characteristics, it counts as politics, and in many liberal democracies as well as autocratic regimes (Liu, 2023), that politics is post-truth. Neither concept would seem to be epiphenomenal of the other; post-truth doesn't cause populism, nor vice-versa. But while post-truth politics can in no rigorous way be seen to *cause* populism, populism, like all other public-facing contemporary politics, is mediated by post-truth politics. Indeed, by this logic, and given the surveys on global distrust cited previously in this chapter, either most citizens in most liberal democracies are now populist-curious (at least in attitudes toward institutional authorities) or populism shares more with the larger liberal democratic culture *at this particular time* than is often assumed. Its attitudes and styles of communication appear as more intensified versions of the liberal democratic culture out of which it issues, and the contradictions to which it responds and around which it organizes. Public epistemic concerns (about fake news and political deception) and academic concerns about public epistemology cannot easily be limited to populists; nor can distrust of politicians and news media. The larger population shares these qualities with populists (Harsin, 2024).

Amidst other changes has come distrust in the authority of cultural intermediary truth-tellers, 'opinion leaders,' and even the means by which truths are told (e.g. social media platforms and technologies). There have also been changes in the way mediated social relationships are imagined and conducted. There are new cultural forms, temporalities, spaces, and cognitions associated with digitally embedded communication (Couldry & Hepp, 2018; Harsin, 2015, 2021). A basic question for scholars interested in the intersection of post-truth politics and populism is this: does one admit the influence of mediated popular culture⁴ on the political realm, and if so, how is post-truth (or 'information disorders') so influenced?

⁴ By popular culture here, I mean it primarily in the sense of most widely shared practices of entertainment, leisure, and communication: 'practices of music, art, fashion, consumption, leisure activities...online media, film, television, and other forms including sports that enjoy support across large sections of the population irrespective of their educational status' (Griffin, 2016). However, as Stuart Hall argued, this is also an arena of struggle for cultural hegemony, at the center of which are values and perspectives about the world, including politics (Hall, 1981).

In the current conjuncture,⁵ populism and post-truth politics are equally constrained and afforded by ‘the attention economy,’ ‘promotional culture,’ ‘infotainment,’ and digitally mediated ‘parasocial relations’ (Harsin, 2018b, 2021, 2024). These are complex relations that are too often skirted over in a sentence at best, in both post-truth politics and populism studies. I call them post-truth’s *cultural infrastructures*. A few words about them are necessary enroute to a discussion of the ‘epistemic’ aspects of populism, since we are tempted to locate causation of populism and post-truth in bad ‘counter-knowledge,’ without asking what cultural influences provide *dispositions* toward truth-telling and which might point to much more challenging solutions to the perceived epistemic problems.

POST-TRUTH’S (AND MOST POPULISMS’) CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURES

One can still say, as Corner and Pels wrote in 2003, that culture ‘continues usefully to signal a range of things still too often left out of account in many conventional research perspectives’ (p. 3). It ‘indicate[s] the realms of political experience, imagination, values and dispositions that provide the settings within which a political system operates, shaping the character of political processes and political behaviour.’ Moreover, these ‘elements’ form a ‘political culture that, among other things, interconnect[s] the ‘official’ world of professional politics with the world of everyday experience and with the modes of ‘the popular’ variously to be found within work and leisure’ (p. 3). In fact, critical communication and media scholars have long demonstrated how ‘the popular’ traverses, influences, and to some degree absorbs or ‘mediatizes’ traditional politics and journalism as professional and social practices (Hall, 1978/2018; Hartley, 2009; Jones, 2005; Street et al., 2013; Harsin, 2021). While the ‘popular’ aspects of culture get short shrift in most post-truth and

⁵ I mean conjuncture in the sense Stuart Hall employed the term, of Gramscian origin, referring to a historically specific crisis, where old and new forces of culture, society, economy, and politics collide, the analytical risk of which being that one is liable to mistake any one of these areas as a singular cause. See Hall (2011, p. 9); also Clarke (2014, p. 115).

populism studies,⁶ if we are to explore potential relations between post-truth politics and populism, shifts in popular culture, its media structures, and communication practices, cannot be ignored.

Over the last twenty years, media and politics scholars have increasingly investigated the complex relations of twenty-first-century political culture, especially dynamics of celebrity and politics, ‘infotainment’ and ‘politainment,’ the attention economy, and ‘mediatization,’ the latter becoming a dominant concept (Corner, 2018; Corner & Pels, 2003; Harsin, 2015, 2019; Mazzoleni, 2014; Riegert & Collins, 2016). At the same time, some scholars were announcing an epochal interpenetrating *epistemic* and *fiduciary* (trust-related) shift in liberal democracy’s political communication forms and processes (Corner & Pels, 2003; Harsin, 2006). It was closely related to a crisis of public trust, influenced by several conjunctural causes such as the rise of ‘prosumer’ or self-mass communication, as Manuel Castells called the latter; the breakdown of mass media (journalism) gatekeeping and its entanglement with infotainment business models and celebrity politics; prominent media-politics scandals involving plagiarism and hoaxes; and the increasingly sophisticated and ruthless work of professional political communication strategists and practitioners to influence the epistemic, fiduciary or trust-based, and affective aspects of the public realm. Public discourse was increasingly self-reflexive about its own epistemic status, which even by 2004, some scholars were identifying as shaped profoundly by new forms of strategic expression in the old/new media convergence culture, such as common audiovisual hoaxes, ‘rumor bombs,’ and ‘fake news’ (Harsin, 2006).

A couple of developments may deserve extra emphasis, as less obvious influences on political culture and public epistemology: promotional culture/attention economy and the shift to a deeply digital mediatization of politics, the fourth age of political communication (Sorensen, 2024).

Promotional culture studies argue that culture and social relations have been powerfully transformed by the role of communication in new forms of consumer capitalism—the latter’s hyper-promotional stage,

⁶ There is a considerable literature in cultural studies on styles of culture being populist (cultural populism), but there is much less on the way that popular culture impacts populist politics. However, see Moran and Littler (2020) and Herkman (2022). The performative, discursive approach to populism is ‘cultural,’ but it puts more emphasis on the performance as a cultural and political act than on the enveloping structuring aspects of popular culture (see Ostiguy et al., 2021).

with no small effects on perceptions of honesty, truth claims, and trust-granting (Edwards, 2021). Hearn explains that ‘[p]romotionalism names the extension of market values and commodity relations in all areas of life’ where we ‘see our selves, relationships, political candidates, and social issues’ in promotional terms. Moreover, we ‘can no longer determine, or read, genuinely expressive intent or determine what is truth as opposed to a lie, what is authentic as opposed to ‘spun’ in this kind of culture. Indeed, she asks, ‘how can we recognize or construct legitimate authority? What is the impact of the generalized public acceptance of ‘spin’ and promotional politics on the democratic process’ when promotion ‘comes to dominate and structurally condition all other forms of political expression and power relations?’ (2011).

The most recent development in promotionalism is its emphasis on digital cultural opinion leaders, or ‘influencers,’ and this would seem to have repercussions for epistemic aspects of the public realm. A recent *Guardian* article emphasized the phenomenon’s transpositional character, orienting perception and behavior across consumer culture and politics, whose lines have been progressively blurred. ‘Over the past century, political parties and brands have spent vast sums of money on trying to get our attention and influence our decisions,’ and today our attention is the target of these new ‘hustlers,’ some with millions of followers. Importantly, ‘[f]or many influencers, deception is lucrative, and becoming increasingly extreme’ (Brown, 2022).

Consumer capitalism has of course always been about what its promoters view as innocuous games of seduction and deception, as if those practices are sealed off in a corner of social life and don’t orient our habitus more generally. But this latest development is different, with everyone potentially being an entrepreneur and their own advertiser-brander, and PR agent, thanks to the ‘democratized’ access to media and communication production technologies. Once we acknowledge this huge cultural shift, why wouldn’t we assume some impact of a loosely epistemic sort on political culture, too? Thus, the paradox: people are anxious about the difficulty of arriving at publicly accepted facts (evidenced by the surveys about perception of ‘fake news’ and ‘disinformation,’ ‘threats to democracy’), but they—we—also participate eagerly in a culture where media and communication are hyper-instrumentalized for supposedly innocuous deception. This cynicism has an impact on political style and performance.

In the main, both post-truth and populism studies neglect the *cultural infrastructures* and their structure and agency regarding truth-telling, (dis-)trust, and publicly accepted (or rejected) facts. It is easier to simply document false statements and correlate cognitive bias, but that focus is consequentially myopic. Keeping the broad converging cultural factors in mind helps scholars better understand what may influence populist rhetoric and ideologies and speak to deeper historically ongoing unresolved social and political problems (Moran & Littler, 2020).

Why is it important to acknowledge these larger cultural and historical forces when talking about populism, especially its epistemic aspects? Because, for starters, in looking for causes and effects, it guards against overfocusing on the agents of populist epistemology and their personal beliefs at the expense of the influence of larger structures, which will point to a different set of extremely challenging problems and solutions.

THE IDEATIONAL CONCEPT'S EPISTEMIC TRAPS

After reflection, some might object that populism is epistemic in specific ways, not just generally affected by the fragility of public facts peculiar to post-truth politics. They might insist that populism's supposedly specific constitutive feature, the construction of the elite/people, us/them binary depends on false narratives and 'counter-knowledges,' thereby warranting specific attention in accounts of post-truth politics. One can find examples of false claims or counter-knowledge as actual foundations of populist movements such as the 'birthers,' 'anti-vaxxers,' or, as I have explored, the French anti-gender theory movement (Harsin, 2018b). The *primum mobile* of each of these movements is a false premise that a nefarious 'they' make, which rhetorically creates 'us,' courageous truth-tellers.

However, one can share a concern about these right-wing linked movements as well as more identarian movements and parties scapegoating immigrants and influencing anti-immigration and nativist cultural policies (e.g. banning the Muslim veil in France) across numerous liberal democracies, yet also resist assuming that these *dispositions* are made on the spot, and, worse, are simply discursive entities. One can look to the ideational and strategic models for the sources of these temptations, for

they ignore the influence of the cultural conjuncture, a historical accumulation of liberal democratic failures, and disavow the porousness of the elite/people divide, or its materiality (Calhoun et al., 2022).⁷

The ideational theory is based on the idea of either a fundamental (ontological) or historically specific (or situational) antagonism between two political forces with opposing moral valences: corrupt elites and virtuous people (Mudde, 2017). Recent adopters of the approach, in the wake of right-wing populist uprisings, often mobilize the idea of the antagonistic binary people/elite to show that ‘the people’ in question are not what they claim to be but rather a materialized synecdoche, which they nonetheless weaponize in exclusionary (perhaps hateful and violent) ways. Meanwhile, the elite are a demagogic illusion. Then scholars move quickly on to show how the movement presses toward its goals of influencing policy or seizing power, by successfully employing seductive falsehoods and ongoing deception, and through a highly emotional, usually angry or fearmongering rhetoric. While there is no shortage of that kind of populism (or general behavior), this ideational focus that entails a kind of ideology critique (false consciousness; no ‘the people,’ no ‘elites’), tends to mobilize research that risks obscuring the public epistemological complexity of the phenomenon it wishes to document, explain (and condemn).

The concept’s own thinness obscures a fuller picture of both populism and its complicated causes. While space prevents me from a lengthy examination of these potential errors, I will briefly outline two major problems before pivoting to the epistemic turn.

RISK I ELITE/PEOPLE FICTION

The ideational approach allows one to look at typological variations and emphases of the core antagonism—elites/people—and thus, the core is present in all accounts. While an abstraction, the concept elites/people is taken by some, if not most, scholars of right-wing populism to be the populists’ epistemological flaw. Complexity is lost in the popular mobilization of this trope, scholars lament, and it can lead to scapegoating

⁷ Bratich (2020) argues that the current panic over ‘disinformation’ is a reactionary wish to restore the old liberal democratic order (especially regarding media, government, and political parties) while disavowing all the problems with it, from a left perspective.

and polarization. However, the emphasis on the inevitable oversimplification of reality in elite/people can lead to academic accounts that cannot admit that a real grievance may exist; that its indignation is authorized by a country's political values and history; and that a real elite may deserve critical attention for allegedly threatening the country's democratic institutions and processes (which may need deep restructuring if their practices are out of sync with the principles they serve). These latter potential realities, and the politics that stem from them, may be obscured in ideational accounts that focus on a problematic 'Manichean' ontology and 'folk' epistemology present in populism.⁸

Of course, immediate dismissal of the elites-focused complaint entails risks. For 'elites' has been a term of social scientific conceptual development and analysis for at least seventy years and is a flexible but never 'empty' signifier (Higley & Burton, 2006; Mills, 1956; Rahman Khan, 2012; Scott & Marshall, 2009; Wacquant, 1993). Elites are that social demographic that has 'control over 'power resources' concentrated in large organizations, for example capital, authority, means of coercion, mass communication, knowledge, and charisma, as well as capacity...[in] groups to act in concert' (Scott & Marshall, 2009, p. 162). In fact, one could argue that elites enjoy the status of a social scientific object that eludes their antagonist, the people.

As Kaltwasser has written regarding strategies for responding to populisms, one should keep in mind that populism's 'emergence can be explained to a great extent by the sense in the electorate that the ideas and interests of 'the people' are not being taken into consideration' (2017). Academically reductionist portrayals of the pair, which are not merely rhetorical, can mirror the rhetoric they find dangerously fictive; they may end up not just unhelpful but, worse, retrograde in resorting to medical tropes of disease in the democracy's body.

Many populist criticisms of elites (even if too often generalized) have equally many empirical referents. As the populists at Oxfam put it in January 2023, 'Richest 1% bag nearly twice as much wealth as the rest

⁸ Ostiguy summarizes this anti-populist oversimplification: 'Normatively, it is difficult to avoid a conception of populism in light of which its followers cannot but be apprehended as 'lacking sophistication,' whether because they easily fall for simplistic Manichean categories (as in Mudde), are easily led astray by ambitious and not overly scrupulous leaders (as in Weyland), or have not incorporated the 'civilized' benefits of pluralism, respect for difference, and openness to the world' (Ostiguy, 2017, n1).

of the world put together over the past two years' (January 16, 2023); or Bloomberg: 'Top 1% of U.S. Earners Now Hold More Wealth Than All of the Middle Class' (Tanzi & Dorning, 2021). To this one could add justified perceptions of non-dialogue and non-representativity with regard to astonishing ratios of representative to constituent in countries such as India (Vaishnav & Hinton, 2018) and the U.S. (DeSilver, 2018). These complaints correspond to the mountain of surveys indicating not just marginal populist but majority distrust of elites and/or lack of confidence in their leadership (Grönlund et al., 2017; Hannon, 2020; Mackenzie & Sorial, 2022; Scudder, 2016).

RISK 2 RIGID PEOPLE/ELITE BINARY IS *CONCEPTUALLY* MISLEADING

Second, not only does the ideational construct risk dematerializing historically specific referents, (whether ideologically one doesn't like them is beside the point), taking the elite/people distinction as rhetorical and intangible may also obscure the fact that the academic rhetorical construction—for populists rarely self-identify with the slur—is itself misleadingly exclusive, a criticism Katsambekis has made with regard to the 'homogeneity thesis,' that populists imagine the people as homogenous (2022). In the abstract, these are two categories that are ontologically distinct—that one can't be part of the people *and* the elite; one can't be elite and be a promoter or deliberate facilitator of the populist movement. But, empirically speaking, some movements labeled populists by academics and by their opponents are elite-facilitated—resourced financially, strategically (or both), or at other levels of participation.

The people that constitute movements and parties may often feel they are a public, self-organized around an issue, and taking their grievances to a broad audience, may often be unaware of elite roles in it. This is especially the case for initially hidden elite roles in strategy, organization, and the funding of populist movements and parties (the conceptual link to populism as a strategy), in some instances associated with the concepts astroturfing (Schill, 2014) and front groups (Mayer, 2015).⁹ Climate change is one of the most-studied examples of this elite backing

⁹ It is interesting to note that a pdf search of a major overview of the populism studies sub-field, *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, yields no results for these concepts such as 'front groups' and 'astroturfing' (Kaltwasser et al., 2017).

(Farrell, 2016; Oreskes & Conway, 2011). That assistance includes populist stylistic and performative aspects, including *the way* they present or perform the antagonism (Moffitt, 2016; Ostiguy, 2017); and the way they perform or ‘argue’ their problems and solutions. While a rumor or conspiracy theory may have obscure origins, issuing from someone with no public persona, promoters, and organizers may discover it and utilize it in more professional and systematic ways, even allowing it to be a major part of a group’s political identity (e.g. the ‘birthers’).

In addition, not only do some cases of populism demonstrate elite roles in them; elites have given many problematic right-wing populisms their rhetorical ‘playbook,’ which populists imitate, perhaps even unconsciously, given how normalized elite political styles and strategies have become across the twentieth century. Their rhetorical strategies, including emotional appeals, formal-aesthetic qualities, and thematic repertoires can be seen to have elite origins, even if they have intensified their dramatic qualities and thus draw more scrutiny. The well-documented disrespect for experts, including scientists; and the well-documented populist use of simplistic emotional appeals and arguments in studies and media treatments across Europe and North America, especially—all of these ‘epistemic’ aspects that scholars are documenting in right-wing populisms can be found at the very center of liberal democratic politics. They have been there for several decades, and thus, instead of being endemic to populism, they are just as likely imitations of mainstream politics.

Moreover, populists are frequently seen as being not just anti-science, but anti-media/-journalism, yet here, too, elites have arguably set the stage for them. In the 1960s the U.S. Republican party decided on a new and enduring strategy: to go on the offensive against the news media. Thus, they launched the strategy of labeling and attacking the dishonest, even ‘lying’ ‘liberal media’ (Feldstein, 2010, 2016; Greenberg, 2008; Levy, 2013; Schoen, 2016). While one can find examples of the practice elsewhere in the world before that point, this was a systematic, ongoing strategy and practice. The point was to discredit preemptively any particular public truth claim unfavorable to them by discrediting the source and thus rendering all of their truth claims systematically false. This U.S. Republican political strategy has been successfully exported (Albertini, 2015; Brauck, 2016). Thus, the Front National used the same strategy as do now other high-profile right-wing parties such as *Alternative für Deutschland*, who speak of the *lügenpresse* (lying media, by some accounts

associated with the anti-democratic context of Nazism; Noack, 2021; see also Conrad, in this volume).

In fact, political consultants advise elite clients to execute a battery of deceptive techniques and anti-logical styles of communication that some populists are rightly criticized for: non-sequiturs, ad hominem, and other fallacies, evading questions, emotional appeals, simplistic problem, and solution frames—these come from elite mainstream politics and are advised by elite political consultants (Aberdein, 2022; Blassnig et al., 2019). Many right-wing populists are also rightly criticized for their implicit and explicit racism. Once again, this has been perfected in more subtle elite political communication codes or ‘dog whistles,’ such as Richard Nixon’s ‘Southern strategy,’ and Ronald Reagan’s fictitious but rhetorically efficacious trope of the ‘Cadillac-driving welfare queen’ (Bonikowski & Zhang, 2023; Haney-López, 2014; Levin, 2019). While some scholars (Mazzoleni, 2014; Mudde, 2004) have claimed that efficacious populist style has authorized more mainstream politics to imitate it less ‘rudely,’ just the opposite could be said: mainstream factually disinterested political rhetoric and strategy has authorized ‘ruder’ popular imitations.

When we focus on all of these epistemic faults of right-wing populisms but don’t acknowledge that they are common to elite political communication, we ignore part of the cause and risk implying the false solution of re-programming populists with correct ‘information,’ or quarantining that same ‘information.’ Mainstream politicians and parties are constantly treating citizens instrumentally, certainly not as people for whom their main job is to deliver clear and useful ‘information’ and/or evidence-based arguments in the service of public opinion formation and voting. This point is too often glossed over in reference to ‘spin doctors’ and politicians’ penchant for lying or diversion; in fact, it is much more organized, systematic, and can rightly be framed as anti-democratic—uninterested in dialogue, in rational critical argumentation, and in considering a plurality of perspectives. The point is so underemphasized in the literature that it bears some exposition.

Political Consulting: Elite Models of Epistemic Populism

Many highly visible overviews of disinformation and misinformation that catch the attention of populism studies (Kapantai et al., 2021; Lazer et al.,

2018; Tucker et al., 2018) fail to mention political consultants or strategists. However, upon closer examination, (elite) political consulting is at the center of public epistemic problems.

For example, Michael Serazio's interview-based research of political consultants is particularly revealing of the casual view this elite profession (and elites who can afford to hire them) have of public facts and political discourse. As Serazio summarizes, consultants' 'impoverish 'facts and details'' and are 'not even interested in formal, conscious deliberation from the audiences addressed if feelings can be conjured first to short-circuit' reasoning processes. Serazio provides an illuminating if troubling context for the measured distrust of politicians and parties publicized by surveys when he concludes: '[C]onsultants speak of the need to co-opt 'real people' in a political 'unreality' where they 'just as often betray truth as reveal it' (2018, p. 15). And when he writes: 'Consultants may well feel that campaigns don't need to be accountable to 'independent facts' if voters adrift in a fragmented information environment won't necessarily hold them accountable.' Uncanny now is his 2014 prediction of post-truth politics, when he and his interviewee, respectively, remark, 'For that reason, one direct mail and opposition research head fears that this is a 'slippery slope' that could culminate '50 years from now, [where] politics could be this kind of cartoonish reality, where facts don't matter' (2014, p. 757). When we talk about populism as a strategy, a performance, or a core idea, ought we not ask the question of whether elite political strategists and performers themselves performed this antagonism and also helped build a post-truth political culture that populists are said to be at home in, as if their discursive epistemic qualities are 'marginal' and becoming mainstream?

Historical evidence abounds that elites have actually employed this venerable antagonism smart elite/dumb people (Borch, 2013) to strategize and execute politics in increasingly expensive professional ways for over a century now. One of the most influential elitist elites, special counsel to several U.S. presidents, strategist for American tobacco as well as the CIA, the founder of modern public relations, Edward Bernays opened his 1928 classic, *Propaganda*, with these retrospectively chilling words: 'The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society.' Likewise, his contemporary Walter Lippmann observed that democracy had 'turned a corner,' due to new 'psychological research, coupled with the modern means of communication' as the 'organ of

modern government.’ He hesitated, ‘None of us begins to understand the consequences, but prophesied that it would alter ‘every political calculation and modify every political premise’ (1922, p. 248). Lippmann’s view is characterized by a resigned realism toward these seismic developments that, arguably, lead in a direct line to Brexit and the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the latter two characterized for their notorious populism.

Recent histories of political consulting trace an arc ending in post-truth politics. Johnson documents the twentieth-century publicity agent crossing over from commercial to political sectors in the U.S., before going global (Johnson, 2017, ch. 18), while Sheingate writes that ‘the success of a [political] publicity campaign hinged at least in part on the public’s inability to distinguish between the objective presentation of facts and the subjective manipulation of information to appear fact-like,’ which ‘has also contributed to an ambivalence many Americans express toward politics that is still evident today’ (p. 14; see also Harsin, 2023; Johnson, 2017). In populism studies, we are accustomed to reading that populists play fast and loose with facts, but we perhaps hear less frequently that such behavior has long been systematic in the U.S. thanks to elites blazing the trail, and has been exported globally (Boynton, 2006; Harding, 2008; Lees Marshment et al., 2010; Ong & Cabañes, 2019; Scammell, 2014).

While there are theoretical and epistemic blind spots perceptible in researchers’ (not just in populists they study) use of the widely accepted ideational definition of populism, epistemic populism studies succumb to an additional temptation. Consequentially, for considerations of a post-truth/populism relationship, the recent ‘epistemic turn’ in populism studies tends to reduce communication’s rhetorical functions to mere information (as knowledge) exchange, or to information as behavioralist stimulus. This is particularly a problem for a theory of post-truth that also insists that anxiety about fragile public facts is often due to the rhetorical forms that encompass and present them.

EPISTEMIC POPULISM

These epistemological emphases would indicate a new turn in populism studies, on the heels of the ‘discursive’ and ‘performative’ turns. There is certainly a contemporary interdisciplinary scholarly concern with epistemic features of certain populisms (especially far right versions). However, as Müller notes, the growing literature on epistemic or ‘epistemological populism’ (Saurette & Gunster, 2011) has been ‘less concerned

with giving an overarching account of populism, but more so with carving out the epistemic dimension of specific populist movements across countries' (2023, p. 7). While some studies take a strong theoretical stance, claiming that all populisms appeal to the superior knowledge of 'common people,' many simply refer to disinformation/misinformation and false belief that is a facet or driver of the particular case of populism under analysis. Epistemic populism studies refer to problematic counterknowledges and false beliefs in their objects of analysis, but they rarely account for how broader cultural infrastructures play a role in structuring those agents and why, more granularly, rhetorically, certain expressions of false beliefs are appealing. They consistently use methods that take the form for granted, assuming that it is the ideational content itself that persuades (survey, experimental, and content analysis methods are dominant).¹⁰

Nawrocki's recent overview of epistemic populist research summarizes the features of the epistemic turn in populism studies (2023). He observes that scholars have been drawn to the way 'populist movements construct and nurture 'alternative' knowledge systems and [that]visions of what is factual and true has become extremely relevant for scholars of populism...Numerous studies describe populists as spreading misinformation, distributing fake news, sowing doubt over man-made climate crisis or the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic, and profiting from conspiracy theories that often thrive in social media, incessantly repeated and reinforced in information bubbles and echo chambers (2023, p. 2). Many studies are concerned with a 'rejection of the truth-speaking sovereignty of science,' dubbed its 'epistemic objection,' valuing personal over scientific knowledge, though 'it has been rarely deployed systematically by political actors labelled as populists' (2023, p. 9). Notice, in the context of Arendt's theorization of public truth or publicly accepted facts, speaking of 'truth-speaking sovereignty of science' already would suggest a misunderstanding about how validity functions in the public realm versus the

¹⁰ For example, using EBSCO's International Political Science Abstracts database, I searched for 'Disinformation OR Misinformation' in article titles, N = 68 peer-reviewed articles since 1982, 58 of them since 2016. Adding a search for different method cues in the abstract section, one finds the following: 16 use survey methods; 15 conduct experiments exposing subjects to 'disinformation'/'misinformation' and others adding an exposure to factchecking; and 10 content analysis. There were 2 articles with 'rhetorical,' 3 with 'discourse,' and no articles with semiotic in the title—those cues corresponding to the most form- and style-sensitive approaches on offer. Search conducted March 17, 2024.

realm of scientific argumentation. In this vein that imagines a kind of rigid empirical and epistemological binary elites/people and a simple conception of post-truth as relativism, Waisbord asserts that '[p]opulism rejects the possibility of truth as a common normative horizon and collective endeavour in democratic life' (in Müller, 2023, p. 5) and 'argues that for populists, 'the people' and 'the elites' hold their own versions of truth.' However, as Müller (2023) notes, while it may seem like populists are relativists in that scholars (and others) find their truth claims to be unjustified convictions, it seems they are making truth claims that would have to appeal to a standard beyond their own community when they claim, for example, that an elite (exists and) is corrupt. 'The very notion of a corrupted elite seems to imply that there is a shared moral framework from which the elite is deviating wrongfully' (p. 5). We have to look elsewhere, beyond common explanations of relativism if we are to understand more rigorously the hot couple, post-truth, and populism.

In a recent review of the literature on misinformation and disinformation, Broda and Strömback conclude that 'the field is mostly data-driven, frequently investigating the prevalence, dissemination, detection or characteristics of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news' (2024). Their discussion shows the research privileges experimental, survey, and content analysis methods. Like disinformation/misinformation studies overall, epistemic populism studies eschew performance and style, and since I have argued that post-truth politics, and the problem of fragile public facts at its center, is dependent on trust performance and -granting, this raises a problem for understanding any possible connection between the conceptual pair. The analytical effect of such epistemic populism studies is understandable given that performance evaporates in the methods of information-centered analyses of deceptive communication. Epistemic populists' methods, authorized by the ideational definition at the expense of the performative or rhetorical approaches, tend to treat political rhetoric as mere transmission of information (ideas/facts/data—ordinary definitions are a circular deferral). I call this reduction of the formal, compositional, performative agency of communication (linguistic or multi-modal/audio-, visual) 'infocentrism.' It devitalizes communication and treats it as information, knowledge, or ideas. 'Informationizing' the phenomenon misrecognizes the truth/trust/form entanglement, and a corrective would be to think about the epistemic in terms of the rhetorical aspects of populist communication. In the rest of the chapter, I

will focus on the problem of communication reduced to information in epistemic populism studies and implied theory.

EPISTEMIC POPULISM'S 'INFORMATIONALIZATION' OF POPULIST RHETORIC

Epistemic populism studies too often commit the error that communication theory long ago identified in its own flawed models: communication is not reducible to information transmitted by senders to receivers through a channel, in an electrical engineering model. 'Information,' or 'facts' are always presented, so the critique goes, and their form and epistemology cannot be fruitfully separated in an account of why epistemically flawed communication is appealing, if not persuasive.

Emphasizing communication's etymological descent from the Latin *communicare*, to share or hold in common, the intellectual historian John Durham Peters has explained in his account of the dictionary and popular reduction of communication to information exchange: 'in both the statistical and popular senses, [information] comes in bits.' Further, it has 'no 'intertextuality' or 'grammar,' and most of the time comes in the form of 'tables, lists, charts.' While one may weave stories that include it, one can 'no more weave stories out of it than one can weave a braid of sand.' In fact, it 'has no real status,' yet 'it has great pretensions to being objective or substantial' (1987, p. 15). Humans use language and symbolic expression to 'cajole, wheedle, seduce, hate, politic, assert, perform, and of course, promise,' Peters continues. Human communication 'creates worlds, it is not only about the world 'outside' (1987, p. 15). Populist communication is hardly an exception.

Disinformation/misinformation studies, like cognitive psychology, tend to treat language or multi-modal symbol use as 'an information processor.' This is a crude reduction, for 'language *does*; not transmit (or if it does, that is the least of its functions....A conception of language as information processor denigrates the ways that language shapes and structures consciousness rather than just provides it with content' (my emphasis; Peters, 1987, p. 15; also Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

Disinformation and misinformation are, in populism and post-truth studies, defined as false information, thus reducing the more complex form and context of communication processes to information processing. This leads to scholars showing what 'information' *does* by isolating and labeling statements false and then showing how naïve people are exposed

to (or ‘infected’ by) them, the success of which is partially determined by a person’s ‘pre-existing condition’ (their limited knowledge, schemas, psychological vulnerabilities). Along the way, the term post-truth is mentioned as a kind of scenery.

But post-truth, I’ve argued, develops to an important degree from distrust in all major social and political institutions and processes, as well as, in many societies, in each other. While truth claims in public life were always mediated, and always appeared in narrative contexts, there was more measurable generalized trust in these institutions’ truth-tellers. Distrust has personalized the performance of truth-telling, which must re-produce its credibility in each instance of performance (each new X/Twitter post, each new image-meme, each video, article, or quotation in an article or video, which mediate live performances such as speeches, interviews, golfing...), putting extra emphasis on style and form as ‘truth-bearers.’ But epistemic populism studies suppress form or abstracts from it to showcase examples of epistemic failures. In doing so, it commits the error of assuming that form does not shape the epistemic content and is not what makes the overall content appealing to those consuming or encountering it. Such an epistemic approach forgets Arendt’s lessons about public truth. Public facts do not appear to us transparently, formlessly, so that presentation doesn’t matter; they lack the coercion of obvious mathematical truths.

Some scholars taking the performative turn in populism studies have emphasized the importance of trust performance in populist collective identity formation. That is, ‘political appeals are public manifestations of recognisable social aspects of the self in society (as well as of its desires) that contribute to creating a social sense of trust based on an assumption of sameness, or coded understanding’ (Panizza & Stavrakakis, 2020, p. 36). Several scholars in this corner of the field have discussed the crucial performance of ‘authenticity,’ especially the role of emotion in it (for example: Dubrofsky, 2016; Enli, 2015; Harsin, 2017, 2018b, 2021; Kreiss, 2017; Sorensen, 2021).¹¹ This form-sensitive approach is likely the strongest common ground with post-truth theory; in other words, one needs to think more rhetorically or formally about public epistemology—about the presentation of statements of fact/falsehood.

¹¹ Much of the work on authenticity in political personae came out of celebrity studies and cultural studies more broadly (for example, see Corner & Pels, 2003, p. 2; Marshall, 2014).

POPULIST FORMS, TRUST, AND PUBLIC TRUTH

For decades rhetorical, critical discourse, semiotic, linguistic, and multi-faceted cultural approaches have paid close attention to form, ideology, and potential effects on belief.¹² More recently, with regard to post-truth and populism, my own work (2017, 2018b, 2021) has focused on the formal and stylistic performances of trustworthiness at the granular level, moving outwards toward cultural and historical as well as media technological constraints and affordances that shape the whole experience of performance. In a recent study, using data from a French populist group's Facebook posts, I focused on what they framed as 'gender theory' policy in French schools. I was able to sort the data and note, for example, emotional appeals (sometimes expressed through ALL CAPS) attached to the popular criticism of, as well as appeal to, specific scientific sources or evidence; as well as their anti-mainstream news position and use of alternative forms of publicity (for example, Youtube). The ethos or credibility of the dominant truth-tellers/posters as micro-celebrities was important, as they coined memorably humorous stage names, such as 'Frigide Barjot' (on Brigitte Bardot) or, drew affective power from a reputation in past activism (the latter was the case of a 1970s–80s activist of immigrant rights, Farida Belghoul).

The analysis moved outward onto relations of exclusion in French society, as the majority of the participants in the sub-movement analyzed were immigrants, some of whom were not fluent French speakers. Elite conservative manipulation of these poorer immigrants risked reinforcing broader public views of the immigrants as 'epistemically' inferior, no doubt drawing suspicion from even more moderate citizens.

In a more recent study (Harsin, 2021), I theorized relationships between trust theory (e.g. Möllering, 2001; Simmel, 2004), post-truth politics, and masculinity, whereby the performance of 'toxic' masculine traits of aggressiveness and schadenfreude were trust-makers that could conceivably secure acceptance of false narratives and statements (indeed,

¹² One can never definitely prove to what degree an expression's form or content has greater or lesser agency in producing an effect, and one cannot definitively prove that a person's belief system or worldviews (schemas) are the only elements involved in influence, in response to a communication stimulus (such as a 'fake news' article or a false statement of fact). And yet, cognitive linguists, if not Aristotle (style and arrangement in *On Rhetoric*), have argued, that how things are presented affects how we 'know' them (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

in this dynamic, trust-makers become truth-makers). The case study was Donald Trump, though I noted important global variations in men like Bolsonaro, Modi, and Duterte. Their performance of trustworthiness that potentially authorized belief was evidenced, visually and bodily, in lurking, eye-rolling, and interruption; orally by interruption, insults, and talking over another; and figuratively in hyperbole and threat, which was also demonstrated in tweets (again, with features such as ALL CAPS to indicate yelling and screaming) (compare also with Diehl, 2017). I compared this rhetorical analysis to existing ethnographic and interview data on Trump supporters, where they celebrated Trump's refreshingly apparent *honesty* to say what others are thinking but are intimidated to say themselves, due to decorum or political correctness. They emphasized the importance of form in producing trust (and likely, acceptance of or disregard for false statements of facts).

Other such form-attentive analyses of post-truth communication include critical discourse studies. In contrast to infocentric approaches to post-truth and populism, for example, consider Wodak's study of the Austrian People's Party (2018). Trying critically to understand their persuasive strategies, she emphasizes interpretation that accounts for their coded signaling of 'chauvinistic and fascist imaginaries'; specific 'allusions to extreme right and Nazi ideologies,' which she argues are 'calculated ambivalence' that 'ensures deniability'; the way that their communication shifts between 'strong' and 'soft' performances that cater to particular contexts and audiences; and systematic attempts to break taboos by re-contextualizing, semiotically, verbally and textually, 'aspects of extreme-right imaginaries,' while 'moving from backstage to frontstage and from party politics to the mainstream' (2018, pp. 25–26).

Wodak's study represents a significantly different and arguably richer approach to understanding the dynamics of influence when compared to content analysis-based coding for true/false statements, survey data, experiments, leading to stimulus response conclusions about cognitive bias. Certainly, the form-attentive methods are inevitably incomplete; they are usually not based on interviews, ethnographic, or survey data, the latter of which would help round out analyses and theorizing about rhetorical influence, and interpretive methods like this are always enriched by the work of other formal analysts on the same set of objects. But it is probably just this kind of research combined with the other methods that will give a fuller picture of the dynamics of deceptive appeal. And they will certainly show the dangers of reducing such complex communication to

the transfer of information (factual and false), from a sender to a receiver, via a channel.

CONCLUSION

Arguing that the dictionary definition of post-truth is highly problematic, I've proposed instead that post-truth:

1. is best understood as an anxiety about the potential impossibility of publicly accepted facts (the demise of public facts signaling the end-game for democracy of any sort); and
2. is only unrigorously reducible to its various constituents, predominantly named 'fake news,' 'disinformation,' and 'misinformation.'

Both post-truth and epistemic populism studies often take 'information' problems as their object of study and 'statements' as their unit of analysis. And both tend to overlook the rhetorical aspects of what is taken as an epistemic problem (knowledge, truth, justified true belief).

Paradoxically, epistemic populist studies tend at once to ascribe great and limited importance to populists' rhetoric. They show that populists' simplistic construction of elites/people is often based on empirical misunderstandings and inaccuracies, yet, in choice of methods and ensuing analysis, they devalue that self-same rhetoric to epistemically flawed statements of fact (i.e. 'information'), mostly ignoring the immediate presentation of facts (or falsehoods) that make them more or less appealing to populists and to the rest of us. This reduction not only deprives epistemic populism studies of a richer understanding of populist rhetoric's appeal, but also forecloses closer theoretical bridges with post-truth political studies, since the latter depends on the constant rhetorical performance of trust in truth-tellers.

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Nostalgic Post-truth: Towards an Anti-humanist Theory of Communication

Ignas Kalpokas  and *Anna Bureiko*

INTRODUCTION

Discussions of post-truth have underpinned attempts to understand contemporary politics for already nearly a decade. Nevertheless, the dominant interpretations of post-truth fail to fully capture the nature and meaning of this phenomenon and, therefore, to provide a politically productive theory of post-truth. That is because of the nostalgic nature of such accounts: they, either implicitly or explicitly, emphasize ‘post-truth’ as a retreat from the Enlightenment ideal of objective reason, as an irruption of the emotional masses into the epicentre of agenda-setting—either through communicative actions of populist politicians—or as a result of technological change (or both in tandem). Paradoxically, such thinking is structurally identical with the populism those same authors aim to criticize: effectively, truth has allegedly been undermined and, therefore, supposedly has to be made great again, while those in defence of truth need to take back control. By contrast, this chapter calls for an alternative view of politics as a tragic domain in which individuals and groups may

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compete and suffer, but ultimately in vain due to the underlying groundlessness of social life. As a result, post-truth should better be seen as a moment of unconcealment, as the becoming-evident of the impossibility of privileged subjects and privileged knowledge positions.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, the mainstream depictions of post-truth are reviewed, focusing on their nostalgic character and the emergent dichotomies of good versus evil that underpin the supposed epochal nature of post-truth. The second part of the chapter deals with the criticisms of the dominant narrative as misguided nostalgia for a non-existent ideal. Finally, in order to move beyond the humanist focus on a single superior reason, an alternative, tragic take on politics is developed.

NOSTALGIC POST-TRUTH AND EPOCHAL SHIFTS

Inasmuch as attempts to describe and conceptualize the current conditions of political and social life are concerned, there is a clear tendency to rely on fundamental dichotomies that portray the world as a battlefield between good and evil or, as Hannon (2023, p. 57) puts it, ‘a clash between truth and the forces of darkness’. As shown below, most of the mainstream discourse on post-truth can be seen as a variation on the same theme but also imbued with a strong sense of nostalgia: the good is in the past, the evil is in the present.

There is indeed a tendency to take ‘post-truth’ literally, as signifying that ‘the time of truth has passed’, that truth is now disregarded by a sufficient part of the population (Barton, 2019, p. 1025) or that, simply put, ‘the truth doesn’t seem to matter’ anymore (Ferretti, 2023). Similarly, Kavanagh and Rich (2018) focus on what they call ‘truth decay’ as comprising an ever-growing disagreement over facts, decreasing individuals’ ability to contain opinions and personal experiences to the private sphere or even to differentiate them from objective information, and receding trust in traditional sources of information. Similarly, post-truth is taken to characterize a condition whereby ‘people consider opinion to be as legitimate as objective facts, or when they weigh emotional factors as heavily as statistical evidence’ (Ball, 2017, pp. 179–180; Mcdermott, 2019, pp. 179–180). Likewise, in d’Ancona’s (2017, p. 31) framing, the very project of modernity is in danger as ‘emotion is reclaiming its primacy and truth is in retreat’. Hence, post-truth is presented as an era characterized by not only an ‘epidemic of lying infecting public discourse’ but also, even more fundamentally, ‘[t]he wanton disregard for truth and

the abnegation of values and virtues that undergird its pursuit' (Ferretti, 2023, p. 316; see also Ghosh, 2022), leading to the notion of post-truth as 'relativistic arbitrariness' (Hainscho, 2023). Similarly, for Bufacchi (2021, p. 349), post-truth 'doesn't simply deny or question certain facts, but aims to undermine the theoretical infrastructure that makes it possible to have a conversation about the truth', thereby closing off options for a renaissance of truth.

As per above, there is a deep sense of nostalgia for what are framed as better, more rational times. For example, as McIntyre (2018, p. 17) puts it, '[o]nce respected for the authority of its method, scientific results are now openly questioned by legions of nonexperts who happen to disagree with them'. There is a definite sense of longing in assertions that '[h]istorically important concepts such as rationality and autonomy [...] have virtually disappeared' as have values central to the development and evaluation of human character (Hoggan-Kloubert & Hoggan, 2023, p. 16). In other words, claims the loss of rationality and its replacement with emotional frenzy have become essentially de rigueur (see also Brunkhorst, 2024). The narrative of societal decay from a preferable past to a lamentable present is clearly visible here (see also de Saint Laurent et al., 2017; Enroth, 2023). Coextensively, the disintegration of consensus over what counts as truth and what criteria and methods can be used to establish something as truth is seen as leading to the dominance of biases and the public being at a liberty to ignore inconvenient facts (Foroughi et al., 2019, p. 140). Indeed, as a sign of derogation from established ideals, post-truth supposedly enables individuals 'to choose their own reality, where facts and objective evidence are trumped by existing beliefs and prejudices' (Lewandowsky et al., 2017, p. 224). In this new world, 'popularity and tribal affinity rather than impersonal logic and evidence' are seen as crucial selection criteria (Hannan, 2018, p. 224).

The mainstream discourse on post-truth can also be seen as strongly hierarchical, establishing a pecking order not only between different kinds of knowledge but also between segments of society. Post-truth is presented as an inferior, 'have nots version' of knowledge that is characterized by narrow instrumentality rather than by generalizability and universality (Andrejevic, 2020, pp. 32–33). In this way, both the worldview characterized as post-truth and its adherents are *simultaneously* rendered inferior to those passing judgement. In the same vein, others focus on what they see as the weakness and gullibility of individuals who simply choose to go with more palatable, or satisfying, statements

and assertions that confirm their preexisting opinions (Foroughi et al., 2019, p. 140; see also Lewandowsky et al., 2017, pp. 359–360; Schindler, 2020, p. 392). There is also a notion of moral decay not only in terms of turning one’s back to truth as an independent value in and of itself, but also by way of equating truth with the common good; hence, the alleged undermining of truth would lead to a corresponding undermining of the public good as well (Ferretti, 2023, p. 306). Hence, turning away from traditional truth hierarchies and mistrusting them, and opting for the emotional appeal of statements instead, is generally seen as a predetermined path towards the tearing apart of societies at the hands of populists (see e.g. Baier, 2024). Such assertions, however, fail to critically reflect on who defines the constitution of the public good in the first place.

In much of mainstream discourse on post-truth, the other side’s inferiority gets conflated with a supposed political threat. For example, Koekoek and Zakin (2023) focus on what they see as a ‘fundamentally anti-democratic’ nature of post-truth. Post-truth is thus seen as ‘deplorable’ and as making facts contingent upon political interests and considerations (McIntyre, 2018, pp. 9–11). Similarly, post-truth is seen as neither self-serving nor independently occurring but, instead, as brought about by political and social actors seeking to profiteer from it; such actors, it is claimed, erode societies’ ability to efficiently deal with the challenges facing them by way of ‘constant sophisticated attempts to confuse and dupe’ (Harsin, 2019, p. 102). Likewise, Hopkin and Rosamond (2018, p. 461) put the blame on ‘[t]he rise of populist and anti-elitist movements’ that contribute to ‘the rejection of basic principles of reason and veracity’, while a similar sentiment is also echoed in Bufacchi’s (2021, p. 354) assertion that ‘post-truth is an invention of the powerful, not the powerless’. Also, for Nally (2023), the fragmentation, disorientation, and outright cynicism resulting from post-truth make citizens powerless to execute any real change. Hence, the discourse is simultaneously nostalgic and continues the trend towards hierarchization (erosion takes place because some are unable to handle democracy and ruin it for everyone else).

Nevertheless, it must also be stressed that human weaknesses are often seen not in isolation but as technologically augmented. Hence, a major strand of criticism is directed against the technological infrastructure of everyday life, with online platforms and other means of digital content delivery deserving particular attention. For example, as Shepard (2022, p. 2) claims, ‘[the] post-truth world is fuelled by the affordances of

social media'. The latter are seen to result in publics succumbing to 'autonomous digital systems capable of exerting force outside of human control'. In particular, emphasis is put on decontextualization of information and algorithmic content governance through prediction of individual preferences based on their data (Syvertsen, 2020, p. 38). On the one hand, algorithms are useful complexity-reducing tools that come to their own, particularly as a result of the large volume, velocity, and variety of content today: as Amoore (2020, p. 156) states, algorithms transform 'the intractable difficulties and duress of living, the undecidability of what could be happening [...], into a single human-readable and actionable meaning'. On the other hand, they can easily make individuals lose track of content alternatives by siloing them in reams of content compatible with their data profiles. A similar view is also put forward by Shepard (2022, p. 3) who stresses that as algorithms 'maximize user engagement through shares and likes', they end up 'promoting the proliferation of post-truth terrain across the network'. In particular, the ability to algorithmically micro-target users with digitally manufactured content is seen as a major new threat (Cotter et al., 2021; Dobber et al., 2021; Thorson et al., 2021). The net result then could be the creation of a fake impression of consensus within an in-group (Chadwick & Stanyer, 2022), resulting in the development of a false view of the world and a shared reality, audience understanding of their self-interest, notions of right and wrong, stirring up specific emotions—all of that for the benefit of those in control of or with access to the technological means of directing the flow of information (Susskind, 2018, p. 143). Hence, the availability of user data and the capacity for nimble and unobtrusive digital content governance create the conditions to imperceptibly nudge individuals towards predetermined choices (Mills, 2022; Yeung, 2017). Such nudging is seen to rely on the predictive capacity of technology companies—knowing in advance what makes audiences tick to the extent of exerting control over psycho-cognitive processes, including in the political domain (Han, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). While there certainly are important insights to be gained from critical studies of technology and their socio-political influence, the focus on the digital layer of today's life only serves to strengthen the supposed dichotomies between those who are immune and those who are gullible.

Nevertheless, there still is a very real tendency to the focus on technology. Individuals have to deal with 'a deluge of information' despite not having the necessary resources to fully process all of the content available

to them (Ecker, 2019, p. 80). It is the surge of content, both reliable and not, that, it tends to be claimed, overwhelms human cognitive capacities, leaving individuals unable to adequately deal with information and, therefore, vulnerable to disinformation (Cosentino, 2023). Similarly, Dahlgren (2018, p. 26) stresses ‘high velocity and dizzying excess’ as paradigmatic features of today’s information environment. However, this is neither a completely new phenomenon (although one significantly exacerbated by the ubiquity of connectivity and the speed of digital content proliferation) nor should it be interpreted as an assertion of a reduction in human cognitive and informational capacities. Instead, as subsequently shown, it is the very expectation of ‘adequate’ information processing that is misguided and unrealistic. Other commonly stressed issues include the absence of gatekeeping in today’s information environment, which is taken to mean that instead of the public interest, information supply channels serve the biases and content expectations of their audiences, leading to the fragmentation of societies (McDermott, 2019, pp. 2–3). Contemporary social media-centric information environment thus becomes seen as an ‘attention factory’ (Valaskivi, 2022). While for most, the above is typically taken to lead towards societal fragmentation, polarization, and disintegration, others tend to focus on how technological tools and artefacts can be used to manufacture and mobilize support and consent (Woolley, 2023). Nevertheless, whichever effect is taken to be the point of reference, the overall sentiment remains, yet again, a nostalgic one: of a more robust and reliable public sphere having been pulled from under society’s feet and traditional truth conventions been undermined.

Given the preceding characteristics, it is unsurprising that one encounters a perceived need to ‘fight against Post-Truth’ (Bufacchi, 2021, p. 357), sometimes even replacing the ostensibly lost rationality with a synthetic one, i.e. computational tools for tracking and removing content that deviates from pre-established norms (see e.g. Carley, 2020). For others, meanwhile, a stark choice is looming: you are either with the Enlightenment (i.e. rationality and Truth-with-a-capital-T) or you are with the ‘charlatans’ (d’Ancona, 2017, p. 5). The stakes here can hardly be higher. And yet, such dramatic nostalgia is not the only game in town, as more critical voices have started to raise questions and concerns about the currently dominant frames.

WHY (POST-)TRUTH IS NOT WHAT IT SEEMS

Already early on, there have been attempts to counter the then-emerging discourse on post-truth, referring to it as, for example, ‘elitist and obnoxious’, an excuse for not ‘selling’ tough policies (Brown, 2016), a patronizing attempt by the elites to find an excuse for failing to get their point across (Fox, 2016). While initially such voices failed to get mainstream traction, more recently, attempts to reconsider post-truth have become increasingly prominent, signalling if not a turn of the tide, then at least an opportunity to have a less one-sided discussion about the nature and effects of post-truth.

As Harjuniemi (2022, p. 272) points out, the current discourse on post-truth, almost without exception, ends up with some conjugation of lamentations pertaining to the loss of an Enlightenment model of truth to which the idealized rational individual was supposed to have direct access. There clearly seems to be a simplistic reliance on seemingly ‘clear-cut distinctions between the esteemed objective realm of facts, science, and reason and the dangerous subjective realm of emotions, ideology, and irrationality’ (Harambam et al., 2022, p. 787). Likewise, for Marres, the typical accounts of post-truth have ‘an element of nostalgia’ for imaginary better times of dominant truth-telling and unquestionable authority (Marres, 2018, pp. 423–424). Indeed, the idea that one only has to somehow ‘return to truth’ rests on assumptions that are both practically and ideologically naïve (Hainscho, 2023; Uscinski & Enders, 2023). Ultimately, then, the dominant accounts of post-truth can be criticized for simplistically delving into ‘a baseless nostalgia for a by-gone era characterized by truth and reason’ (Harjuniemi, 2022, p. 279). Almost identically, for Hannon (2023, pp. 48–49), ‘[t]he idea of post-truth implies a nostalgia for an age of facts, a time when politics supposedly had little to do with emotions or personal opinions and instead revolved around evidence, objectivity, and rationality’. Overall, then, one can easily sense a rather conservative outlook in mainstream thinking on post-truth.

Similarly, Altay and Acerbi (2023, p. 14) criticize the propensity to embrace ‘alarmist narratives about the prevalence and impact of misinformation’. However, it is also important to note that misinformation, post-truth, fake news, etc., always belong to the domain of the *other*—it is others who create and proliferate untruths and *others* who fall for them (Strassheim, 2023; see also Altay & Acerbi, 2023; Uscinski & Enders, 2023). In this way, conceptualization of post-truth and, crucially, the

labelling of the other as post-truth acts as a way of establishing boundaries and stopping the conversation. This is not to suggest that assertions of people holding patently wrong beliefs or relying on emotional criteria and prior beliefs are completely unfounded (although the mainstream *interpretation* of such tendencies is); neither should the rejection of the nostalgic version of post-truth and the associated alarmist claims be taken to imply that ‘anything goes’. Instead, the main criticism is that the currently dominant academic discourse on post-truth is both ahistorical and blind to its own ideological assumptions.

In this context, Sloman and Fernbach (2017, p. 257) are blunt in their assessment: for them, ignorance is ‘inevitable’, even a ‘natural state’ of human existence that ensues from the unavoidable complexity of the world. While this assertion is valuable in pointing towards a more nuanced understanding of the matter at hand, it is still insufficiently productive due to the use of a very loaded term ‘ignorance’. Indeed, such assertions, as well as the customary use of ‘post-truth’ as a stigmatizing label can be seen as questionable from both political and ethical standpoints: instead of allowing fellow citizens to stand on an equal footing, such practices a priori delegitimize and contemptuously dismiss their concerns while supposing that ‘we’ know better and have privileged access to reality (Hannon, 2023, p. 54). In this way, a dangerous dichotomy is established—one that is used to rhetorically and politically separate ‘those who are worthy of political influence (the informed elite) and those who are unworthy (the misguided masses)’ (Hannon, 2023, p. 54). Crucially, such delimitation also tends to overlap with preexisting deprivation, stratification, and discrimination, only strengthening them through ascription of an alleged lack of objective non-emotional reason and political capacity (Blackman, 2022, p. 61).

However, people are bound to have divergent views of reality that correspond with their lived experience and socio-political alignment (Uscinski & Enders, 2023). Here one needs to keep in mind that the key explanatory and sense-making unit for humans generally is not an isolated verifiable fact or even a set thereof. Instead, it is a narrative: as Holmstrom asserts, ‘truth, as in a fact or piece of information, has no intrinsic value’ but, instead, ‘[i]t is up to the narrative to create that value’ (Holmstrom, 2015, p. 124). Similarly, for Baron (2018, p. 73), success in a goal-oriented activity, such as politics, depends less on the quality of the evidence presented, and more on the *meaning* produced by the actors in question. The central driving factor here is the existential

need to give meaning to the world and establish the coherence of one's lived experience (Bonetto & Arciszewski, 2021). Finding an apparently fitting explanation to what is (or seems to be) going on in the world and the ensuing abundance of (newly found) meaning can also explain sharing behaviour, whereby individuals become inclined to proliferate the narratives they have found to be important to them (Wanless & Berk, 2020).

The above also has clear implications with regard to competition over (different takes on) truth. Hence, a narrative that is, for whatever reason, undesirable can be dislodged not by offering more facts or by extensive verification alone, but by offering a more potent meaning-establishing narrative (Ecker, 2019, p. 82). It also transpires that the more meaning individuals attach to particular narratives or points of view, the more resistant they are to revising them, as doing so would involve relinquishing a fundamental part of one's identity (Vidigal & Jerit, 2022). Nevertheless, this should be taken as a recurring feature of human thinking (contrary to the Cartesian ideal of abstract disembodied reason engaged in a detached and rational understanding of the world) rather than a sign of the present times. In addition, as Newman (2023, p. 16) stresses, pleasure plays a crucial role in choosing among truth-claims in a competitive marketplace of ideas. Nevertheless, while he intends the preceding observation as a criticism of post-truth, there is more nuance to pleasure because it functions as a motivating and enabling force in politics. In fact, the classic Cartesian-style vilification of emotions only serves to undermine the way in which the latter act as 'important sources of knowledge about power, oppression and governance' (Blackman, 2022, p. 61). Unsurprisingly, then, Hainscho (2023) sees conviction and passionate dedication as being key to political contestation, even in times of so-called fake news. Citizens seem to be no less committed to the *idea* of truth and their own *version* of truth, even though there may be less agreement over what actually *is* true (Hannon, 2023). In this sense, post-truth cannot be interpreted as dominated by detachment or cynicism—on the contrary, it has to be seen as characterized by incessant competition over meaning and, therefore, pleasure.

Koekoek and Zakin (2023, p. 127) are right to point out a typical fallacy in the mainstream critiques of post-truth—their tendency to emerge 'from a liberal, managerial, technocratic or hyper-rationalist perspective that [...] kicks out the affective and emotional'; while otherwise critical of post-truth, they also stress the danger of succumbing to

an epistemocracy that cloaks itself in the alleged self-evidence of reason and facts but, instead, ‘represents another fundamentally anti-democratic move insofar as it makes acquiescence to a particular knowledge regime a condition of ‘good citizenship’. Likewise, Fuller (2021, p. 352) criticizes opposition to post-truth as merely a technocracy-focused ‘epistemic oligarchy’. Hence, McIntyre fails to grasp the crux of the matter when he claims that ‘[i]n its purest form, post-truth is when one thinks that the crowd’s reaction actually *does* change the facts about a lie’ (McIntyre, 2018, p. 9). The error here is on two interconnected levels: first, the assumption of an idealized dichotomy between truth and ‘a lie’ and, second, the focus on factuality in discourse. The truth/lie distinction rests upon the presence of a detached rational subject capable of a bird’s eye view of the matter at hand; meanwhile, the fact-centricity of discourse assumes the independent legitimizing value of grounding discourse in a verifiable reality, i.e. that a discourse is tenable only to the extent that it is grounded in facts, and that for alternative framings of reality to be equally tenable the facts have to somehow change accordingly.

While emphasis is often on the intentional spread of disinformation as a conscious attempt to deceive, it must be kept in mind that this is by far not the only motivation: in fact, much of the sharing takes place under the mistaken assumption that the content in question is true or, even when the content is known to be fake, deceit may not necessarily be the goal (see e.g. Perach et al., 2023). Individuals thus may engage in sharing fake content out of a perceived need and public interest (in order to ‘spread the news’ or in order to combat perceived biases, advocate for specific issues) but also with narrower interests in mind (such as maintenance of in-group cohesion), or as a matter of parody, satire, or other humorous uses (which may also serve political, rather than narrowly self-gratifying, purposes), even if the humorous aspect might be lost on others. For this reason, the treatment of post-truth discourse as a unitary phenomenon characterized by a clear and easy distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ or ‘the good’ and ‘the bad’, risks false righteousness and further polarization.

Notably, the structure of argumentation behind mainstream accounts of post-truth demonstrated in this chapter closely mimics that of one of its main targets—populism. As a form of political discourse, populism builds upon discontinuities between present experience and idealized versions of group past, thereby eliciting nostalgia (Wohl et al., 2023), a sense of the past being the answer to today’s perceived ills (Ding et al., 2021). This collectively imagined past is then framed as *the* model to be reclaimed,

thereby entering into an antagonistic relationship with those in support of alternative visions, potentially even framing the latter as an existential threat (Wohl et al., 2023), as having somehow ‘stolen’ the object of desire at the core of such imaginary past (Schreurs, 2021). Naturally, pessimism about the present, a sense of it having been degraded (especially by out-groups) becomes the default outlook (Steenvoorden & Hartevelde, 2018), thereby again sharing key affinities with the mainstream discourse on post-truth. Despite engaging in a highly sentimental framing of the past, such evocations of nostalgia are also highly politically potent, enabling groups to shift the blame for their current alleged lack of privilege (van Prooijen et al., 2022). Likewise, critiques of populism have the tendency to portray its adherents as gullible and easily misled, susceptible to emotions, irrational, and otherwise politically inferior (Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis, 2022), also not unlike portrayals of the adherents of post-truth. Notably, the object of nostalgia can be completely fluid, enabling populists on both the political left and right to articulate their own objects to be missed and revered; not only that—in Central and Eastern Europe, for example, local context-specific versions, such as communist nostalgia, have been shown to contribute to the spread of both populism and conspiracy theories (Buzalka, 2018; Ramonaitė, 2023). In other cases, imperial nostalgia or other forms of an idealized (and even revered) past can perform the same role (e.g. on populism and Ottoman nostalgia in Türkiye, see Elçi, 2022). In fact, it could even be claimed that nostalgia is an omnipresent and largely ideology-agnostic element in political discourse (Kenny, 2017). Should nostalgia, above anything else, be reframed as the key variable, one that could subsequently postulate a general framework of longing, the objects of which—including, but not limited to, political power, forms of societal organization, material wealth, singular Truth—only *appear* to hold a central signifying value but, instead, are dependent on context, outlook, and ideology.

Indeed, the aspect of nostalgia has been ignored in the calls to decouple post-truth and populism (see e.g. De Cleen, 2018; Waisbord, 2018). Instead, the power of nostalgia should be seen as a key element in the appeals of populism, post-truth, and also in critiques thereof. However, post-truth is, in a way (and highly paradoxically, when seen from the mainstream perspective), more authentic than its critiques since, through its practice (though certainly not rhetoric), it ultimately unmask the futility of capital-T-Truth in societal interactions. This is certainly not to say that post-truth (or its close relative populism) cannot be given a

dangerous or even violent spin by those who practice and preach their particular manifestations. However, the preceding does contribute to answering the question of what, if any, meaning can be derived from post-truth and what, if any, role the concept can play in interpreting political reality. Crucially, critique of how post-truth is framed does not have to mean a rejection of the term itself. Notably, ‘post-truth’ remains a useful term, but not in the way it is typically framed. Instead of a nostalgic attitude that laments the loss of access to some timeless universal idea of truth and, therefore, to the world ‘as it really is’ and implying, along the way, a sense of loss of human cognitive capacity and even willingness to know ‘*the* truth’, one should interpret the preceding objects of nostalgia as futile fantasies of Enlightenment origin. A more productive rendering of post-truth would imply going beyond such idealized versions of truth and the human capacity for it—literally going beyond truth in the Enlightenment sense. Hence, instead of referring to a time when things come tumbling down, post-truth should be taken to denote a condition in which traditional models of knowledge become unmasked as having never truly worked, even though for many this remains difficult to acknowledge.

Notably, when assessing ways to deal with the vicissitudes of today’s political discourse, attention often tends to shift the blame onto the role of digital platforms as key communication infrastructures in homogenizing political discourse. In particular, social media companies are often seen as responsible for policing fake content and egregious forms of political speech, often criticizing the ways in which private corporate actors lack a normative commitment to the public interest despite their strong influence in the public arena (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2023, p. 167). Nevertheless, for the platforms themselves, there may be conflicting demands between freedom of expression and community wellbeing; hence, platforms, as well as other actors within the digital ecosystem, have to make their choice as to where they place themselves on a continuum that has maximum free expression at one end and maximum community cohesion at the other (Myers West, 2018). While not arguing for platforms as lawless spaces, outsourcing to them the status of (automated) arbiters of truth would come with threats of their own—essentially, establishing truth monopolies within their walled gardens.

It is often counterargued that bias and partiality can be reduced or even eliminated through machine learning, i.e. allowing predictive policing algorithms to learn patterns that indicate a likelihood of an undesirable activity or events potentially occurring with the aim of pre-empting them.

Nevertheless, such AI-enabled detection patterns still remain susceptible to problems pertaining to the selection of training data, societal biases that even impartially curated data may still reflect (Kaufmann et al., 2019). Moreover, no machine learning tool can be reasonably expected to address the root causes of any problems. In addition, discourse homogenization through automation also has the effect of the indirect responsabilization of users themselves, as they are forced to police their own speech or have content removed by automated content moderation tools, often with limited ability to appeal (Gorwa et al., 2023). For this reason, it is crucial to develop a normative framework to undergird the politics of disagreement, even in terms of ground truths, provided that the actors involved are putting forward their honest interpretations of the world (intentional attempts to manipulate and mislead would be a wholly different matter).

THE TRAGIC NATURE OF TRUTH AND POLITICS

In terms of normative ideals to guide political thinking, development of a robust, inclusive, and responsive democracy would hardly seem controversial. And yet, it is precisely such qualities that the dominant discourse on post-truth potentially undermines. As Hannon (2023, p. 14) stresses, '[t]he rhetoric of post-truth often implies that political truths are self-evident, incontrovertible, and closed to reasonable disagreement'; the underlying assumption is, therefore, that decision-making in politics is relatively straightforward, uncontroversial, or even technocratic, thereby externalizing the burden and blame on citizens—or some groups thereof—who, it seems, '*willfully* choose bad policies or are hapless dupes'. Indeed, when someone is criticized as siding with post-truth, particularly from a position of power and status quo, it becomes an act of setting and maintaining boundaries between those who are allowed to possess the capacity for having a voice and those who are not (Marres, 2018, pp. 428–429). As Blackman (2022, p. 61) points out, association with the affective dimension (and, coextensively, with the lack of reason) has traditionally been the means by which 'the working classes, colonial subjects, women, children and people with different sexualities' have been excluded from the public sphere and from any supposedly common political project, and is thereby again used as a boundary line in the framing of contemporary politics. Crucially, while the critics of post-truth often

label the latter as anti-democratic, it is their own discourse that manifests clear anti-democratic peculiarities by dismissing the very possibility of alternatives to the established elite discourse and to assumptions that have acquired a for-granted status (Hannon, 2023, p. 16).

Of course, intuitively (at least for minds that have been preconditioned for an Enlightenment-derived pattern of thought), the drive towards the (re)establishment of truth as a singular value may have a strong appeal. It might seem that if only some criteria to arbitrate between different claims and establish their truthfulness could be determined, this would lead back to a more predictable public sphere. Nevertheless, it is crucial to keep in mind that should the constellations of power organize around the dominant models of truth, any supposedly universal guiding principles may end up as symptoms of newly emergent patterns of oppression rather than solutions to the supposed malaise of truth decay (Fuller, 2023). Likewise, inasmuch as opponents of post-truth would like to self-arrogate lofty terms, such as ‘defender of truth’ (Dell’Utri, 2023, p. 165), the opposite of post-truth is not necessarily truth either. Instead, as stressed by Koekoek and Zakin (2023, p. 127) in their otherwise critical take on post-truth, ‘democratic promise lies precisely in the possibility of challenging existing orders and enacting alternative ones (even ones that might be deemed scandalous within current norms)’. Similarly, following Hannon (2023, p. 18), ‘[w]hat makes democracy valuable, in part, is that it guards against illusions of certainty’. Instead, the nostalgic accounts of post-truth are geared towards a rehashing of such illusory certainty. In fact, both structurally and semantically, they are, once again, identical to the political movements they condemn and could easily be rephrased into slogans like ‘Make truth great again’ or ‘Take back control of truth’. What lies in common is a longing for stability and closure, and the framing of alternatives not as competing options but as having taken away the cherished state of affairs and, therefore as evil, either by choice or due to some internal deficiency. In either way and for either camp, the other cannot be encountered on an equal footing.

Nevertheless, disagreement ought to be seen as fundamental to democratic politics. In particular, disagreement is more likely to pertain to the high-stakes foundational principles of the political community. As Marres (2018, pp. 439–440) observes, ‘the statements that we can or should ‘all’ be able to agree about, and about which prescriptive normativity can be securely exerted, tend to be the less crucial, conditional statements that indicate the margins of public debate’; on the contrary, ‘the

claims that are at the centre of public debate, and help organize it, are often marked by epistemic dynamism'. In that sense, the establishment of a final version of truth would only deepen the entrenchment of the powers pertaining to the status quo at the exclusion of those who do not fit the established framework. Newman (2023, p. 25), for example, also argues against closure in politics and the need to challenge the status quo, borrowing from Foucault the notion of parrhesia—effectively, the practice of speaking truth to power. Such a practice is both risky and necessitating commitment: the parrhesiast 'lacks the protection of a political constituency and [...] assumes all the risks of speaking the truth as a genuine ethical position' (Newman, 2023, p. 25). This is wielded as an alternative to post-truth: while for Newman, post-truth is always the easy option—the translation of the majority's biases and misconceptions into public discourse—the practice of parrhesia harkens back to the singularity of truth: there is always *the* truth that has to be spoken (Newman, 2023, p. 25). Instead, the perspective advocated in this chapter aims to uproot parrhesia or any other conceptualization of proclaiming *the truth* by arguing that any act of speaking is ultimately groundless and only has value and meaning that is immanent to itself. After all, once one rejects the very premise of a Cartesian subject as the benchmark model of the political actor on both empirical and normative grounds (i.e. as both fictional and discriminatory), the very possibility of there being a universal externally grounded truth that can be objectively discovered and, therefore, anchor political discourse collapses. Crucially, though, the practice of speaking truth and investing in truth is not cancelled: instead, it points to the possibility of a multiplicity of co-present truth-speakers whose truth-utterances are equally groundless but, nevertheless, manifest equal claim to authority (it must be strongly stressed that this only applies to *honest* truth-speakers and not those intentionally trying to deceive). In order to better understand this practice, one needs to delve into the tragic nature of politics.

The tragic pertains to politics inasmuch as choices have to be made and defended, sometimes to the point of sacrifice, but they are made on a groundless terrain, i.e. they are always partial, embodied, and embedded but never universally anchored. For this reason, the tragic dimension of politics comprises 'striving for something particular in the hope of deliverance' without ever being able to fulfil that goal (Kalpokas, 2018, pp. 165–166). Under such circumstances, one finds themselves in a seemingly paradoxical situation: simultaneously in need of making fundamental

choices *and* having no ultimate grounding for them. Fixity and taken-for-granted identities and subject positions become virtually impossible (unless one resorts back to power-laden essentialism). Instead, individuals are condemned to a ‘permanent pursuit of political selfhood, always already having decided upon a particular manifestation of the latter on the groundless terrain of human existence’ without the ability to achieve such self-realization in practical terms (Kalpokas, 2018, p. 166). Crucially, then, the ultimate nature of the tragic is only revealed by way of ‘discarding the false consolation of some higher value’ (Kalpokas, 2018, p. 167). Similarly, for Neidleman (2020, p. 464), ‘[t]ragedy begins from a particular conception of conflict (as inescapable), impossibility (as constitutive), and dissolution (as inevitable)’. Interpreted in this context, ‘divisiveness is not a negative or politically disempowering principle in the democratic imaginary’ but, instead, ‘it underlies the requisite resistance to uniformity; it animates the heterogeneity necessary to withstanding a debilitating stability [...] of political agency’ (Gourgouris, 2014, p. 816). The tragic idea of politics, therefore, manages to avoid both the depoliticization of disagreement, which would lower the stakes involved, and the fantasy of overcoming disagreement through some future utopia—instead, difference and conflict thus are seen as unavoidable (Neidleman, 2020, p. 464), as the necessary corollary of groundlessness once the totalizing unitary standard of humanity and truth is discarded. However, it must also be admitted that tragedy is not a universal descriptor of *any* conflict—instead, ‘[t]ragedy occurs when conflicting forces can be neither evaded nor transcended, neither eschewed nor reconciled’ (Neidleman, 2020, p. 465). Such tragic conflict is, naturally, impossible without there being a clash of foundational truths, without groundless *and* co-present truth-telling.

The crux of the tragic lies in the fact that democracy necessitates rules to be made by the citizens, but at the same time, citizens are deprived of the possibility of relying on an external authority to ground their decisions—a condition they cannot escape without doing away with democracy altogether (Neidleman, 2020, p. 472). Similarly, for Gourgouris (2014), democracy is a regime without a foundation or authorization, one that places its citizens in a condition of permanent uncertainty. Hence, democracy is ‘unsettling’ because it is ‘a political condition that requires an unconditional commitment to the continuous formation and transformation of the *polis*, which, in this respect, can never settle’, but, instead, undergoes a continual process of (re)imagination

and (re)formation (Gourgouris, 2014, p. 817). While occasionally there might be hope of overcoming this foundational dynamic, tragedy shows that such attempts are always doomed to failure (Gourgouris, 2014). Instead, ‘the groundlessness of human existence [is] manifest in political conflict as Void-of-Order’, best conceptualized as a clash of potentialities that have no foundation beyond themselves but, nevertheless, must be taken as authoritative by their adherents (Kalpokas, 2018, p. 169). The aforementioned Void-of-Order acts as a centripetal force: as any order is ultimately groundless, it is permanently open to contestation from any of the equally groundless alternatives, not as a matter of either of them becoming the ultimate order (since nothing that is groundless can be ultimately anchored) but as a matter of holding each other in tension. However, the establishment of illusory centres of meaning and order, such as essentialist appeals to truth-and-humanity standards, can easily derail this fragile system by closing it off to competition at the expense and to the detriment of those not captured by the dominant standard.

Nevertheless, in some cases, tragedy can also be used to smuggle in the return of humanism in a new form: ‘not the rationalist, universalist variety’ but, instead, one based on shared mortality and ‘vulnerability to suffering’ (Honig, 2010, p. 1). Still, one must ask whether mortality and suffering are truly uniquely human and, likewise, whether even all humans are (and have been) equally predisposed to mortality and suffering by the conditions of their lives and inherent hierarchies of value. Of the two humanist views of tragedy presented by Honig (2010, pp. 2–3), both contain serious flaws. The first, attributable to traditional humanism, emphasizes how ‘tragedy renders clear the human spirit, exhibiting human willingness to sacrifice on behalf of a principle, commitment, or desire’, defiantly meeting death and knowing that it would be for a principle that lives on (Honig, 2010, pp. 2–3). However, such a heroic position is undermined by the groundlessness of any claim, choice, or ideal, thereby leaving death in vain. For the second type of humanism, meanwhile, what matters ‘is not the tragic protagonist’s martyrdom, but rather their *vulnerability*’, thereby foregrounding the focus on mortality and suffering (Honig, 2010, p. 3). This, however, is a rather exalted view that begs the question of whether there really is always meaning in death and suffering, particularly coming back to the groundless terrain of politics. Hence, instead of a quasi-masochist self-exaltation in suffering, one should rather focus on mundane suffering, suffering-in-vain at the hands of others. Suffering while defending an ideal, as well as suffering at the hands of defenders

of an ideal, must be understood as equally groundless, yet necessary for there to be *a* meaning at all: truth-utterances may be groundless, but they are also invested in. There must certainly be an element of belief in one's choice and course of action, or else political paralysis would ensue; however, 'belief must be simultaneously counterbalanced with the groundlessness of tragic choice' (Kalpokas, 2018, p. 169). The above also implies a perpetuity of political struggle—ordering instead of order (Kalpokas, 2018). This would also enable the reconceptualization of post-truth as groundless truth or, rather, a co-groundlessness of truth-utterances that nevertheless have to be played out against each other in a tragic struggle. Crucially, therefore, '[t]ruth is always the name of an exalted contingency', thereby necessitating a reframing of politics as competition among partial interpretations that can never be brought together in a synthesis or in a singular order to be fought for and established (Kalpokas, 2018, p. 169). The challenge, therefore, is in learning to embrace the tragic without the heroic.

Similarly, for Koekoek and Zakin (2023, p. 130), 'the need for sharing a world and contesting pre-given forms of life' is 'foundational to democratic politics', with a clear implication that 'overcoming or finally stabilizing [such contestation] would undermine democracy', thereby rendering any reality-establishing criterion 'a phantasm, forever out of reach'. For them, the key difference between democratic contestation and post-truth is that the former represents the constant (but ultimately futile) striving for commonality, whereas the latter undermines the very conditions for any commonality. Nevertheless, the assumption of groundlessness of political existence precludes the very possibility of commonality *across* groups, thus implying that there is nothing to undermine in the first place. Post-truth, therefore, should be seen as a diagnosis rather than some kind of disease. Also, for Hoggan-Kloubert and Hoggan (2023, p. 17), as part of a solution to the political challenges of today, 'we need to develop and pursue common, shared public (learning) spaces as platforms for encounter and dialogue across differences'. Nevertheless, such assertions only further imply that there *is* some common ground to be covered, and that there *exist* abstract individuals devoid of particularistic subject positions—a typical standpoint of Enlightenment lineage. Even if we reframe objectivity as a practical task, as something that arises from dealings, practices, and behaviours among subjects (Dell'Utri, 2023, p. 173), no consideration is typically given of the conditions under which such practices take shape and the unavoidably

partial, power-laden nature of any standard taken as objective. Instead, focus should be directed towards the abovementioned dealings, practices, and behaviours *without* attempting to put them together into something more. Rather, it is *interactivity* that should matter as a practice that keeps the diverse (and unavoidably partial) subject positions together. Crucially, by simply denoting the situatedness of entities (human individuals included), interactivity does not preclude or undermine the high stakes of tragic politics.

Still, as a final observation, a vital clarification has to be made. While the framework above is open to any honest truth-utterances, there, in fact, *is* a normative ground to discard some honest truth-utterances: truth-utterances which essentialize others, particularly in value-diminishing ways, should also be disallowed. After all, essentializing utterances obstruct the groundlessness and interactivity of the political domain by aiming to fix others in predefined positions and/or push them below the plain of interaction. However, as long as this playing field is upheld, openness to truth-utterances must be seen as the necessary condition for the unavoidably tragic dynamic of groundless democratic politics.

CONCLUSION

While the mainstream representations of post-truth tend to presuppose nostalgia for better times supposedly lost, this chapter has argued that this interpretation is not only futile but also cannot be fully reconciled with democratic politics. Instead, such accounts tend to be nostalgic for something that has been fictional all along—the rational disembodied Cartesian subject, supposedly capable of uncovering objective truth through the employment of superior reason. In important ways, such discourse also echoes that which it purports to criticize, namely, populist reasoning. As an alternative, politics has been reframed here as a tragic domain, characterized by a plurality of truth-utterances that are expressed, held, and defended, but ultimately without the salvation of standing for undisputable truth. In this way, tragic politics is anti-heroic: there is no transcendental ideal to merit sacrifice but, instead, incessant interactive engagement on a groundless terrain, whereby *ordering* must always take place, yet without the consolation of arriving at a fixed point of *order*. Simultaneously, then, post-truth is better understood in a diagnostic, rather than evaluative, sense.

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(Anti-)Populism and Post-truth

Giorgos Venizelos 

INTRODUCTION

The last decade has seen a significant upsurge in academic and public debates on phenomena such as populism, fake news, conspiracy theories and misinformation.¹ These signifiers are often uncritically brought together in the same discussion, generating and naturalising affinities among them to the extent that they are now discussed under the umbrella notion of ‘post-truth populism’. According to the relevant literature, ‘post-truth populism’ is often understood as a ‘new’ political phenomenon (Ryoko Drávucz & Kocollari, 2023, p. 248) principally defined by its indifference towards facts and evidence (Fossum, 2023). It capitalises upon, and instrumentalises, technological advancements related to social media and, most recently, artificial intelligence

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to contaminate the public sphere by spreading fake news and misinformation (Carlson, 2020; Monti, 2020). As such, ‘post-truth populism’ taps into citizens’ emotions and anxieties, manipulating public opinion (Harsin, 2018; Kinnvall, 2018). Therefore, it downplays reason and rationality (Hoggan-Kloubert & Hoggan, 2023). As a result, it is understood as a threat to democracy and society (Hector, 2018; Speed & Mannion, 2017).

Readers might perceive the above description of ‘post-truth populism’ as sensible and in line with their own preconceptions about the phenomenon. However, this designation oversimplifies a complex phenomenon. This chapter argues that the discursive construction of ‘post-truth populism’ is facilitated by the automatic adoption of an anti-populist perspective as a default point of departure in any discussion *about* populism (cf. De Cleen et al., 2018; Stavrakakis, 2017).

‘Populism’ became a ubiquitous word in the (post-)financial crisis (2008) discourse. It was used widely, by experts, politicians as well as citizens, serving as a metaphor for ‘irrationalism’, ‘manipulation’ and ‘demagoguery’. Schematically, populism was positioned in opposition to liberalism, pluralism, human rights and, ultimately, democracy (Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Kioupiolis, et al., 2017). This alarmist trend was accelerated with the ‘double shock’ of the BREXIT referendum in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the US in 2016, and received a further boost with the COVID-19 healthcare crisis—during which ‘populism’ was associated with anti-science positions, vaccine scepticism and so on (Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis, 2022; Galanopoulos & Venizelos, 2022). A similar *hype* can be observed in relation to ‘post-truth’. Even before the pandemic, numerous works were published by pundits with ‘Post-Truth’ in their title. These include, to name a few, Evan Davis’ (2017) *Post-Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do About It*; Mathew D’Ancona’s (2017) *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight it*; and James Ball’s (2017) *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World*. Despite the varying focus of these works, they share a certain attitude towards post-truth. They are not simply critical of it (as they should be), but also *dismissive* towards ‘the masses’ that are presented as ‘ignorant’ and ‘mesmerised’. Having embarked on a mission to defeat opponents of facts and objective reality, these pundits see themselves as gatekeepers of truth. Such a stance offers little in grasping the complexity and salience of the phenomenon.

Arguably, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a (discursive) critical juncture connecting these two distinct (and normatively charged) notions. From the *event* of the pandemic onwards, it is no longer ‘populism’ on the one hand, and ‘post-truth’ on the other. Rather, the two notions are presented as an organic ensemble, constituting what is referred to as ‘post-truth populism’. For example, Ryoko Drávucz and Kocollari (2023, p. 244) argue that “‘post-truth populism’ can be regarded as a category on its own and a special type of populist political communication”. The authors maintain that populism and post-truth ‘had been intertwined or mixed up as they seem to go hand in hand and are even used to refer to quite similar, if not the very same things’ (Ryoko Drávucz & Kocollari, 2023, p. 245).

The central objective of this chapter is to interrogate the forced association between populism and post-truth, as well as the overarching (stereotypical) assumptions that underlie their supposed relationship. Discourse on ‘post-truth populism’ is neither neutral nor inconsequential. Betraying an alarmist overtone, with profoundly elitist and anti-populist anxieties, such an unreflexive response has significant theoretical and political implications. To begin with, dominant discussions place enormous emphasis on the consequences ‘post-truth populism’ may have on politics, policy and society, but neglect the ways ‘post-truth populism’ functions as a signifier in the dominant discourse (cf. Farkas, 2022). As a result, the role political elites and experts play in ‘post-truth politics’ is overlooked. The elitism prevalent in expert discourse *about* post-truth and populist politics may explain, at least in part, why experts and policymakers are subject to growing distrust; why they fail to effectively communicate their agendas to citizens; why they meet resistance; as well as why fake news and conspiracies resonate with (some) people even against a background of scientific facts disproving post-truth narratives (Venizelos & Trimithiotis, 2024). Finally, extremist forms of (right-wing) politics are grouped under the catchy notions of ‘populism’ and ‘post-truth’ that function euphemistically, downplaying the serious implications of reactionary politics for our contemporary society (Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis, 2022).

Adopting a critical ethos, this chapter shifts focus from the meaning of ‘populism’ and ‘post-truth’ to the way these two differential notions are articulated in public discussions and are brought together, forming relations of equivalence that construct the seemingly organic concept of ‘post-truth populism’. As such, the chapter argues that it is more productive to observe the language games around ‘truth’ and ‘populism’ and

the ways elites employ them to dismiss challengers through rhetorical mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion.

The arguments and objectives outlined here unfold in four main sections. The first section reviews the notion of populism, understood mainly as a *signifier* in academic discourse; and highlights the profoundly anti-populist character of theorisations *about* populism. The aim here is to underline the premises within which anti-populist discourse reactivates and adapts to historical and political conjunctures including the (post-) pandemic era. The result is a reinvented and reified form of *post-truth anti-populism*. The second section scrutinises the dominant understandings of ‘post-truth populism’ by debating core assumptions about the phenomenon. These assumptions revolve around the moral status of truth, as well as populism’s supposed opposition to reason, rationality and science. The third section exemplifies the role dominant socio-epistemic structures play in naturalising knowledge that is accepted as objective and apolitical by the community. Highlighting the politicised nature of the debates on truth, this section proposes an epistemological reading of the populist/anti-populist polarisation that renders visible a distinction between elitist and counter-hegemonic attempts to produce knowledge. Finally, aiming to lead the debate on post-truth populism towards new directions, breaking away from stereotypes, the fourth section argues that one should move beyond a perspective that focuses almost exclusively on causality. Rather than viewing emerging technologies as determinants for the diffusion of post-truth, the section argues that the struggle over truth is salient in both historical and contemporary societies. Accepting this highlights that new technologies may render the polarisation between ‘truth-driven experts’ and ‘post-truth populists’ more visible—but they do not invent it. Rather than developing strategies to block post-truth claims—which seems, nonetheless, to generate more backlash—the chapter concludes that more reflexivity about the role experts play in this relational conflict on post-truth is required. Incorporating such a suggestion might be a good point to recalibrate the debate.

POPULISM, ANTI-POPULISM, POPULIST HYPE

This first section focuses on the extensively researched and discussed notion of populism, examining it both as an academic concept and, above all, as a signifier in public debates. An overarching scholarly

‘consensus’ maintains that populism exhibits two omnipresent characteristics: *people-centrism* and *anti-elitism*. This operational definition, as it is referred to, captures the phenomenon in different cultural and historical contexts as well as in its different ideological and organisational configurations (Canovan, 1999; Laclau, 1977; Mudde, 2004). However, little else is agreed: the normative status of the phenomenon, its relationship with democracy and its impact on policy and society, all remain highly contested. The normativity that characterises discourses about populism reveals a remainder that escapes the operational consensus. Attempts to fix populism’s meaning *slip*—arguably, due to the epistemological (and perhaps ideological) foundations within which scientific discourse *about* the phenomenon emanates.

According to Bourdieu (1990), the meaning of ‘the people’ and ‘populism’ is principally articulated, and therefore constructed, in struggles between intellectuals. This means that populism is not simply an objective socio-political phenomenon with essential characteristics and meaning (i.e., a phenomenon with fixed causes, specific ideology, predestined positive/negative consequences on democracy/society and so on). Rather, ‘populism’ is also a signifier in public discourse. Pointing in this direction, Urbinati maintains that the struggle ‘over the meaning of populism turns out to be a debate about the interpretation of democracy’ (1998, p. 116). Her argument is exemplified by scholarly attempts to determine the ‘real meaning’ of ‘populism’ that often contradicts the supposedly neutral and open character of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’. While, for some, *people-centrism* is connected with visions of homogenous societies, monism, anti-pluralism and illiberalism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Müller, 2016), for others it is connected with processes of inclusion and incorporation of excluded sectors in the social, political and economic arenas, increased political participation and radical democracy (Mouffe, 2018; Venizelos & Stavrakakis, 2022). Similarly, for some, populism’s anti-establishment discourse might be understood as a threat to democratic societies in that it is interpreted as ‘hatred’ and ‘polarisation’ (Kets De Vries, 2020); while for others the scrutiny of political elites is seen as exercise of democratic agency and diagnosis of the flaws of democracy (Panizza, 2005). The way scholars theorise populist appeals to ‘the people’ and its opposition to ‘the elites’ is intrinsically connected with their perception of democracy. Some may view populism as an unmediated form of politics that disregards core aspects of liberal democracy (e.g. representation and consensus) (Worsley, 1969); while others view them as

core dimensions (of radical forms of) democracy (e.g. participation and antagonism) (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014).

Critical populism research argues that the normatively charged character of discussions about populism outlined above, is rooted in three interrelated reasons associated with the *excessive* and *uncritical* use of the signifier ‘populism’ in public discourse. First, the ‘*populist hype*’: a notion that underlines the intensity, frequency and volume by which the notion of ‘populism’ appears in media, political and academic discourse on populism (De Cleen et al., 2018). Being a catchy term, ‘populism’ is often used strategically by editors to capture audience attention: it appears in headlines, but not necessarily in the main body of articles; and is used metaphorically or metonymically, loosely implying or explicitly creating connections between it and other negatively conceived social, political and economic phenomena (Brown & Mondon, 2020).

Second, *anti-populism*: a notion that denotes the *quality* of discussions about populism. ‘Populism’ is usually framed in pejorative—if not apocalyptic—terms, functioning as an overarching category postulated in opposition to democracy and pluralism (Stavrakakis, 2017; Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Kioupiolis, et al., 2017). Schematically, the polarisation between populism and anti-populism reveals a hierarchical taxonomy: at the top is anti-populism, which ascribes to itself a superior status often connected with higher forms of knowledge, education and technocratic expertise (Ostiguy, 2017; Voutyras, 2024); at the bottom is populism, which is given an inferior status and is connected with ignorance, irrationality and folksiness. As such, the elitist structure of anti-populism becomes apparent. In positing itself in radical opposition to populism, anti-populism delegitimises challengers to the status-quo by dismissing them as ‘populist’ (even if they cannot be classified as such based on the criteria that the field of ‘populism studies’ provides) (Galanopoulos & Venizelos, 2022).

Anti-populism constitutes a salient and recurring political logic that reinvents itself in a given politico-historical conjuncture. For example, during the 2007–2008 financial crisis, the label ‘populism’ was assigned to both anti-austerity movements on the left *and* xenophobic discourses on the far right. Despite their distinct ideologies, both radical left and radical right actors were denounced as ‘populist’—a label that denoted economic irresponsibility, demagoguery, etc. In the COVID-19 pandemic, ‘populism’ was attached to anti-vax movements, science-scepticism, the mismanagement of the pandemic and post-truth politics, and linked with irrationality,

conspiracy theories, etc (Venizelos & Trimithiotis, 2024). Such qualities broadly attributed to populism (as a homogenous concept) often constitute peripheral characteristics that are connected with *some* variants of populism—typically topologies that belong to the radical right of the spectrum (Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Nikisianis, et al., 2017; Venizelos, 2023). In any case, they are neither constitutive nor exclusive of populism as a whole.

The common front against ‘populism’ resembles the horseshoe theory—according to which radical left and extreme right, rather than being at opposite ends of a linear continuum of the political spectrum, come to closely resemble each other (Voutyras, 2024). Arguably, the indiscriminate grouping of left and right under the notion of populism says more about the anti-populist camp itself—occupying the political centre in order to protect its established position—than its enemies (whose fundamental differences are collapsed under the homogenising label of populism).

A third key factor is the near-exclusive association of populism with the far-right. Especially in the COVID-19 conjuncture, a significant portion of scholarly work focused on cases of right-wing populism to test whether there is a connection between populism and post-truth (see Harsin, 2018). It affirms this connection (between populism and post-truth), and reifies a supposedly intrinsic relationship between the two. What such accounts fail to recognise, is that it is mostly radical right-wing variants of populism that are mostly connected with post-truth politics.

For example, Speed and Mannion (2017) seem to understand populism as a form of healthcare chauvinism. They claim that populists’ main concern is to secure healthcare access for natives only, protecting them from the ‘freeloading other’ who enters the country as medical tourist aiming to take advantage of its hospitals. However, a basic reading of Speed and Mannion’s (2017) argument raises the question of whether populism, *rather than nationalism*, is a more fitting descriptor; since the process of othering they describe positions ‘the foreigner’ as the constitutive other and not some ‘illegitimate and self-indulged elite’ (see De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Venizelos, 2021). The authors are clear that ‘hatred’ is what lies at the core of the politics they describe—to the extent that they call it ‘discriminatory populism’. What they fail to recognise, though, is that they talk about a phenomenon that it is primarily characterised by nativism and only secondarily, if at all, by populism (Mudde, 2007).

Another example is provided by Michailidou et al. (2023, p. 63) who argue that '[t]he rise of *populism*, *illiberalism* and political *extremism* undermine the authority of the intermediaries of truth and encourage their adherents to search for their own facts against established media and journalism' (emphases added). Assuming that discourse is not neutral or merely descriptive, but rather plays a critical role in constructing our very socio-political reality (Stavrakakis, 2017), it could be argued that placing 'populism' (without being further defined or subjected to typologies) alongside negative signifiers such as 'illiberalism' and 'extremism' plays a crucial role in *constructing* and reinforcing a definition of populism that is inextricably connected with such qualities. The aim here is not to downplay the implications of *radical right variants* of populism on democracy and society but, on the contrary, to highlight that *ideology* plays a determining role in this (Venizelos, 2023). Dominant discourse on populism fails to distinguish between diverse and multifaceted typologies of populism (left/right, democratic/reactionary, inclusionary/exclusionary and so on), ultimately collapsing xenophobic, authoritarian phenomena connected with anti-vax movements under the notion of populism. (As it will be further explored later in the chapter, left-wing populists embraced healthcare and science, thus having different impacts on public deliberation).

Overall, while scholars agree on the primacy of people-centrism and anti-elitism in populist politics, the normatively charged nature of the debate blurs conceptual boundaries and puts the operational consensus under stress. Taking into consideration the performative effects of language, it is argued that the systematic and persistent anti-populist articulations *about* populism naturalise its pejorative meaning (Stavrakakis, 2017). As such, 'populism' is conflated with phenomena that, although they resemble it, are conceptually distinct.

While the study of anti-populism might seem a niche and pedantic attempt of a few (critical) scholars to 'restore' or 'correct' the allegedly distorted meaning of populism, the relational status of populism and anti-populism, and their mutual constitution through a dynamic interaction, cannot be neglected. After all, *identity presupposes difference*. As such, according to Stavrakakis (2017), it is equally if not even more important to insist on studying anti-populism together with populism. Populist discourse neither emerges nor operates in a vacuum. The broader landscape of political antagonism between antagonistic camps and their bid for hegemony must be taken into consideration. This dynamic process

involves, not only the populist actors seeking to mobilise support and advocate for a counter-hegemonic agenda, but also radically opposing anti-populist forces antagonizing the former (Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Kioupiolis, et al., 2017).

Consequently, more attention and reflexivity needs to be paid to the language games around the signifier ‘populism’. This means that one needs to shift focus from the essential meaning and supposed characteristics of populism *to the way it is used in public discourse, and with what performative effects* (De Cleen et al., 2018). Failure to understand this has significant theoretical and socio-political implications. As the following section highlights, grounded on the axiomatically anti-populist position in discussions *about* populism, a reinvented form of anti-populism that emerged in the (post) pandemic context understands populism in a quasi-organic relationship with post-truth.

DISCOURSES ABOUT ‘POST-TRUTH POPULISM’

This section of the chapter transfers the reader’s focus onto ‘post-truth populism’—or more precisely discourses *about it*. Following from the discussion laid out in the preceding section, and restating the core thesis of this chapter, it is argued that the articulation of ‘post-truth populism’ is intrinsically connected with the default anti-populist position of public discourse. Thus, what is new here is not necessarily the phenomenon of ‘post-truth populism’ but also the discourse that constructs it and simultaneously opposes it: *post-truth anti-populism*, which can be seen as a new paradigm of anti-populism.

The volume of academic work on ‘post-truth populism’ does not just highlight the growing interest in studying this supposedly ‘new political phenomenon’. On the contrary, it reinforces the connection between the notions of ‘populism’ and ‘post-truth’, ultimately bringing the two (differential) signifiers into relations of equivalence. According to Galanopoulos and Stavrakakis (2022, p. 25) ‘more and more arguments connect “post truth” and/or “fake news” with populism, and present both phenomena as mutually reinforcing pathologies of a perceived political normality’. This has both theoretico-scientific and socio-political implications: reducing political antagonism in an overly simplistic dichotomy between ‘facts’ and ‘lies’, creates obstacles in understanding the complex and heterogeneous phenomenon (that often draws

on positivist/scientific data to structure its arguments) currently on the rise.

The task now is to delve into the definition of ‘post-truth anti-populism’ according to the relevant literature. As Conrad et al. (2023, p. 3) maintain in their edited volume, *Europe in the Age of Post-Truth Politics: Populism, Disinformation and the Public Sphere*, ‘post-truth is often defined as a mode of communication where a certain type of *populist actor* uses the infrastructure provided by social and other digital media to infuse the public sphere with mis- and disinformation’ (emphases added). The argument that post-truth is diffused by *populists*, right-wing politicians, commentators and influencers as well as activists, is also shared by Waisbord (2018) and Monti (2020) who argue that populists’ purpose is to castigate critical, progressive and democratic organisations. Overall, discourses about ‘post-truth populism’ reveal at least three overarching assumptions: (a) that the phenomenon posits itself against truth, facts and evidence; (b) that it is profoundly emotional rather than rational; and (c) that it constitutes a threat to science. These core claims will be critically evaluated in what follows.

Truth and Lies

The most obvious characteristic ascribed to ‘post-truth populism’ is, of course, that it downplays evidence, manufactures reality and, overall, attacks the moral authority of truth (Ball, 2017; D’Ancona, 2017; Davis, 2017). ‘Post-truth populism’ is linked with ‘indifference to factual correctness’ (Conrad, 2023, p. 84), ‘denial of facts’ (Ryoko Drávucz & Kocollari, 2023, p. 253), ‘false information’, ‘mis-/dis-information’ (Bergmann, 2018), ‘fake news’, ‘alternative facts’ (Speed & Mannion, 2017), ignorance and unsophistication (Brennan, 2022). According to Speed and Mannion (2017, p. 250) ‘[p]opulist politicians’ reliance on assertions that appear true, but have no basis in fact, creates a false view of the world’. This leads Fossum (2023, p. 31) to argue ‘the factual and evidence-based foundation of democratic politics is challenged by the rise of a particular species of populist politician and populist parties’.

Overall, truth is understood to have ‘lost its symbolic value’ as it is either ‘cynically manipulated or completely bypassed’ (Newman, 2023: 13–14). In the so-called age of post-truth, it no longer seems to matter whether politicians are caught lying openly and blatantly (Newman, 2023). Donald Trump constitutes a paradigmatic case in this regard.

However, the important thing with Trump is, arguably, not that he lies, but that there are almost no repercussions. Thus, from a social constructivist point of view, it might be more important to move beyond a narrow and often misleading focus on facts and lies, towards an understanding of how claims denying truth are constructed and why they become popular, even against scientific evidence.

The discourse on lies reveals ‘a nostalgia for an age of facts’ (Van Dyk, 2022, p. 39). However, it is questionable whether such an era ever existed. After all, are lies foreign to our societies, and by extension, politics? Have societies always relied on one unquestionable truth? Drawing on Jacques Lacan’s (1966) notion of fantasy, nostalgic accounts mourning the sudden death of truth seem to fall into an essentialist trap where a supposedly ‘original state’ marked by the absence of disturbances and transgressions—in this context understood as lies—and defined by honesty, truth and good will, existed once and is now long gone.

‘Post-modernism’ is often blamed for relativising truth, reducing it, supposedly, to mere opinion (Ryoko Drávucz & Kocollari, 2023). However, post-modernism did not introduce relativism but pointed out the fluidity of meaning-construction. Putting the blame on ‘post-modernism’ fails to recognise the antagonistic core of society and politics and the hegemonic struggle entailed in them. Newman (2023) ultimately recognises that the relativisation of truth is not equated with the rejection of truth-as-a-whole. Truth is not merely a reflection of objective reality but something intrinsically connected with power. This leads to Foucault’s notion of ‘regimes of truth’, arguing that antagonistic systems of knowledge achieve hegemony in specific historic moments through operations bounded in the discourse/power nexus and as a result they end up being perceived as objective. As such, ‘to say that truth is historically or culturally constructed, and that it is bound up with power, does not mean that truth does not exist, but rather that there is no universal, overarching, absolute category of truth that stands outside history—or at least not one that has any real intelligibility or usefulness’ (Newman, 2023, p. 23).

Drawing (and in fact subverting) the core claim of the ‘pro-truth’ camp, what seems to be problematic is not only denying truth but also claiming it as a whole. Let us remember the famous statement of Jacques Lacan: ‘I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there’s no way to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible: words fail. Yet it’s through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the real’ (Lacan, 1987, p. 7). Unmediated access to reality is elusive and unattainable; it

cannot be fully symbolised or captured by language and representation. Thus, any attempt to claim the wholeness of truth resorts from and results in symbolic and fantasmatic constructions that mediate one's experience.

Politics is based on the articulation of claims and master narratives that construct a world with coherent meaning. However, intellectuals require reflexivity and tentativeness when making bold claims on behalf of truth, in the sense that self-certainty entails the risk for closure. Failing to incorporate this element of caution not only risks overlooking the nuances of complex issues but also neglects the potential consequences of absolute certainty. Interestingly, when examining such discourse it becomes evident that it says less about anti-vaxxers or post-truthers and more about those who oppose populism. The consequences of unbridled self-certainty in political rhetoric extend beyond ideological clashes and truth wars, as they pave the way for authoritarian tendencies. Therefore, embracing a more reflexive and tentative approach is not just a scholarly virtue but a safeguard against the perils of dogmatism and its authoritarian potential.

REASON AND RATIONALITY VS. EMOTIONS AND IGNORANCE

'Reason' and 'rationality' seem to assume a central position in the debate on post-truth too. An array of pundits and scholarly publications betray this assumption—see for example Hoggan-Kloubert and Hoggan's (2023) text entitled *Post-Truth as an Epistemic Crisis: The Need for Rationality, Autonomy, and Pluralism*, and Hector's (2018) *Rationality and post-truth—The threat to democratic society* (see also Porpora, 2020; Gudonis & Jones, 2021). In fact, 'reason' and 'rationality' are often juxtaposed to post-truth, populism, fake news, etc., which are, in turn, presented as being in an equivalential relationship (Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis, 2022).

Emotions (as opposed to reason) are thought to constitute a core characteristic of populism and—apparently—'post-truth populism' as well. Populists spread *fear*, 'stir *emotions*' ('especially negative ones' such as 'resentment') and exploit them, negatively affecting political decision-making since sentiments overshadow facts and evidence. Political emotions are thought to be a relatively new phenomenon—'a fundamental development of this era' or at least something that is being 'rediscovered' in conventional politics (Ryoko Drávucz & Kocollari, 2023, pp. 250, 252).

Arguably, the exceptionalisation and demonisation of emotions are problematic. Emotion in politics is not new, and it is certainly not a discovery of populists, but a salient feature of politics, playing a core role in social agency, collective identity formation and political mobilisation and participation (Laclau, 2005). However, owing to the crowd theories of the previous century and the increasing ‘scientism’ of social and political studies, emotions were, for long, not considered a legitimate category of socio-political analysis (Cossarini & Vallespín, 2019). The ‘crowd’ or ‘the people’ were thus framed as a ‘hypnotised mob susceptible to manipulation’, while ‘collective action was almost equated with collective madness’ (Eklundh, 2019, p. 21). The demonisation of emotions via its association with populism is also evident in contemporary discourses about ‘post-truth populism’. Charismatic leaders are thought to *exploit* irrational voters *spreading* the populist mood (Speed & Mannion, 2017). In emotion-fearing discourses there is an evident persistence on *intentionality* (i.e. populists *want* to manipulate) which, at best, downplays the agency of ‘the people’ and the complexity of psychosocial dynamics embedded in political identification (Venizelos, 2022).

Emotions are conventionally juxtaposed to reason, structuring an artificial divide between normal and pathological, pragmatic and illusory, rational and irrational.² This distinction is also evident in critical political theorists like Newman (2023, p. 16) who argues that ‘[t]he model of rational deliberation between free and equal participants in the public sphere has been replaced by the Freudian image of the unthinking group, emotionally bound to its leader, which demands illusions and cannot do without them’. However, it is questionable whether a shared rationality exists (Mouffe, 1999). As such, rather than framing subjects as irrational it would be more productive to recognise the affective core of (political) identification and (social) mobilisation.

² The artificial division between ‘rationality and emotion’ is gendered. The public sphere of ‘politics’ is nominally annotated as ‘masculine’ and consequently as ‘rational’, strong’, ‘pragmatic’, ‘emotion-free’ and therefore ‘good’ at maintaining order. The private sphere, represented as a legitimate venue for emotions to exist, is correspondingly feminized and therefore dismissed as irrational-qua-affective, a state of disorder (Eklundh 2019).

Against Science

Another key theme in scholarly discourse revolves around the assumption that ‘post-truth populism’ is anti-scientific in that it rejects the authority of experts. As Newman (2023, p. 13) puts it ‘scientific knowledge and expertise are openly disparaged by populist demagogues’. The cases of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro quickly come to mind as key examples of (populist) politicians who bypassed experts, made consistently controversial statements about the pandemic and endorsed a number of conspiracy theories that have boosted grassroots mobilisations by anti-vax groups (Galanopoulos & Venizelos, 2022).

Drawing on such examples of (right-wing) populists during the pandemic, Speed and Mannion’s (2017) article entitled ‘The Rise of Post-truth Populism in Pluralist Liberal Democracies: Challenges for Health Policy’, argues that post-truth populism constitutes a threat to national healthcare systems. According to them, ‘populist policies’ are poorly designed and implemented and are, hence, dysfunctional. It is evident that right-wing populists (such as Trump and Bolsonaro) appeared ignorant, questioned science and measures to contain the spread of COVID-19.

But is ‘populism’ indeed anti-scientific? ‘Paradoxically’, anti-vax movements often use scientific arguments to structure their claims. Against this background Mede and Schäfer (2020) develop the notion of science-related populism, highlighting that populists do not just reject scientific knowledge replacing it with peoples’ common sense, personal and emotional narratives. On the contrary, Mede and Schäfer (2020) argue that science-related populism operates within the realm of science, as they use facts and have their own alternative experts to legitimise truth claims. Similarly, in Ylä-Anttila’s (2018) empirical account, ‘populist’ discourses, actually, do not seem to embrace an ambivalent or relativist position towards truth as commonly suggested. Rather, they endorse radical scientism and profound positivism, drawing on ‘data’ and ‘facts’ to prove their point (see also Saurette & Gunster, 2011).

Arguably, populism’s juxtaposition to science has theoretical roots that can be traced back to Hofstadter’s (1955) vintage anti-populism, which viewed anti-intellectualism (among an array of other negative qualities)

as the core defining feature of populism.³ Similarly, Canovan's (1999) position that populism opposes the established structure of power and dominant ideas and values of society, may be *somehow* applicable to the current conjuncture. Indeed, anti-elitism does not refer only to political and financial actors in the strict sense but, more broadly, extends its aversion to hegemonic norms (cosmopolitanism, political correctness, pro-vax views) as well as actors promoting them (intelligentsia, pundits, experts, scientists). Established hegemony is not solely political or financial, but cultural and scientific as well.

However, it is important to underline that aversion to cosmopolitanism, 'political correctness', vaccines, as well as the technocrats and professionals who promote them, *can only be connected with populism as long as they are articulated in the name of 'the people' and against an 'elite'*. In other words, *opposition* to these 'values' *alone* does not suffice to define such a stance as populist. Such an arbitrary association is connected of course with the predominantly negative understanding of populism in public discourse—which will be analysed further down through the lens of anti-populism.

Another problem with framing populism (in general) as anti-scientific is that such a claim seems not to apply to left-wing typologies. During the COVID-19 outbreak many left populists had persistently advocated in favour of scientific guidance, respected and promoted governmental mandates to the degree that they often resembled mainstream political actors. Even more strikingly, in many cases they failed to provide a distinct narrative of their own, including potential criticism of the way extended measures have affected citizens' democratic freedoms and rights (Galanopoulos & Venizelos, 2022). Consequently, it might be risky 'to causally link different types of populism with impacts on health policy' (Powell, 2017, p. 724). After all, it is debatable whether there is a specific set of policies labelled as populist. Rather, (populist) political actors *communicate* their policies in a populist manner, through the antagonistic pit of the people/elite, framing them as a matter that concerns the underprivileged majority, and simultaneously as an attack against a privileged elite.

³ This type of opposition to experts is indeed evident in the rural populisms of middle America (past and present); but not as much in the urban populisms (e.g. of southern Europe).

Overall, the review of discourses *about* ‘post-truth populism’ performed in this section of the chapter, indicates that this ‘new phenomenon’ is understood in juxtaposition to truth and facts, reason and rationality and, subsequently, in the given (post-)pandemic conjuncture, to science as well. As such, ‘post-truth populism’ is understood to be an overly emotional phenomenon. These claims were debunked on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Theoretically, dominant claims were subjected to interrogation from a critical and post-structuralist point of view, questioning the status of truth as an inherent quality in politics as well as the supposedly alien place of emotions in it. Empirically, these claims were debunked through their juxtapositions with examples of progressive and democratic populist phenomena that do not share the (above) characteristics ascribed to ‘populism’ or ‘post-truth populism’, which ultimately seems to serve as a general category that aims to forcefully explain the current politico-historical conjuncture as a whole.

EXPERT DISCOURSE, EPISTEMIC POSITION, KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

The divide between truth and post-truth, real and fake news, emotional populists and rational experts cannot be taken for granted. On the contrary, the epistemic position societal actors hold must be scrutinised, exemplifying the function dominant discourse has in constituting socio-political reality and antagonistic identities. As such, it is more productive to observe the language games that structure the debate on ‘truth’ and the rhetorical mechanisms that, through processes of inclusion/exclusion, claim it. In this sense, post-truth politics is at best relational. However, due to its status, prestige and privileged position, scientific knowledge is accepted as undeniable community knowledge. Therefore, dominant socio-epistemic structures exclude ‘other’ forms of knowledge. This is neither to dismiss science, nor to legitimise ‘alternative facts’ and conspiracy theories, but to highlight that knowledge is naturalised through a dynamic interaction between discourse and power.

According to Galanopoulos and Stavrakakis (2022, p. 409) ‘mainstream politicians and prominent members of the media and the academic establishment seem to claim a—neutral, allegedly non-political—epistemic superiority based on the possession of a (single) truth and on incarnating a supreme rationality’. Yet, what seems to be overlooked is that this allegedly objectivist stance disguised behind epistemic authority is,

in fact, *political* in nature. According to Galanopoulos and Stavrakakis (2022, p. 415), again, ‘the debate over populism, post-truth politics and fake news on the one hand, and rationality, truth and politics based on facts and knowledge of experts on the other, essentially presupposes the transformation of political confrontation into a supposedly neutral epistemological debate around truth, thereby causing a series of concerns about the very essence of the political’.

In the post-Weberian paradigm science, scientists, and even laboratories, are believed to be apolitical in that they follow positivist rationality that is based on facts (Boschele, 2020). Indeed, politicians are very likely *not to* possess technical and scientific knowledge required to tackle emerging issues. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, scientists found themselves on the front stage of politics, assuming an even more central role in everyday public life than politicians. Politicians declared allegiance to science, claiming that the management of the pandemic strictly adhered to expert guidance. However, such a claim resembles Agamben’s (2005) ‘state of exception’ in that political decisions, with significant implications for democracy, were made and normalised in the name of techno-scientism.

Notwithstanding the necessity of scientific advice, the interaction between elected political authority and assumed rational positions of appointed experts reveals inherent tensions. According to Boschele (2020, p. 2) ‘to rely on expert knowledge also means to legitimize people who do not get their authority politically from the sovereign people, but such authority derives from the allegedly (and yet often contested) objective position of their (experts’) disciplines’. In the age of neoliberalism, the monolithic and narrow culture of expertise transformed knowledge into a techno-scientific paradigm. Consequently, popular and participatory forms of knowledge production are dismissed as kitsch or folksy, revealing the elitist character of dominant epistemologies (Venizelos & Trimithiotis, 2024). As such, a hierarchical construction between knowledgeable (experts) and ignorant subjects (populists) becomes visible. The former have a privileged access to a kind of truth that is coded as superior, and the latter are denied access to it. The anti-populist polemic on ‘populists’ often takes a moralistic character.

The distinction between *disbelief in facts* and *mistrust towards the experts upon whom knowledge is dependent* might be proven particularly fruitful here (Popescu-Sarry, 2023). More specifically, opposition towards official communication might not be so much about the content of this

information (e.g. about healthcare issues, climate change), but the actors who propose it—namely, epistemic authorities; as well as the way these actors position themselves against knowledge (e.g. as subjects possessing objective knowledge that is based on undeniable facts and evidence). In other words, populists of the radical right and anti-vaxxers may not necessarily oppose expertise in policy design altogether, but rather expert-led decision-making processes (De Cleen et al., 2018). The latter is thought to downplay the will of ‘the people’, while the primary role of experts is to generate knowledge and not to take political decisions. As Mede and Schäfer (2020, p. 479) put it, right-wing populists and conspiracy theorists ‘do not challenge the scientific epistemology per se—in fact, they are described as ‘pro-science’ [...]—but that they see organized science as corrupt and want to replace it with alternative authorities and counterknowledge’. As such, it could be argued that the claims of ‘populist’ discourses are about decision-making sovereignty, and not simply about truth (Mede & Schäfer, 2020).

Mistrust towards expert authorities has been on the rise since COVID-19—but it is by no means a new phenomenon. Nevertheless, besides reactionary manifestations, opposition to technocracy was manifested by progressive and democratic movements against austerity (2011–2015). This reveals a broader logic characterised by a tension between ‘experts’ and ‘the people’. As such, the issue at stake might not be epistemic diagnosis but the position of authority from which it is articulated. The first relates to the *identification* of an issue through the lens of science and expertise. The second is related to the body that makes the diagnosis, as well as its mode of articulation. Such a formalist approach enables one to distinguish between *elitist* and (so-called) *populist* epistemologies pushing for hegemonic and counterhegemonic knowledge, respectively (Ylä-Anttila, 2018): the former was already defined above while the latter is thought to be based on the knowledge of ‘the common people’ and the proximity to everyday life, pushing for epistemological ordinariness (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). As such, the polarisation between experts and ‘populists’ might not be so much about ‘truth vs lies’ but about incompatible epistemological grounds. Epistemology is *political* in this sense, and operates on the vertical axis that juxtaposes elitism/anti-populism (from above) and anti-elitism/‘populism’ (from below): the former is represented by actors who are framed as privileged due to their access to resources and forms of life that are inaccessible to the latter, who

perceive themselves as being sidelined and excluded from decision-making processes.

Thus, besides opposition to knowledge, '[r]ecognising that populist forces can establish their own relation with the production of knowledge, instead of treating them merely as irrational political agents, is a big step towards a better understanding of populism and its relation to post-truth and towards a more rigorous and self-reflexive politicized epistemology' (Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis, 2022, p. 410). To be sure, taken at face-value, the relational understanding of epistemology risks elevating conspiracy theories, equating them to scientific knowledge. Far from being the aim, the key argument of this section is to scrutinise the logic through which established epistemic (elitist) knowledge that presents itself as rational and unquestionable becomes hegemonic.

BEYOND CAUSE AND EFFECT

Building on the deconstructive and reflexive ethos of what has preceded, a final argument put forward in this chapter is that to better understand phenomena that define our era, one should move beyond a causal understanding of these phenomena towards one that examines the way they are used in everyday social and political practices. Technological advances and their incorporation into politics, including the rise and dominance of social media, the decentralisation of information and the current prominence of artificial intelligence (AI) are commonly understood as key political challenges that need to be addressed in the post-truth era.

Therefore, some experts appear wary of the fact that 'expertise is clearly widely distributed in society, with citizens expert in everything from restaurant reviews to medical advising' (Speed & Mannion, 2017, p. 251). For Ryoko Drávucz and Kocollari (2023, p. 250), the 'possibility of expressing multiple voices in the media is what sets the ground for post-truth'. It is true that such tools can manufacture information, as well as pictures and videos, generating material that is indistinguishable from 'real' and 'authentic' content. However, the above-mentioned preoccupation of experts with the decentralisation and production of information by users betrays a degree of *demophobia*, as it reveals 'an elite anxiety about the consequences of political ignorance' (Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis, 2022, p. 408).

Moreover, a causal approach is often accompanied by strategies to counter post-truth, including fact-checking, prebunking and debunking

strategies as well as application add-ons that block or blur content from dubious sources. However, curbing the spread of post-truth can prove extremely difficult in practice, if not arbitrary, while it seems to generate resistance, if not backlash, from groups who perceive this as silencing or ‘cancelling’ (see Hameleers, 2023; Boukes & Hameleers, 2023).

Crucially, AI and social media do not necessarily *cause* post-truth. As Fossum (2023, p. 32) put it ‘[i]f structural changes are important sources of fake news, disinformation, and manipulation, then the rise of populism is hardly the only source of fake news and disinformation. If so, the irony in focusing on the most blatant manifestations of fake news as espoused by populist politicians is that it may detract attention from those factors that helped create such traits in the first place’.

Technology influences politics, but this does not mean that it determines it. The technological means that exist in a given conjuncture are products of historical conditions of possibility, embedded in material and immaterial power relations that overdetermine the way technology is used (Anastasiou, 2022). Given the high levels of contemporary global polarisation, digital technologies could radicalise and make more visible the pervasive antagonism of the political. The means by which counter-knowledge is articulated, subverting or perhaps distorting hegemonic norms, as well as the intensity with which this is done, may be different now. But the practice of demarcating between ‘truth’ and ‘post-truth’, one ‘worldview’ and ‘the other’, is not new. The persistent critique of such tools risks overlooking the inherent hegemonic struggle embedded in socio-political affairs.

It is important to note that these platforms are not limited to ‘populists’ but are also available to non-populists. For example, Barack Obama was recognised as a pioneer in incorporating them into his political campaigns; fact-checking teams suggest that both Russia and Israel (states that under Putin and Netanyahu are considered *authoritarian and nationalist* rather than populist) used AI to generate deepfakes and shape public opinion during their invasions on Ukraine (2022) and Gaza (2023) respectively (Eisele, 2023; Twomey et al., 2023). Finally, the twofold character of technology should not be neglected (Anastasiou, 2022). Besides reactionary actors such as anti-vax movements and conspiracy theorists during the COVID-19 conjuncture, with which digital media are connected, these mediums were employed by progressive and inclusionary movements aiming to enhance democracy through novel forms

of political participation (2010–2012) (e.g. left-wing populism, square movements, etc.) (Gerbaudo, 2017; Venizelos, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This chapter interrogated dominant discourses *about* ‘post-truth populism’. While public discussions maintain that this is a new phenomenon that grasps the spirit of our times, the chapter argues, instead, that what is ironically new here is a novel typology of reified ‘post-truth anti-populism’. Put simply, the forceful connection between these two distinct phenomena—‘populism’ and ‘post-truth’—into a supposedly organic relation, is a product of a salient pejorative theorisation of populism. Problematically, public debates have placed enormous emphasis on an ill-defined notion of ‘populism’—often capturing a wide range of distinct phenomena ranging from the far-right to authoritarianism and from anti-vax conspiracy theories to fake news and post-truth politics. As a result, little attention has been placed on the other end of this polarising divide. Thus, the role of populism *as a signifier* in public debates, as well as the role of *anti-populist elites*, are overlooked.

The first section of the chapter provided a critical analysis of populism, not so much as an objective social and political phenomenon, but mainly as a signifier in dominant discourse. As such, it highlighted the predominance of anti-populism as the traditionally default position in any discussion about populism. Such a standpoint sets the premises for discussions *about* populism in the so-called post-truth era as well. The section argued that anti-populism is neither a new nor a static category, but a reactive one. In moments of economic, social, political and epistemological crises, ‘populism’ seems to be the term that experts use to make sense of opposition to the hegemonic norms and values of society. In previous historical and political conjunctures such as the financial crisis of 2008, ‘populism’ was connected with political discourses questioning the neoliberal establishment on both the left and right. In the (post-)pandemic conjuncture, it was linked with fake news, misinformation, science-scepticism and post-truth politics in general. The reactivation of anti-populism underlines a salient political logic defined by diachronic qualities such as an elitism, identified as a self-proclaimed superiority in terms of access to knowledge. Simultaneously, it dismisses its ‘other’—populism—connecting it with irrationality, ignorance and irresponsibility,

framing it as a threat to democracy. Arguably, this says little about populism and more about the forces opposing it.

The second section delved into discussions *about* ‘post-truth populism’ that are pertinent to the post-pandemic conjuncture. The analysis reveals three overarching assumptions about ‘post-truth populism’: first, that it opposes truth; second, that it is overly emotional rather than rational; and, third, that it is anti-scientific. These claims were interrogated on both theoretical and empirical grounds. The assumption of an unmediated access to truth, and the existence of a universal rationality embedded in dominant discourses castigating ‘post-truth populism’, has significant implications. Such assumptions betray a fantasy of a coherent ‘big Other’ who guarantees an objective community knowledge as a whole and fails to recognise the at least partial or incomplete, as well as politicised, ‘nature’ of truth and reason. At the same time, the ostracism of emotions as a legitimate category of political participation and analysis, misses a core aspect of subjectivity-formation often embedded in complex and contradictory psycho-social dynamics.

A core objective of this chapter—performed in its third section—was to exemplify the role epistemic positioning and expert discourse play in the production of knowledge as objective. This is not to dismiss the importance of science, but to highlight the dynamics of knowledge production as being embedded in historical and political contingencies bound by the nexus between discourse and power.

To take future debates out of an insular focus on post-truth politics, the fourth section of this chapter argued that one needs to shift away from a causal understanding of social and political phenomena in such a practice. Technological advancements, such as the contemporary rise of AI, are usually thought of as determinants of post-truth. However, this chapter argued that the problem is not technology *per se*, but the way it is used. While technology decentralises information and allows for the manufacturing of content, it does not necessarily cause post-truth. Rather, it makes the historically omnipresent hegemonic struggle (over truth) more visible.

To conclude, this chapter sought to critique hegemonic accounts of ‘post-truth’ by exemplifying the often elitist undertone embedded in their dismissal of challengers’ claims on the basis of ‘ignorance’ and ‘unsophistication’, which are often treated as features of ‘populism’. Rather than dismissing science and expert knowledge, the purpose of this chapter was to modestly highlight the necessity for reflexivity and self-awareness.

In an age increasingly characterised by mistrust towards ‘the expert class’, the dominant techno-scientific paradigm of governance seems to be generating a backlash. This might not be solely connected with the denial of truth but with the rejection of those promoting it. As such, it might be more productive to move beyond a narrow dichotomy between facts and lies, towards an understanding of how claims denying truth are constructed and why they become popular—even against scientific evidence.

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Political Communications and the Media



The Epistemic Dimension of Populist Communication: Can Exposure to Populist Communication Spark Factual Relativism?

Michael Hamелеers

INTRODUCTION

In times of mounting distrust in established knowledge, conventional expert sources, scientific evidence, and the abundance of counter-factual truth claims online, we are arguably confronted with a post-truth era (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2018). Although truth has always been a construction whose validation depends on one's perspective, the current climate of distrust and the wide availability of alternative constructions of truth that compete for legitimacy has further eroded, relativized, and polarized support for factual information. In this chapter, I argue that this trend may be both cause and consequence of populist communication. Empirically, I aim to explore to what extent this is the case, and how beliefs related to the relative status of factual knowledge can be primed by exposure to populist communication.

Populist communication—which I understand as the emphasis of a moral and causal divide between ordinary people and corrupt elites (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017)—has drastically changed in the face of shifts

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toward post-truth relativism. Initially, populism has been conceptualized as a social identity frame that juxtaposes ordinary people against political elites, such as the government (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004). However, in line with increasing concerns over the prevalence of mis- and disinformation, media hostility and anti-science sentiments, populism has increasingly emphasized a central opposition between honest ordinary people and duplicitous elites, which include the mainstream media and scientists (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Mede & Schäfer, 2020; Conrad, in this volume). As omnipresent blame-shifting labels related to ‘fake news’ or ‘corrupt scientists’ may severely undermine people’s trust in mainstream information and conventional knowledge (e.g., Egelhofer et al., 2022; Van der Meer et al., 2023), it is crucial to explore in what ways populism has taken on an epistemic dimension, and how the antagonism between the people’s truths and the alleged lies of the established order may contribute to increasing epistemic polarization and relativism.

Against this background, this chapter first of all explores how online populist messages create an antagonism between congruent and incongruent elitist truth claims. Based on the qualitative inventory of delegitimizing populist narratives, I report on the findings of an experiment in which participants were exposed to messages framed using epistemic populism. Specifically, people saw political messages in which scientific knowledge and expert evidence were attacked and contrasted to people-centric claims on reality. The experiment was conducted to explore if the emphasis on a binary divide between the people’s honesty and the deception of elites can fuel the perception that truthfulness has become relative, debatable, and polarized (Van Aelst et al., 2017). The main expectation is that when established knowledge is attacked and delegitimized, people will be strengthened in the belief that factual information is relative, flexible, and depends on one’s perspective. After all, delegitimizing conventional truth claims typically regarded as authoritative knowledge undermines the idea that truths are fixed, or that objective knowledge is not subjected to interpretation and biases.

As a well-functioning deliberative democracy should be founded upon a shared understanding of basic facts, I argue that the rise of epistemic populism across democracies is a potentially undermining force that further erodes trust and makes people open to counter-factual evidence resonating with their existing beliefs. Hence, when populists deliberately target science and mainstream media with accusations of disinformation and bias, the public may become increasingly polarized on an epistemic

level. As a consequence, citizens may come to distrust democratic institutions and media, and may instead gravitate toward counter-factual alternative media sources and conspiracy theories.

By mapping the epistemic dimension of populist communication and connecting it to its effects on perceived factual relativism, this chapter aims to make an important contribution to the populism literature. Although the epistemic component of populism has been acknowledged in extant literature (e.g., Mede & Schäfer, 2020; Saurette & Gunster, 2011), we currently know little about how the emphasis on epistemic populism in communication may fuel factual relativism, thereby contributing to epistemic populism on a societal level. Taken together, our study explores how the flexible and chameleonic nature of populism has adjusted itself to the era of factual relativism and increasing concerns on disinformation—herewith revealing the potentially disruptive nature of communication that puts into question the legitimacy of established knowledge and institutions involved in informing the public.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptualizing Epistemic Populism

Populism can essentially be defined as the emphasis of an antagonism between ordinary people and corrupt elites, who allegedly oppose and harm the ordinary people's will (e.g., Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004). Populism has either been studied from a political party or actor-centered perspective or from a discursive or stylistic framework. The former framework postulates that certain political actors or parties may be classified as populist, whereas others are not. The stylistic or discursive approach, in contrast, presupposes that populism can be emphasized as a style or frame and that the central ideas of populism can be present to various degrees (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In line with this, I conceptualize populist communication as the framing or emphasis on a central divide between ordinary people and corrupt elites (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017). This frame can be used to add an interpretation to different issues, and may be used by different political and non-political actors to stress a social identity frame that distinguishes the ordinary people from corrupt and dishonest elite actors (Bos et al., 2020).

In line with scholars who have looked at the connection between truth and populism (e.g., Hameleers, 2022; Saurette & Gunster, 2011;

Waisbord, 2018), I argue that populist communication has taken on an epistemic dimension in recent years, especially in the aftermath of growing concerns about disinformation and the weaponization of fake news after the 2016 US. elections. Specifically, polarizing political figures and political parties such as Trump in the US, Baudet in the Netherlands and the AfD in Germany often use their direct communication channels to blame established media for spreading ‘fake news’—especially when established information is in conflict with their positions (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Conrad, in this volume). These accusations are congruent with a populist style of communication, as the conflict between an honest in-group and culpable elite actors is emphasized: The elites are allegedly to blame for misinforming and deceiving the ordinary people, thus causing harm to the powerless and honest people.

This illustrates how the divide between the people and the elites emphasized in populist communication may go beyond blame shifting to political elites: The mainstream media, scientists, experts, and other knowledge disseminators may be attributed blame for lying to the people, or deliberately presenting them with a fake narrative to hide reality (Hameleers et al., 2020). This strongly aligns with the ideas of a conspiracy narrative: The powerful and ‘evil’ elites are accused of being involved in a scheme that is meant to silence the people and maintain the power imbalance in society (e.g., Barkun, 2003). Especially in an information ecology where counter-factual narratives compete for attention with established accounts of events (Waisbord, 2018), populist messages that contain ‘fake news’ accusations may offer a credible interpretation of events. Hence, in times when facts have become more relative and the truth debatable on factual terms (Van Aelst et al., 2017), delegitimizing populist narratives may be persuasive for citizens who are no longer sure whom to trust or believe.

Populism’s connection to constructions of truth and reality has formerly been referred to as epistemic populism by Saurette and Gunster (2011). In their analysis of Canadian political talk radio, Saurette and Gunster (2011) concluded that the construction of legitimate truth claims in talk radio often takes on a populist form, which specifically means that the knowledge of the ordinary people and common sense are seen as legitimate forms of knowledge. At the same time, the knowledge disseminated by elites, experts, and established information sources is deemed illegitimate. In line with populism’s emphasis on the centrality of ordinary people, epistemic populism highlights that the first-hand experiences

and common sense of ordinary people are a more trustworthy indicator of reality than distant expert analyses or elite interpretations that may be corrupt.

This understanding of epistemic populism resonates with the forms of counter-knowledge found on alternative or hyper-partisan media platforms (Heft et al., 2019; Müller & Schulz, 2021; Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Hyper-partisan alternative media may be a receptive platform for the expression of epistemic populism as they are characterized by their anti-establishment perspective: These platforms disseminate truth claims that challenge or attack established knowledge, whilst postulating alternative truth claims that are in line with a populist perspective (Müller & Schulz, 2021; Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Given the anti-elite perspective of hyper-partisan media platforms that offer an alternative to conventional information sources, this study will explore constructions of epistemic populism on the hyper-partisan US platform Breitbart as a case study. Considering that this platform is known for its hyper-partisan perspective and anti-elite constructions (Hameleers & Yekta, 2023) as well as its popularity among especially right-wing populists (Müller & Schulz, 2021), I consider it an important likely case of epistemic populism. In addition, as this US-based platform has a wide reach in terms of unique monthly users, its constructions of reality may have an important role in shaping perceived factual relativism. Yet, it should be noted that the inclusion of one specific alternative and hyper-partisan media platform is not representative of the wider alternative media landscape, or regional variances in the construction of counter-factual truth claims. I use a case study to explore the construction of epistemic populism, and to showcase the variety of the ways in which alternative truth claims may be framed in opposition to established claims on truth, objectivity, and expert consensus. I raise the following exploratory research question for the case study presented in this chapter: How and to what extent is epistemic populism constructed on the hyper-partisan media platform Breitbart (RQ₁)?

EPISTEMIC POPULISM AND FACTUAL RELATIVISM

Next to mapping the nature of epistemic populism on hyper-partisan media, I aim to show whether and how such communication may fuel factual relativism among recipients. Does the populist emphasis on a divide between legitimate and illegitimate truth claims fuel the idea that

the truth is debatable, subjective, and open to interpretation? Extant literature on the effects of fake news accusations and similar labels delegitimizing the media has indicated that exposure to anti-media communication lowers trust in the media or factually accurate information (e.g., Egelhofer et al., 2022; Tandoc & Seet, 2022; Van Der Meer et al., 2023; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Specifically, Egelhofer et al. (2022) find that accusations of disinformation can lower trust in the targeted media outlet. For populist citizens, this may even spill over to general evaluations of the media's trustworthiness. In a similar vein, Tandoc and Seet (2022) find that different disinformation labels may impact perceived concerns about false information, and that explicit fake news labels can trigger perceived falsity and intentionality. Focusing specifically on misinformation exposure, Van der Meer et al (2023) find that messages that contain actual misinformation or an accusation of falsehoods lower trust in factually accurate information. Lastly, Van Duyn and Collier (2019) conclude that exposure to accusations of fake news in political discourse lowers news trust and reduces the accurate identification of real news.

Based on extant research on delegitimizing messages that blame the media, it can thus be concluded that such communication can undermine trust in accurate information. Taking this one step further, I expect that the epistemic populism—stressing the validity of common sense and people-centric experiences over established facts—can enhance perceived factual relativism. The underlying rationale is that exposure to populist information that cultivates distrust in established facts, expert knowledge, and the mainstream media may activate cynicism related to the universal status of facts. Similar to the mechanisms underlying the effects of anti-elite populist communication, such messages may cultivate a deprived in-group identity, herewith motivating people to strengthen their attachment to the threatened in-group (e.g., Bos et al., 2020). Exposure to the idea that the media or other knowledge disseminators lie to the honest people may strengthen the perceived epistemic cleavage between 'us and them,' contributing to the belief that truthfulness is a matter of debate and the conflicting and irreconcilable perspectives of the people versus the elite.

Although one could argue that exposure to populist communication mainly strengthens the belief that there is one truth, which is the alternative version of reality allegedly hidden from the ordinary people, I postulate that the effects of populism on the general population are different. Indeed, although people with prior beliefs aligning

with populism may rather be confirmed in their idea that the established media and other elite actors spread untruths, the populist delegitimization of established knowledge may have a different main effect on the general audience: It can be interpreted as undermining the value of scientific evidence, expertise, and authoritative knowledge. Therefore, as a consequence of being exposed to epistemic populism, recipients may become more cynical toward the idea that truthfulness and objectivity are the result of fixed and objective scientific principles and consensus, rather than a relative and subjective and biased reading of facts and knowledge. Attacks on established and authoritative knowledge should thus activate the perception that facts are relative, subjective, and part of biased or ideological constructions. Based on this, I introduce the following hypothesis: Exposure to epistemic populism augments perceived factual relativism (H1).

To answer the research question and the hypothesis, I rely on two data collections using different methods. First of all, a qualitative content analysis of the alternative hyper-partisan media platform Breitbart is conducted. The central aim of this first study is to explore how the theoretically outlined concept of epistemic populism is framed by an alternative media platform. As a second study, and based on the findings of the content analysis, I conducted an experiment in which the central features of epistemic populism were manipulated into a political communication setting. The aim of this second study was to investigate whether exposure to the central ideas of epistemic populism would reinforce or activate the interpretation that factual knowledge and expert interpretations are subjective and contingent upon biases and personal interpretations. After all, the populist attack on science, truth telling, and factual knowledge may undermine the idea of an objectively observable reality, and may cast doubt on the existence of hard facts or independent expert knowledge.

STUDY I: THE EXPLORATION OF EPISTEMIC POPULISM ON BREITBART

Methods

To better understand how epistemic populism is constructed, I analyze Breitbart as a ‘most likely’ case of an alternative media platform that caters to the needs of a populist audience (e.g., Müller & Schulz, 2021) whilst also containing strong anti-establishment and counter-factual narratives

(Heft et al., 2019). I specifically look at the post-Covid-19 period in order to capture a wide range of issues for which truth claims may follow an antagonistic and populist framework. For this reason, I analyzed a theoretical sample of original articles published on Breitbart's website in the period from the 1st of June 2022 to the 1st of June 2023. As our exploratory endeavor does not aim for a representative overview of themes, but rather a diverse set of narratives that are theoretically meaningful, the inclusion criteria were formulated based on diversity and relevance: A maximum variety of narratives and topics was included within the selected timeframe (i.e., climate change, immigration, gun control). As a starting point, I took an initial sample of 50 articles. To assess saturation, and to allow for a cyclic-iterative analysis process, these 50 articles were coded before another 50 articles were selected and coded. For the additional sample, I looked for different perspectives that could extend or disprove additional findings, and herewith help us to arrive at an exhaustive overview of the construction of truth claims within the framework of epistemic populism.

The selected articles were coded selectively. This means that the articles were first read in depth. After this round of familiarization, relevant segments of the data were arced and assigned open codes, following a grounded theory approach of data reduction (Charmaz, 2006). A segment of text was deemed relevant when it contained implicit or explicit references to truth claims, reality, objectivity, expertise, evidence, common sense, or other related themes that connected to RQ₁ in the broadest sense. The procedures of open coding followed an unstructured approach, in order to not impose meaning on the data during the first step of coding: descriptive labels that summarized the essence of the fragments were attached to the data (i.e. invoking public opinion to voice partisan disagreement and delegitimization; fake news accusation paired with mission statement alternative media). In the second step of focused coding, the open codes were reduced, merged, and (re)grouped: Relevant codes were made more central and stripped from specific context; codes that discussed variety on the same dimensions were grouped; and similar codes were merged. This step allowed us to see the essence of the data, and formed the basis for developing themes that are discussed below in the results section. These themes discuss the main variety within different categories that indicate epistemic populism as an overarching concept.

FINDINGS OF STUDY I

Quoting Public Opinion and the People's Feelings to Delegitimize the Opposition

In many hyper-partisan constructions of reality, the opinions and feelings of the ordinary people or the majority were used to legitimize truth claims congruent with a conservative ideology. In many cases, Breitbart selectively quoted results from public opinion data to indicate the weak support for liberals or their political positions: 'With the president set to showcase "Bidenomics" in a speech in Chicago, a new poll finds that only one in three US adults approve of his economic leadership. That 34 percent figure is even lower than his overall approval rating of 41 percent.' Next to referring to the majority of the ordinary people as evidence for bi-partisan truth claims, the feelings and sentiments of ordinary citizens were often used to legitimize hyper-partisan positions on immigration. As an example, in an article stating that British families had to move out of a military base to make room for 'alleged asylum seekers,' Breitbart included different quotes from appalled families:

British Military families have been left 'appalled' after they were given just a week's notice to leave their homes at a former airbase in Essex to make way for alleged asylum seekers. Speaking to Sky News, a member of one of the military families said: 'We've almost been moved off the base now before the asylum seekers move on. Originally we were given a good time period. It was a good couple of months. But over the last few weeks that's all shuffled.'

By referring to the personal and emotional narratives of ordinary citizens, and by emphasizing the legitimacy of partisan claims by selectively referring to congruent public opinion data and majority support, epistemic populism was constructed (RQ₁). Specifically, experts and elite interpretations of events were circumvented, whereas the ordinary people's common sense and truth claims were used to justify anti-liberal, anti-left, anti- 'woke' or other anti-establishment narratives.

Logical Fallacies and Selective Quoting of Evidence

Next to the emphasis on the experiences and common sense of ordinary people and the circumvention of experts and conventional evidence,

Breitbart's truth claims often contained logical fallacies. Specifically, congruent truth claims were constructed by only selectively quoting evidence, or by relativizing incongruent truth claims through unfair comparisons. As an example, to legitimize the conservative position that electric vehicles are part of a deceptive left-wing agenda, Breitbart discussed the safety risks of electrical vehicles. To make the point that electric vehicles are more dangerous than traditional vehicles, they selectively compared one of the smallest gasoline-fueled cars with one of the biggest electric trucks: 'The official, Jennifer Homendy, raised the issue in a speech in Washington to the Transportation Research Board when she pointed, by way as an example, to an electric GMC Hummer that weighs about 9,000 pounds with a battery pack that alone is 2,900 pounds—roughly the entire weight of a typical Honda Civic.' Although it is discussed as an example, the narrative compares vehicles from completely different categories (a small hatchback to a large SUV) to make the general point that electric vehicles are heavy and thus more dangerous.

In a similar vein, applied to the congruent conservative perspective on gun rights, Breitbart compared the deaths caused by guns to the deaths caused by car accidents to legitimize the truth claims that guns are not dangerous: 'CNN pushed gun control by citing accidental gun death figures for children but omitted the fact that car accidents kill 27 times more children.' Although this statement may be factually accurate, the accusation that a mainstream media outlet 'omitted facts on car accidents' is a logical fallacy in the sense that the statement was about the deaths of gun control, and not a comparison between the risks of firearms compared to other causes of death among children. Yet, by blaming the media for selectively leaving out factual information, an accusation of partisan bias was articulated.

Delegitimizing Conventional Knowledge and the Mainstream Media

Next to emphasizing the centrality of the people, populism revolves around the attribution of blame to out-groups. In epistemic populism, this could relate to the attribution of blame to the media, experts, or other sources of conventional knowledge dissemination. This anti-elitist perspective was also present in the reality constructions of Breitbart. In different instances, the elites were accused of silencing the ordinary people by limiting the freedom of speech: 'Hate speech laws currently going through the Irish parliament will see ordinary people treated like

‘drug dealers’ over their views, a Senator has said.’ The attribution of untruths to the elites also followed a partisan logic. For example, Breitbart devoted an entire article to ‘debunking the lies of Biden.’ In this article, Biden was accused of deliberately deceiving the people. Yet, most of the debunking messages themselves did not contain references to empirical evidence or relevant expert knowledge. The accusation of disinformation was constructed in a populist manner: Biden was accused of lying, and common sense was used to legitimize this claim.

Accusations of disinformation were also often targeted at the mainstream media or social media platforms. Social media companies were accused of censorship, and their efforts to combat disinformation were regarded as an intentional attempt to hide the ordinary people’s truth. Mainstream media channels, such as the BBC, were accused of spreading fake news, even if they admitted their mistakes after spreading potentially inaccurate information: ‘The fake news Tweet has since been deleted, but the BBC insisted it was an ‘honest mistake’ after the speech to the United Nations General Assembly in New York this Tuesday.’ The apologies of the BBC were regarded as ‘belated’ and their own claims on the honesty of their mistakes were refuted by pointing to the partisan bias of the media platform: ‘Clearly blaming the President for the conflict they inadvertently believed was coming, Britain’s BBC Tweeted that Donald Trump tells UN General Assembly ‘war will follow’ after his decision to re-impose sanctions on Iran.’

Interestingly, alternative media’s anti-establishment position and their opposition to mainstream media and the established order was explicitly emphasized by Breitbart, stressing that their role is to not act as amplifiers of the established media: ‘At the very least, consumers of alternative media—you know, our customers—expect us to not act as amplifiers for the establishment media. At the very least, if nothing else, alternative media should be a place where we are not the media’s toadies, where we do not unquestioningly spread MSM narratives.’

Here, we can also see an interesting connection between the theme related to references to public opinion data and the delegitimization of the media. More specifically, to emphasize the narrative that established media cannot be trusted, Breitbart referred to public opinion data that revealed the public’s low trust in the mainstream media, and the prominent perception among especially conservatives that the mainstream media deliberately deceives the people:

In other words, only one-quarter of the country believe the media are not guilty of intentionally spreading lies to mislead the American people. The partisan breakdown is even more revealing. A full 92 percent of Republicans believe the media intentionally mislead the public. Independents are not far behind, with 79 percent. Even a majority of Democrats, 52 percent, agree, with only 46 percent disagreeing.

These statistics were used to legitimize the antagonistic narrative that the mainstream media cannot be trusted, and that established media and journalists are involved in deliberately deceiving the people: ‘No fair-minded journalist can look at these numbers and not be blown away by the fact that the establishment media have so lost the trust of the American that a breathtaking 72 percent now believe (and for good reason) fake news is reported deliberately.’

Partisan Truth Claims

Confirming the relative and partisan nature of reality and truth claims, Breitbart explicitly referred to the conflict between the factual claims constructed by Democrats and the truth. More specifically, in the context of a discussion on gender rights and equality, the position that people can identify with a gender that is different from their biological identity was delegitimized by calling the Democrats’ position false facts and a ‘religion’ that you cannot disagree with without risking a violent reaction: ‘But for today’s Democrats elite and Democrat leaders, it’s not only not a fact, it is religion to them that you affirm that men can get pregnant and if you don’t say it, then you are responsible for violence. I mean, this is their line.’ In the same article, the claim was made that Democrats ‘do not believe’ that women exist. This position was referred to as crazy and opposed to reality: ‘They don’t believe there is any such thing as a woman, not really, and they think that if a biological man wants to claim to be a woman, hey, that’s fine, and we all have to accept it, or else we’re bigoted and violent. It’s just crazy.’

The Democrat Party and President Biden specifically were often delegitimized by referring to their truth claims as illegitimate or deliberately dishonest. In one instance, Biden was made to look incapable and stupid by referring to mistakes he made in a speech about the war in Ukraine: ‘According to a Bloomberg reporter, Biden also said ‘Iraq’ during a conversation on Tuesday about the Ukraine war.’ Although this attack on

Biden was rather implicit, Breitbart frequently referred to the false information disseminated by Democrats or Biden, or the deliberate attempt of opposed partisans to deceive the people. Conservative or Republican truth claims and positions were not delegitimized, whereas the factual claims of the Democrats were delegitimized or put into question. This shows that the epistemic populism expressed on Breitbart follows a partisan logic.

Exclusionist Reality Constructions

Extending the concept of epistemic populism, our analyses indicate that Breitbart's coverage emphasizes a right-wing populist narrative. Hence, next to the opposition between corrupt elites and the honest ordinary people, Breitbart consistently refers to immigrants as 'illegal aliens,' which confirms a right-wing populist construction of reality: 'Driver's licenses for illegal aliens are vital for the open borders lobby because when illegal aliens are pulled over by local police, driving without a driver's license is the first criminal charge that can put them in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody.'

In the content analyzed, the ordinary people's gut feelings, common sense, and emotions were often used to legitimize out-group hostility. Hence, the negative emotions of ordinary American citizens related to immigration were frequently referred to in order to legitimize the position that immigrants are undesired: 'But many residents were angered by their public spaces and tax dollars being handed over to illegals. 'It seems this whole thing was dumped on us,' one resident said, according to WGN-TV. 'We pay taxes in this district and we should have been told what's going on and why.' Thus, because ordinary US citizens experienced negative sentiments toward out-groups, a wider anti-immigration narrative was legitimized as a truth claim.

CONCLUSION OF STUDY I

The findings of the case study on the truth claims of alternative hyper-partisan media outlet Breitbart are congruent with the conceptualization of epistemic populism (Saurette & Gunster, 2011). The analysis specifically reveals that public opinion data and emotions of ordinary people are used as evidence to substantiate partisan and exclusionist truth claims. In the hyper-partisan construction of Breitbart's reality, immigrants and

Democrats are excluded or delegitimized, whereas the political and media elite that voices incongruent issue positions is referred to as ‘fake news’ or ‘uninformed.’ Extending existing conceptualizations of counter-media or epistemic populism communicated by alternative media (e.g., Heft et al., 2019; Saurette & Gunster, 2011), our qualitative analyses reveal that references to the ‘ordinary people’ and ‘common sense’ can be invoked by referring to the majority of citizens—which is corroborated by selectively referring to statistics of opinion polls. It can also be observed that the legitimization of the people’s truth claims and the delegitimization of elites is highly emotionalized: The frustration, anger, fear, or disappointment of the ordinary people targeted at the elites is often emphasized as evidence for people-centric truth claims, which aligns with the idea that populism is a highly emotionalized discourse (Hameleers et al., 2017).

STUDY 2: EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE ON THE EFFECTS OF EPISTEMIC POPULISM

The first study revealed that the style and construction of truth claims on alternative hyper-partisan media platforms may follow the logic of epistemic populism. Specifically, conventional expert knowledge and empirical facts were circumvented or attacked, whereas a people-centric construction of reality was foregrounded. To investigate whether the populist divide between people-centric truth claims and the delegitimization of conventional knowledge can result in perceptions of factual relativism, an experimental study was conducted. This second data collection aims to explore the consequences of epistemic populism for democracy, specifically related to the ideas of factual relativism (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2017). Can the populist delegitimization of science, established claims on truth and expert knowledge result in growing relativism, uncertainty, and perceived subjectivity of facts?

Methods of Study 2

An online experiment was conducted among US participants. Confirmed by the case study above of Breitbart, immigration was selected as an issue that is prominently covered in an anti-establishment manner by alternative media outlets. The experiment followed a simple between-subjects design: Participants were either exposed to a neutral control condition that reported on the facts of US immigration policies or an experimental

epistemic populism condition in which the antagonism between ordinary people and corrupt, lying elites was central. The topic of the experimental and control condition was kept similar. In line with the findings of the case study, the narrative of the experimental condition blamed the mainstream media and elites for deceiving the ordinary people. Participants were randomly assigned to the *control condition* or the *epistemic populism condition* (equal group sizes). Appendix 1 includes the stimuli.

The data for the experiment were collected by an external international research organization (Kantar Lightspeed). Based on a voluntary-opt in panel, a diverse sample of 169 participants was used for this study (80 participants were assigned to the control condition, 89 participants were assigned to the experimental condition). The sample reflects balanced and diverse representations across age categories (47.7% between 18–50 and 52.3% older than 50), gender (47.9% female), and education (51.5% higher/moderate and 48.5% lower educated). Inclusion criteria for participation in the study consisted of agreeing with the informed consent procedure and being a US citizen over 18 years old. The sample was also varied regarding ideological self-placement, although substantially more right-wing participants were sampled: 33.7% identified (mostly) as left-wing, and 66.3% as right-wing. The overrepresentation of right-wing participants is relevant to consider in this study, as the hyper-partisan message that contains a blame attribution to the media may resonate most with their existing political beliefs.

The central dependent variable of perceived factual relativism was measured with a battery of survey items developed for the purpose of the experiment. Specifically, seven different statements that tapped the extent to which participants believed that the truth was relative, malleable, and subject to political or partisan reasoning were developed (i.e., there is no common truth, multiple accounts of reality co-exist; the truth is a subjective interpretation of factual information; the truth is a subjective interpretation of factual information). Scores on the seven items (all measured on 7-point disagree-agree scales) were averaged to form a scale of perceived factual relativism ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.35$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.867$). The average is slightly higher than the midpoint of the scale, which indicates that, across the board, participants were moderately skeptical about the universal nature of facts and truthfulness.

After the measurement of the dependent variables, a manipulation check was included. To confirm that participants could correctly spot the difference between the neutral message and the epistemic populism,

I asked them to indicate whether the message talked about (1) basic facts about immigration (corresponding to the control condition) or (2) whether it contained an accusation to elites for deceiving the people (the epistemic populism condition). Independent samples t-test confirmed that the manipulation was successful: Participants in the control condition were significantly more likely to associate the message they saw with key facts on immigration ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.44$) than participants in the epistemic populism condition ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.40$); $t(155) = 2.16$, $p = 0.016$; 95% CI [0.041, 0.938]. In addition, participants exposed to epistemic populism were significantly more likely to associate the message with the emphasis on a cleavage between ordinary people and corrupt elites ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.81$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.87$); $t(155) = -4.11$, $p < 0.001$; 95% CI [-1.78, -0.63]. Overall, it can be concluded that participants correctly identified epistemic populism, and the difference between the experimental condition and the neutral control condition that simply reported factual information on the topic of immigration.

FINDINGS OF STUDY 2

Turning to the test of the main hypothesis that exposure to epistemic populism would trigger or activate perceptions of factual relativism (H1), I compared the mean scores on the measure of perceived factual relativism between the mean control group and the epistemic populism group (the treatment). The findings of an independent samples t-test in which the conditions were included as independent variable and the averaged perceived factual relativism score as dependent variable revealed no significant differences across conditions. In other words, although participants in the experimental condition reported slightly higher levels of perceived factual relativism ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.34$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.38$), this difference was not substantial or significant ($t(155) = 2.16$, $p = 0.296$; 95% CI [-0.55, 0.31]). Hypothesis 1 cannot be supported based on these findings. In contrast to the expectations, showing people a message in which established knowledge was attacked and undermined, and contrasted to a people-centric interpretation of reality, did not correspond to stronger beliefs about the subjective and biased nature of reality and truth claims.

To explore whether the lack of effects still holds when we explore differences across groups that are more or less vulnerable to populist

communication, for example, based on prior populist attitudes, media distrust or ideological alignment, a series of regression analyses was conducted. I found no significant interaction effect between exposure to epistemic populism and existing populist beliefs ($B = -0.06$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = 0.480$). In addition, there were no significant interaction effects with political ideology ($B = -0.06$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = 0.547$) or media distrust ($B = 0.02$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = 0.839$). This indicates that perceived factual relativism is a rather stable trait that is not easily affected by exposure to a single populist message that delegitimizes the elites and their truth claims. Thus, even among people likely to support populist truth claims, or oppose such interpretations, there are no effects of exposure to messages that attack established truth claims.

OVERALL DISCUSSION

In the current digital media ecology, competing interpretations of truth and reality compete for attention among a fragmented audience. At the same time, populist politicians often attack and delegitimize the truth claims of established media, politicians, and scientists (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Conrad, in this volume; Lovc & Mahmutovic, in this volume). In this setting, it may be extremely difficult for citizens to discern true from false information. In addition, the populist attack on knowledge and established truths may make people uncertain about which ‘facts’ to believe and support, given that alternative claims on reality abound online. As an example, on social media platforms, the truth claim that COVID-19 is a virus originating from China was accompanied by the alternative claim that it was a biological weapon constructed in a lab by evil elites. When both alternative versions on the same issue are paired with seemingly authentic expert references and legitimized with empirical evidence, how can citizens make a well-informed decision on what is true?

This chapter argues that the populist attack on expert knowledge, established facts, and other institutions of knowledge dissemination can be harmful for democracy. Hence, although the truth may not be regarded as a fixed entity, but rather a construct that depends on perspective and context, some things are observably true whereas other things are demonstrably not supported by empirical facts or expert consensus. Yet, this understanding of truth and facticity is undermined by recent expressions of right-wing populism that attack incongruent knowledge and evidence whilst presenting alternative truth claims that are not in line with

scientific consensus. This populist interpretation has been referred to as epistemic populism, which we can understand as the emphasis on people-centric truth claims contrasted with an attack on established sources of scientific and expert-based knowledge (Saurette & Gunster, 2011).

Considering that populism obtained an epistemic dimension across various parts of the globe, this chapter explored the concept of epistemic populism in terms of its content and effects. As the delegitimization of established knowledge and the accusation of fake news may lower people's trust in real information (e.g., van der Meer et al., 2023), it is crucial to assess how epistemic struggles are communicated on counter-media, and how the divide between the people's honesty and the lies of the elites may influence people's own understanding of the value of facts and truths. Hence, the delegitimization of truth claims may contribute to factual relativism, and herewith erode the epistemic basis of deliberate democracy (van Aelst et al., 2017).

Based on an exploratory qualitative content analysis of the hyper-partisan platform Breitbart in the US, we can see that the divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites central to the classical definition of populism (e.g., Mudde, 2004) can be extended in an age of post-truth politics and factual relativism. Hence, in the current (digital) landscape where incongruent truths are often dismissed as opinions or alternative interpretations (van Aelst et al., 2017), fake news accusations delegitimize conventional knowledge (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019) and disinformation is presented alongside established information (e.g., Waisbord, 2018), populist communication emphasizes a specific alternative epistemology of truth and objectivity. As illustrated with our case study, this people-centric epistemology considers the ordinary people's emotions and public opinion as key markers of objectivity and truth. Hence, congruent claims on truthfulness are often legitimized by referring to the feelings of ordinary citizens, or the outcome of opinion polls stressing the majority of beliefs supporting the truth claim.

This epistemology is further characterized by the delegitimization of established knowledge disseminators, such as mainstream media channels, opposed political elites, or institutions and large corporations. Similar to research on counter-media (e.g., Heft et al., 2019; Ylä-Anttila) or epistemic populism in alternative media (Saurette & Gunster, 2011), we found that the establishment was often blamed for not representing the people's truth, or even for deliberately hiding reality from the ordinary people. These accusations often went beyond fake news or disinformation

accusations. Hence, extending literature on the centrality of disinformation accusations in right-wing populism (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), the elites were often blamed for offering a biased representation of reality by selectively quoting facts that supported their position. In addition, the analysis of the alternative media platform Breitbart revealed a strong exclusionist and radical right-wing construction of reality: Immigrants and non-native citizens were excluded from the honest ordinary people, and were not included in the legitimization of truth claims.

The populist epistemology was, however, not devoid of references to expert knowledge and evidence. However, evidence was quoted selectively and out of context. In that sense, expert knowledge and empirical data were used insofar as they were instrumental to the construction of hyper-partisan truth claims—a finding that is congruent with existing research on the epistemology of alternative and hyper-partisan media in the US (e.g., Hamelaers & Yekta, 2023). This makes epistemic populism difficult to detect at times: As the people-centric epistemology is not based on the complete circumvention of conventional claims of truthful information and objectivity, for example, by referring to data from public opinion polls or by claiming expert consensus, epistemic populism may be highly persuasive and credible for media users.

Despite this premise, the experimental study did not find any effect of exposure to epistemic populism on perceived factual relativism. Hence, compared to a neutral control condition stating basic facts on US immigration, a message containing epistemic populism to frame immigration did not activate the belief that facts are subject to interpretation or manipulation. Although the perception of factual relativism strongly correlated with populist attitudes, media distrust and a right-wing ideology, our findings lend support to the idea that factual relativism is a stable trait that is not easy to influence by exposure to a single message. On the one hand, this can be approached optimistically: Although polarizing figures and right-wing populists may deliberately try to delegitimize knowledge disseminators (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), they may not succeed in further augmenting these beliefs among the general population. Another explanation is that not the idea of factual relativism, but rather the confirmation that the resonating universal beliefs in truth, is strengthened by populist communication. Hence, exposure to populist ideas may strengthen the belief that people-centric and anti-elite perspectives represent credible interpretations of reality, and that conventional statements of reality are invalid. However, we do not find any indirect effects that

such ideas on reality are affected more by people with prior populist attitudes, which contradicts the idea of fostering a universal perspective on reality based on exposure to congruent epistemic populism.

On the other hand, approaching the null effects less optimistically, the already high averages of perceived factual relativism in our sample indicate that people in general tend to perceive facts as subjective and a matter of opinion. Hence, people in general may have lost their faith in established sources of factual information and have come to accept the terms of post-truth politics and factual relativism. This is in line with the salience of concerns related to disinformation in the current digital information landscape (e.g., Newman et al., 2023). Hence, many people are very concerned about mis- and disinformation, and these concerns may not be representative of the actual (low) levels of disinformation (e.g., Acerbi et al., 2022; Knuutila et al., 2022).

This study has a number of limitations. First, both the exploratory content analysis and the experiment were very limited in scope: They contained a case study of one hyper-partisan platform and one message of epistemic populism, which makes it difficult to generalize to the multifaceted and diverse setting of counter-media or populist communication. Different accusations of fake news may have different effects (e.g., Tandoc & Seet, 2022), and our focus on just one delegitimizing message and one issue may overlook these nuances. In addition, alternative media across settings may apply different epistemologies: As alternative media is an umbrella term, it may also relate to left-wing media that criticize the establishment, or media that are closer to conventional truth claims and expert references in their coverage. Thus, we cannot extend the concept of epistemic populism to all alternative media platforms. That being said, many alternative media and populist communication across the Global North and South take on a counter-factual epistemic perspective. Related to this, the limited geographical scope of this project may be considered as another limitation. We focused on the US, where the weaponization of fake news has taken center stage in politics after the 2016 US elections. This may partially explain why we did not find any effects of epistemic populism on factual relativism: people may have already been desensitized to this frame that permeated the bipartisan nature of political and media discourse.

Despite these limitations, I believe that the exploration of the concept of epistemic populism applied to alternative counter-factual media is

extremely relevant in the context of increasing concerns about disinformation, growing distrust in empirical and scientific evidence, and the cultivation of people-centric sentiments by the populist radical right.

APPENDIX I: STIMULUS MATERIALS

1. Control

Key Facts About US Immigration Policies

BY OUR EDITORIAL OFFICE

The US has lifted restrictions established early in the coronavirus pandemic that drastically reduced the number of visas issued to immigrants. The number of people who received a green card declined from about 236,000 in the second quarter of the 2020 fiscal year (January to March) to under 78,000 in the third quarter (April to June). By comparison, in the third quarter of fiscal 2019, nearly 266,000 people received a green card.

Overall, more than 35 million lawful immigrants live in the US; most are American citizens. Many live and work in the country after being granted lawful permanent residence, whilst others receive temporary visas available to students and workers. In addition, roughly 1 million unauthorized immigrants have temporary permission to live and work in the US through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals and Temporary Protected Status programs.

2. Epistemic Populism

Failing Mainstream Media Deceive Ordinary Citizens About Immigration Policies

BY OUR EDITORIAL OFFICE

The US has lifted restrictions established early in the coronavirus pandemic that drastically reduced the number of visas issued to immigrants. At least, the established media want us to believe that immigration is declining. They deliberately hide the fact that immigrants allowed to enter our country illegally are increasingly allowed to profit from our welfare. They conceal the fact that immigrants receive more welfare than native US citizens who need to receive support most in times of the crisis we are facing.

The mainstream media make it seem that the number of visas issued reduced, whilst in fact our country offers unlimited support to immigrants who come here to profit from our wealth. They receive better housing, free healthcare benefits, and are more likely to be supported when they cannot find work due to the pandemic. This situation once more shows that the mainstream media do not care for ordinary native citizens, and rather support elitist voices in society. Urgent action is needed!

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Refusing to Be Silenced: Critical Journalism, Populism and the Post-truth Condition

Maximilian Conrad 

INTRODUCTION

Background

Against the backdrop of populist actors' efforts to delegitimize 'mainstream media' (Bos et al., 2023; Conrad, 2023; Egelhofer et al., 2021; Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Sehl et al., 2022; Lischka, 2021), this chapter addresses the implications of journalists' experiences of physical and verbal abuse and intimidation for the development of political culture in a liberal democracy. The overall aim of this volume is to discuss post-truth populism as a potentially new political paradigm, characterized to a significant extent by the declining role of facts and truthfulness in politics (Newman, 2019, 2023). This development is intimately linked to the resurgence of populism in liberal democracies. The present chapter contributes to this overarching ambition by drawing attention to a somewhat overlooked aspect of post-truth politics, i.e., the role of populists' efforts to fundamentally *delegitimize*—as opposed to merely critique—mainstream media by branding them as 'fake news', 'lying press', or 'system media'. Such efforts are viewed here as creating the context in

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which verbal and physical abuse and intimidation of journalists play out. As such, they are seen as being intended to *silence* the voice of critical journalism in liberal democracy, thereby imposing a singular version of truth rather than enriching political debate by providing space for otherwise un- or overheard perspectives.

This perspective on the role of populists in silencing critical journalists is essential in informing discussions on post-truth politics. On the one hand, the concept of post-truth politics refers to an ‘epistemic crisis of democracy’ (Dahlgren, 2018; see also Chambers, 2020), suggesting an erosion of commonly accepted standards for ascertaining facts and telling fact from fiction. It is not simply the case that facts (and truth) no longer matter (sufficiently) in political discourse, but rather that the trustworthiness of those who establish and/or convey the facts has become increasingly contentious (see also Harsin, in this volume). More fundamentally, post-truth politics hinges on an epistemic problem in the sense of a fundamental lack of understanding of how facts are established (through the provision of evidence and falsifiable propositions), including the misunderstanding that facts—once established—are *permanent* and do not change in light of new evidence/observations. And on a related note, *truth itself* has become increasingly contentious and contested, as different actors claim to know the facts and speak the truth and accuse other actors of lying and/or withholding the truth. Against this backdrop, populist politicians frequently draw on the distinction between *elite lies* and *popular truths* (Conrad, 2023; Waisbord, 2018) to claim that they know the truth that the mainstream media are withholding from the people. The point to be made in this chapter is, however, that, far from being meant to enrich efforts to find the truth by offering more and different perspectives, populist efforts to discredit and delegitimize mainstream journalism are intended merely to *impose* one highly specific version of (allegedly popular) truth by *silencing* any contending perspectives, including those conveyed by critical journalists.

Aim and Research Questions

In this chapter, this dynamic is explored by discussing the development of the post-truth condition from the vantage point of journalists who, in carrying out their work, have been exposed to various forms of verbal and physical abuse and intimidation. The chapter explicitly addresses the role

of populist actors/politicians in this context. Even though such politicians are hardly (if ever) the ones involved in such acts, our interview data clearly underline a connection between the discursive delegitimation of mainstream journalism (Bos et al., 2023; Conrad, 2023; Egelhofer et al., 2021) and acts of verbal and physical abuse and intimidation as they play out both in the online and offline world, for instance in protests or demonstrations. Against this backdrop, this chapter asks the following research questions:

1. What impact do experiences of verbal and physical abuse and intimidation have on the work of journalists and their assessment of the state of journalism in liberal democracy?
2. What is their assessment of the (presumed) link between verbal and physical abuse and intimidation and populist efforts to delegitimize mainstream journalism?
3. What are the consequences for liberal democracy in terms of the development of post-truth political culture—and to what extent does this mark the advent of post-truth populism as a new political paradigm?

Methodological Approach

Against the backdrop of a theoretical discussion on the connection between post-truth politics and populist efforts to delegitimize mainstream journalism, the chapter's empirical analysis is based entirely on semi-structured interviews with journalists representing important political shows on both private and public TV stations in Germany. The interviews took place between the autumn of 2023 and the spring of 2024 (see section "[Journalists' Experiences of Physical and Verbal Abuse and Intimidation](#)" for further details) and involved journalists who have covered and/or reported on demonstrations against, e.g., German governments' (at the national or federal level) handling of the Covid pandemic. In the interviews, the respondents were asked about their experiences of physical and verbal abuse and intimidation as well as about their assessment of the impact of such abuse on the role of journalism in liberal democracy, in general, and on their own journalistic work, in particular (see the complete interview guide in Appendix 1).

Organization of the Chapter

Following this introduction, the following section “[Post-truth Politics and the Populist Assault on Mainstream Journalism](#)” discusses the current state of the literature on post-truth politics in relation to the chapter’s research questions. Although there is an emerging literature on populist efforts to delegitimize mainstream journalism, the significance of such efforts is not addressed sufficiently in the more specific literature on post-truth politics. Beyond identifying this as a gap, this section also presents the argument that the experiences of journalists do not figure prominently enough in empirical analyses of post-truth politics. The third section presents the findings of the interview study, drawing attention to (a) the interviewed journalists’ experiences of various forms of physical and verbal abuse and intimidation, (b) their assessment of the impact of such abuse on their own journalistic work and on the state and role of journalism in liberal democracy, and (c) their assessment of the role of populism in this context. The fourth section returns to the chapter’s overarching theoretical question, i.e., what the findings on efforts to silence critical journalists contribute to our understanding of the extent to which the populist assault on the institution of journalism constitutes a step towards a new *post-truth populist* political paradigm.

POST-TRUTH POLITICS AND THE POPULIST ASSAULT ON MAINSTREAM JOURNALISM

The last few years have witnessed the emergence of a considerable literature on post-truth politics. Despite an at least partially *justified* unease about the term’s lack of precision, the concept appears to stick in academic as well as wider public discourse. This lack of precision stems at least in part from the fact that the concept is used to denote a whole range of phenomena that, while certainly interlinked, are and should be kept distinct from one another (e.g., Chambers, 2020).¹ In terms of positioning this chapter within the literature on post-truth politics, its aim is to contribute to the strand of the post-truth politics literature that

¹ For instance, the concept of post-truth politics tends to refer to lies and misleading statements made by a certain brand of populist politician, but at the same time also covers instances of inadvertent mis- as well as deliberate disinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), and even efforts by external/foreign actors to disseminate false information for malicious purposes, i.e., to interfere in domestic politics, e.g., election campaigns.

is situated within the field of political theory and sees post-truth politics, first and foremost, as a development in political culture (Conrad & Hálfðanarson, 2023; Van Dyk, 2022; García-Gutián, in this volume). This chapter therefore speaks to earlier work that has emphasized the presumably changing status and/or symbolic authority of the truth in political discourse (MacMullen, 2020; McIntyre, 2018; Newman, 2019, 2022). As Simone Chambers has put it, ‘post-truth is about citizens’ *attitudes* towards the truth’ (Chambers, 2020, p. 149; Strandbrink, in this volume). It is this attitudinal component that creates the conditions in which certain politicians can blatantly disregard the facts (or lie) *and get away with it*. To some extent, this is connected to a ‘diminishing role of facts and analysis in public life’ (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018), but it is fundamentally also about the authority to define what constitutes facts and how facts are established in the first place. Drawing on Hannah Arendt, the point has been made that politics requires a factual basis and that, indeed, politics becomes impossible to the extent that it lacks a shared factual basis (Hyvönen, 2018; Newman, 2019; Van Dyk, 2022; cf. Ólafsson, in this volume).

However, it has also been pointed out that the discourse of post-truth politics oversimplifies the extent to which facts can claim objectivity (Monsees, 2020, 2023; see also Van Dyk, 2022). This argument is also quite important in developing approaches to dealing with the problem of post-truth politics, not least in regulatory terms: whether to regulate (and possibly prohibit) the dissemination of disinformation depends essentially on the ability to determine *objectively* whether something is factually correct or not. Whether or not ‘bound up with a call for radical positivism, that is, value-free access to empirical facts’ (Van Dyk, 2022, p. 38), this kind of decision nonetheless comes with the risk of potentially crossing over into censorship or curtailing freedom of speech/expression (cf. Bouza García & Oleart, 2023). In fact, the argument has been made only the most banal facts can be held to be objectively true, e.g., the size of the crowd at Donald Trump’s inauguration ceremony (e.g., Vogelmann, 2018). As a consequence, only the most banal of factually incorrect statements are easily ‘debunked’ and/or corrected. While this criticism is certainly valid, it is enormously important to avoid drawing the conclusion that the relativization of facts—or maybe better, the increasingly blurry lines between fact and opinion (Van Dyk, 2022)—is *not* a significant challenge to the functioning of a democratic public sphere. What is at stake in the discussion on post-truth politics is ultimately the very

idea of deliberation in the democratic public sphere, which necessitates a commonly accepted factual basis.

Apparently, the link between facts and evidence needs to be clarified much better. Even if we adopt the premise that a radical positivism in the sense of value-free access to empirical facts is impossible (Van Dyk, 2022), it should go without saying that facts are *not* arbitrary statements without any supporting empirical evidence. But just as supporting evidence can change, so can facts—they are not established at one time and claim permanent validity. This point is closely connected to the populist distinction between elite lies and popular truths (Conrad, 2023; Waisbord, 2018). At least at some level, this distinction is based on conspiratorial thinking that facts are imposed by political, cultural, or scientific elites, and that they are not allowed to be contradicted by rival observations or, indeed, *alternative facts*. But *alternative* though they may be, the problem with alternative facts is clearly that they are not facts in the first place unless they are empirically substantiated. Post-truth politics, then, is essentially a form or style of politics that breaks with the idea that we need to relate to established facts in political discourse. We can challenge those facts through the provision of new evidence, but we cannot disregard the facts and make up our own. In a nutshell, we can thus make the Arendtian argument that politics requires a shared understanding/acceptance of facts—a public infrastructure, so to speak (Hyvönen, 2018)—and still be reconciled with the notion that facts are necessarily falsifiable and thus cannot claim permanent validity.

This argument is more or less directly linked to populism's antagonistic relationship towards mainstream media/journalism. Drawing on the binary distinction between elite lies and popular truths, populists make mainstream media out to be part of the corrupt liberal elite that imposes certain facts on the people. Consequently, post-truth politics is very much a struggle about the authority to define the truth *against* the very elites that have imposed certain truths on the people by only allowing certain facts while disallowing any alternative facts (cf. Waisbord, 2018). The misguided view of facts as *imposed by elites* onto the people is important, and with it the increasingly blurry line between fact and opinion. Post-truth populist discourse tends to draw on the allegation that only certain perspectives are allowed in public debate, but fundamentally also on the existence of *alternative* perspectives that need to be given voice and that must not be ignored by the establishment. Populism's antagonistic relationship towards mainstream media thus even entails an emancipatory

claim in that it claims to enhance and broaden democratic discourse by adding alternative perspectives. However, this presumably emancipatory ambition stands in stark contrast to the reality of mainstream journalists' experiences of verbal and physical abuse and intimidation.

In this regard, there is a certain gap in the literature on post-truth politics that needs to be addressed. While considerable emphasis is placed on the impact that post-truth populists have already had on political culture, the delegitimation and attempted silencing of critical journalism in the creation of the post-truth condition has not been adequately explored. Some emphasis has been placed on questions connected to trust in and demand for quality journalism (Michailidou et al., 2023; Michailidou & Trenz, 2021; Verbalyte et al., 2023). A number of publications have also highlighted the role of populist politicians in fueling resentment against mainstream journalism (Bos et al., 2023; Conrad, 2023; Egelhofer et al., 2021; Wright, 2021). Furthermore, the actual voice of journalists who have experienced physical and verbal abuse and intimidation from populists and their supporters has not found expression in research on post-truth politics. Connected to this, the link between populist efforts to mobilize resentment against mainstream journalism and physical as well as verbal abuse and intimidation against journalists needs to be better understood. The main aim of this chapter is to contribute to filling this gap.

JOURNALISTS' EXPERIENCES OF PHYSICAL AND VERBAL ABUSE AND INTIMIDATION

Details of the Interviews

Selection/Recruitment of Respondents

For the interviews, we contacted journalists working for important media outlets on German television, i.e., the political magazines *Monitor*, *Panorama*, *Kontraste*, and *Spiegel TV*. The first three are produced by different regional broadcasting companies that are part of the association of German public-service broadcasters ARD.² These political magazines

² German public-service broadcasting consists primarily of two main broadcasting companies, i.e. the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der*

are aired every third Tuesday and Thursday night. They were purposively selected because of their prominence in the German TV landscape; they are very well known due to the simple fact that all three have been around already since the 1960s.³ Similarly, the hosts of the respective shows (two of which were interviewed for this study) are exceptionally prominent and, as a matter of fact, frequently targeted/singled out as figureheads of what politicians of the right-wing populist *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) refer to as ‘lying press’ or ‘system media’. Correspondingly, the political magazines themselves are construed as part and parcel of these system media, which is why it is quite common for far-right politicians to point out the presence of camera crews from these shows in an effort to whip up tensions among the participants at political rallies or other types of events. Furthermore, the two hosts who were interviewed for this study are among those journalists who, along with scientists and political figures, were frequently depicted in prisoners’ uniforms on posters displayed, e.g., at protests in the context of the Covid pandemic, suggesting that they should be imprisoned for their role in misleading or misinforming the German public.

In addition to these three public-service TV shows, the fourth political magazine included here (Spiegel TV) can be accessed via the website of the Spiegel newsmagazine, but its features are also broadcast on various German TV channels, including public-service channels. Moreover, its affiliation with the Spiegel newsmagazine makes it part of the alleged mainstream liar press—and references to the presence of Spiegel TV reporters at populist events have the same effect in terms of whipping up tensions as their public-service counterparts.

The respondents in the interviews perform different roles in their respective organizations. Two are hosts and, indeed, editorial *heads* of the respective shows; they were selected primarily due to their prominence

Bundesrepublik Deutschland (ARD) and the *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen* (ZDF). The former is an association of nine regional broadcasting companies and operates both television (national and regional) and radio stations, whereas the latter only produces television. In addition, German public-service broadcasting also includes the nationwide radio station *Deutschlandradio*.

³ The oldest of the three shows is *Panorama*, which has been broadcast by the *Norddeutscher Rundfunk* (NDR) in Hamburg since as early as 1961. Its counterpart *Monitor* at the *Westdeutscher Rundfunk* (WDR) in Cologne started in 1965, while *Kontraste* at the *Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg* (RBB, previously *Sender Freies Berlin*, SFB) has been around since 1968.

and the fact that they are frequently singled out as symbols representing/personifying what is construed as the left-liberal liar press. In addition, we interviewed reporters from the different outlets that had covered some of the major demonstrations in various German cities during the Covid pandemic. The respondents were purposively selected on the basis of instances of verbal and/or physical abuse that were visible in their coverage of such events, or because they have previously been singled out at protests as protagonists of the alleged mainstream *liar press*. The study includes a total of nine interviews, including three with respondents from *Spiegel TV* and the online version of *Der Spiegel*, three with respondents from *Kontraste*, one with the host and editorial leader of *Panorama*, and one with the host and editorial leader of *Monitor*. In order to provide more context, the study also includes an additional interview with a representative of the German Journalists' Union (DJU) that is part of the public services union Ver.di. This interview took place in Berlin in May 2023. The respondents were contacted with a formal contact letter sent out by e-mail that explained the purpose of the interviews.

Execution of the Interviews

The majority of the interviews took place in person in September 2023 in Hamburg (Panorama and Spiegel TV), November 2023 in Cologne (Monitor), and in March 2024 in Berlin (Kontraste). Due to scheduling issues, two more interviews needed to be conducted online, specifically one interview with a Hamburg-based freelance journalist working *inter alia* for the online edition of *Der Spiegel* and one interview with a journalist working for *Kontraste*. These two interviews took place in September 2023 and March 2024, respectively. Apart from these two online interviews, all interviews were conducted in the respective respondents' offices in Hamburg, Cologne and Berlin. All interviews were conducted in the respondents' native language German, which is also the native language of the interviewer and of the research assistant who transcribed the interviews. The interviews took between 45 and 75 minutes, were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed by the research assistant. Additional notes were taken by the interviewer, who is also the author of this chapter. The interview questions can be found in Appendix 1 at the end of the chapter.

Analysis of the Interviews

Following the transcription of the interviews, the author carried out a thematic analysis with the help of the MaxQDA software. Using an inductive approach, the main themes addressed in the interviewees' responses were identified in successive rounds of coding, starting with an initial paraphrasing of all relevant parts of the material, followed by a gradual condensing of the paraphrases and, finally, a definition of the identified themes. In this process, four broad themes emerged that then guided the interpretation of findings: the respondents addressed (a) the actors that commonly attacked journalists; (b) the forms of abuse that they have experienced themselves; (c) the impact of such attacks on their journalistic work; and (d) their assessment of the development of the situation of journalism/journalists in Germany in light of such experiences. Within these four main themes, a number of subthemes also emerged that are addressed in the presentation of findings below.

Presentation of Findings

Actors

Regarding the question of whether there are any specific groups that journalists, based on their own experience, consider to be particularly prone to engage in verbal and/or physical abuse and/or intimidation, the findings are fairly mixed. According to the interviewed journalists, only one group stands out in particular, i.e., individuals identifiable as part of the far right (Georg Restle/Monitor, Jannis G., and Spiegel TV, R2). One respondent mentioned that 'the radical right and Neonazis are always a threat' and that 'when you recognize them, it's always clear that you need to be a bit careful', adding that 'this was especially the case in the context of the Corona protests, that there were Neonazis openly marching along' (Jannis G.). Another respondent pointed out that 'when it comes to more violent or somehow more aggressive reactions, then you definitely have more of that from rightwing radicals, or Neonazis or so', but added that 'in principle, aggression can come from anyone' (Spiegel TV, R2).

However, the overarching impression from the interviews is that it is not necessarily a particular group of people (defined in terms of ideology or worldview), but rather specific types of personalities that journalists would expect physical or verbal abuse from, e.g., individuals who (appear to be) emotional, aggressive, and frustrated (Spiegel TV, R1).

One respondent pointed out that ‘if I am at a protest (...), I would be able to say ‘okay, these ones will be aggressive’; but there are also those who you *think* are just normal people and then they yell the most insane stuff at you’ (Spiegel TV, R2). Several respondents pointed out the—by now well-documented (e.g., Frei et al., 2021; Koos, 2021)—heterogeneity of participants of protests against Covid restrictions/measures in Germany. One respondent spoke of ‘overlaps between Corona protests and the radical right or Neonazi organizations and especially the extreme right’, adding that ‘Neonazis are very hostile to the press⁴ because to them, everything is somehow leftwing press’ (Jannis G.). Another respondent also pointed out that there was a certain spillover from Corona-related protests to the pro-Russian ‘peace demonstrations’ in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and ultimately also to the protests against the war in Gaza (Kontraste, R2).

Forms of Abuse/Assaults

Regarding the forms of abuse and intimidation that the interviewed journalists have experienced, *death threats* are strikingly common. In some cases, these have remained fairly abstract (see below), but there have also been cases of more prominent journalists (such as the two interviewed hosts and editorial leaders of the selected TV shows) where the police found death threats to be serious and credible. One host spoke of having received a letter threatening to kill her and her children if she were to go on the air the next day. Another host was among those who received a death threat from the so-called NSU2.0.⁵ But death threats were also directed to lesser known journalists, albeit in a less concrete form. One respondent spoke of a protester who said that ‘when all this is over, *heads will roll* and also those of the press’ and that ‘this will happen when people realize that you’re a journalist’ (Spiegel TV, R1; emphasis added).

Physical Abuse and Intimidation

⁴ „pressefeindlich“ in the German original.

⁵ NSU2.0 was the signature used under a large number of hate mails and death threats sent by right-wing extremists to individuals and organizations in Germany and Austria since 2018 (cf. König & Jäckle, 2023). The name alludes to the murders of the terror group *Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund* (NSU) that killed nine people between 2000 and 2006.

In addition to death threats, all interviewed journalists have also experienced different forms of physical abuse and intimidation. One of the interviewed journalists has even experienced an attack so brutal that it was simply a matter of luck that no one was killed or severely injured. While covering a protest against the war in Gaza in Berlin in October 2023, the journalist and his team had a big boulder thrown directly at them from a balcony, injuring one of the two members of their security detail on the leg. In the words of the respondent,

we needed to retreat a little, simply because we needed a break, we needed to regroup and discuss something. So we were standing off to the side a bit, and then someone threw a boulder onto us from a balcony [...]. And it hit one of our security people on the leg or the foot. [...] If it had been thirty centimeters to the left, it would have hit him in the head. When you're hit in the head by a boulder like that, there is a good chance that you end up paralyzed or possibly even dead. It wasn't just a little stone [...] and I think we also saw where it was thrown from, it was really people on a balcony. [...] Someone really wanted to... they saw that we had a camera. [...] We were also not close to the police, we were alone and someone wanted to show us what they think of us.

Many other respondents spoke of other forms of physical and verbal intimidation. This has taken the form of 'people running towards journalists with the clear intent to destroy the camera or to use other forms of physical violence' or 'coming and standing very close to you in a threatening manner' (Georg Restle). Other respondents spoke of groups of people ('mobs') driving them into a corner (Spiegel TV, R1), forming a circle around them so that they could no longer get away (Spiegel TV, R2),⁶ or 'yelling into your ear so that you cannot hear anything anymore' (Spiegel TV, R1). One respondent recounted an incident where someone took her hat 'and then there were—all of a sudden—three people directly behind and all very close, almost all men. And then things got very tight and then the police came' (Spiegel TV, R1). Along the same lines, one respondent highlighted a threatening experience that he had had when

⁶ One respondent recalled a situation where 'we were the only camera crew that was still there. With a big camera and sound, so that we were the only ones that were clearly recognizable, and a kind of circle had formed around us. We could neither go inside, so we couldn't move any more'.

trying to interview a leading figure of the right-wing extremist ‘Free Saxons’ in the state of Saxony. As the respondent recalled:

At one point I was doing sort of an interview with the head of these ‘Free Saxons’, like the leader figure. And [...] at first it’s just the two of us, but then maybe five more people join, then at some point ten people come, then 20, then 30, and in the end, [...] I would say there are 30-40 people surrounding me. And they are shouting something at you, they’re commenting on every question. Which doesn’t bother me, [...] but still. They’re holding their cameras into your face the whole time, they’re filming everything, which they can by all means do, but it is still an attempt, I think, it’s also a kind of intimidation. (Kontraste, R2)

Verbal Abuse and Intimidation

All three female interview respondents reported experiences of sexualized verbal abuse (Anja Reschke/Panorama; Spiegel TV, R1; Spiegel TV, R2). One mentioned that ‘you are insulted as soon as you are recognized’ (Georg Restle/Monitor), while others spoke about the verbal abuse that they have received via e-mail, text messages and even threatening letters (Anja Reschke/Panorama; Spiegel Online). Some spoke of the dehumanizing character of such abuse, which often take the form of personal attacks where journalists are referred to as ‘media whores’ (Georg Restle/Monitor). One respondent spoke of the lack of civility when one tries to argue with people on social media, saying that such efforts result in virtually ‘immediate shitstorms’ and describing Twitter (at the time) as something ‘like a littered picnic area,⁷ there are only terrible people there who (...) don’t address your argument, but immediately insult you personally and gloat’ (Anja Reschke/Panorama). Other respondents spoke of their experiences when covering protests on site, where people threatened to beat them up or claimed that ‘we will get you!’ (Spiegel TV, R2).

Another form of verbal abuse or intimidation is what one respondent has referred to as marking or branding (*Markierung* in the German original). This involves pointing out the presence of journalists at an event to a presumably already angry crowd and thereby whipping up tensions,

⁷ In the German original: „vermüllter Picknickplatz”.

saying things like ‘Spiegel TV is here, just in case you want to take it out on someone—this is Spiegel TV’ (Spiegel TV, R2), ‘look, this here is Restle from this terrible show Monitor’ (Georg Restle/Monitor), or ‘you with the pink hat’—‘it’s this idiot over there’ (Spiegel TV, R1). Another respondent pointed out that he had been mentioned by name in speeches or threatened (Spiegel online). One of the respondents recalled a situation where this practice of pointing out their presence resulted more or less immediately in physical abuse, stating that when the speaker was

done with his tirade against our ARD team, an elderly man stood up and attacked the camera directly. And from the sequence it was clear that to me that it was the speech [...] that had incited the atmosphere so much among these concrete people that he said: ‘Okay, if such people are here filming, then I have to get physical and put an end to it’. (Silvio Duwe/Kontraste)

One of the respondents also mentioned that after interviewing a person who subscribed to various conspiracy narratives, the same person published the journalist’s (and his colleague’s) presumed home addresses on Telegram, calling on his followers to ‘pay us a visit to tell us the truth’ (Kontraste, R1). Several respondents furthermore mentioned that journalists tend to be filmed/videorecorded permanently when they are reporting from public events (Spiegel TV, R2; Kontraste, R2). Several respondents pointed out that this increasingly occurs also in the form of (live-)streams (Spiegel TV, R2; Kontraste, R2). One respondent shared that when covering a protest against the war in Gaza in October 2023, a person—who the respondent assumed was streaming—identified him as working for German public-service TV, walked up to him with his camera and started filming, stating that (in the words of our respondent), ‘here you have it, it’s these people, these are the people that are responsible for the deaths of human beings because they are lying, look at them, look at these guys here’ and ‘look, these here are these traitors, these are the people that make sure to incite this conflict’. Our respondent also added that this is a particularly uncomfortable feeling because you never know what kind of reach such streamers or their respective channels have (Kontraste, R2).

Sexualized Verbal Abuse

Three of the interview respondents were women, all of whom reported experiences of sexualized verbal abuse (Panorama; Spiegel TV, R1; Spiegel TV, R2). One respondent remarked that ‘it was unusual how many e-mails I received with rape fantasies. What sexual violence *wasn't* supposed to be done to me. (...) A lot of sexualized violence, that was really enormous’ (Anja Reschke/Panorama). Another said that ‘you get insulted a lot, also as a woman. I’ve been called a press, a journalist c**t, of course also expressions like this’ (Spiegel TV, R2). The same respondent said that

‘I think I block out a lot. I think that’s also because I have the feeling that, as a woman, one is reduced even more to one’s body and things like this come up as well, of course. This ‘journalist c**t’ has somehow stuck with me, but also because this comes up quite often, also in other variations’.

Obstructions

Finally, different forms of obstructions appear to play a key role in disturbing journalistic work. Notably, it is apparently common practice at demonstrations that organizers designate specific people (which the respondent referred to as ushers, or ‘Ordner’) whose role is to spot cameras and to keep participants from talking to mainstream media. Sometimes, these ushers apparently also follow camera crews directly to make it impossible for the journalists to start a conversation with participants. But it has also happened to one of our respondents that obstructions take the form of protesters tripping journalists up (who are walking backwards while interviewing people who move forward). In addition, it is evidently a very common experience that people push the journalists’ cameras down, place their hands or a piece of paper in front of the camera, or make so much noise that journalists simply cannot do any proper interviews. In fact, according to one respondent, such obstructions are so common that he has stopped paying attention to them (Kontraste, R2). Such obstructions also include instances of people—who aren’t actually the ones being interviewed—disturbing interviews by commenting on the questions asked by the reporter (e.g., ‘what kinds of questions are these—you are intentionally asking the questions that you need to get the image that you want’, Kontraste, R2). One respondent even pointed out that such obstructions also occur, at times, against the expressed will of the person to be interviewed, who say that ‘yes, I know what kind of

people these [journalists] are, but I want to make my point nonetheless and see how this will be broadcast' (Silvio Duwe/Kontraste). The same respondent also spoke of 'love bombing' or 'communication bombing' as a new form of obstruction to his journalistic work that he experienced for the first time at a *Querdenken* demonstration against Covid measures. In this situation, people are 'very communicative' and 'want to—in a seemingly friendly way—communicate so much with you that you don't get to do what you came there to do' (Silvio Duwe/Kontraste).

Impact on Journalistic Work

Given the chapter's emphasis on the implications of hostility towards journalists for the development of a post-truth political culture (and with, the silencing of the voice of critical journalists), it is important to discuss the extent and the ways in which journalists are affected in their journalistic work.

Awareness of Security Concerns

The interviewed journalists all acknowledged their awareness of security concerns. Many and, in particular, the more senior ones, also see a development in terms of the quality and quantity of the hostilities that they experience in their carrying out their daily work. The more prominent respondents pointed out that they can no longer participate in public events *unless* they know precisely that the event in question has a security concept. They also pointed out that this is a fine line because on the one hand, they want to be close to the action, but also not provoke/stir any emotions by showing up with a security detail (Anja Reschke/Panorama; Georg Restle/Monitor). All the interviewed journalists acknowledge that they are affected by the hostility to which they are exposed and that, as a consequence, they need to approach certain situations differently, most importantly by checking the security situation before agreeing to go to certain places or certain events. At the same time, the interviews also revealed that it was very important to the respondents to express clearly and unequivocally their refusal to allow physical or verbal threats to intimidate them. This is an important finding in relation to the question of the link between post-truth politics and efforts to silence the voice of critical journalists (see discussion in section "[Discussion: Silencing the Voice of Mainstream Journalism?](#)").

Regarding their awareness of security concerns, the respondents shared the view that they are fully aware of the risks of their work and that this awareness does leave a mark on them. One respondent described that this ‘is not a nice feeling. Because you feel limited in your freedom of movement [...]. At all public events that I go to, no matter where, even at democratic events, this feeling is always present’ (Georg Restle/Monitor). The same respondent also said that

it is absolutely clear that when I express an opinion in commentaries on certain topics [...], then I know that a shitstorm is about to go off and then I also know and have it in my head that there’s a lot of crazies out there that could take this to be a call to action to harm me, also personally or physically. (Georg Restle/Monitor)

But the same respondent also made it clear that ‘I wouldn’t say that this affects my day from morning to night’. Another respondent pointed out that ‘this is something that I had not previously experienced in my life to this extent. So one is a bit more fearful, because I don’t know, okay, is there anyone standing there and will stab you?’ But the same respondent added that even death threats did not have ‘an impact on my journalism at that moment. (...) They only had an impact on my behavior in the sense that I lost a bit of my naïveté’ (Anja Reschke/Panorama). But the risks appear to be perceived as manageable. In the words of one respondent: ‘you already know when you arrive, you know exactly what will happen [...] and that’s why you don’t go with just any camera crew. [...] You know exactly what will happen’ (Spiegel TV, R2). And another one said, along the same lines: ‘you plan in such a way that you prefer to go with a camera crew instead of going alone’ (Spiegel TV, R1).

This refusal to be intimidated is clearly important to the interviewed journalists. They all feel at some level that the awareness of security concerns does something to them and that they need to consider very carefully whether or to what extent they are—and what they need to do in order to be—safe in a given situation or environment. This is summed up by one respondent who said the following:

I don’t want to give these people the satisfaction to be able to say: ‘we succeeded, the press doesn’t come to us anymore, but only the YouTubers and streamers and those alternative media that report according to our

views'. But you have this in the back of your mind. How do I approach this? How far can I dare to go in? (Silvio Duwe/Kontraste)

Another respondent remarked that 'for a long time, I claimed that this has no effect on me because I also *don't want it to have an effect*, that I don't want to let myself be intimidated. But I think that's not completely honest'. One respondent emphasized that 'one shouldn't give these people the feeling that they succeed with their [intimidation], and that's why I participate in public events whenever I am invited and whenever I want to go and have the time, of course', adding that 'I will not be intimidated by that' (Georg Restle/Monitor). Another respondent (Jannis G.) said that 'I don't want to allow myself to be constrained or often I try not to be affected by it and go up really close because that's how you get the best images'.

Assessment of the Development of the Situation of Journalism in Germany

When asked whether they see any kind of development with regard to the situation of journalists in Germany, the more experienced respondents do point out that the quantity and quality of abuse and intimidations has changed. This is related to various aspects, the most important of which are the perception of (a) an increasing contempt for journalists; (b) an increasing level of aggression/aggressiveness; but also (c) increasing demands for what is often construed as 'more balanced reporting'.

Regarding contempt for journalists, one respondent speaks of 'an increasingly hostile atmosphere towards representatives of the media, in particular public-service media, at these demonstrations' (Georg Restle/Monitor). Another one pointed out that 'naturally, when you go to demonstrations, then you are the enemy. As a public-service journalist, you are of course the enemy and this is also made very clear to you' (Kontraste, R1). Along the same lines, a third respondent's experience is that respect for journalists has deteriorated, arguing that 'especially at large demonstrations, one gets the impression that people get great enjoyment from taking their anger and frustration out on journalists' and elaborating that 'you get insulted constantly, people try to discredit you, and when you ask questions, people tell you that you are part of this elite; it is this common blend of anger, hate and conspiracy theories that are fired at you' (Spiegel TV, R2).

Regarding the aspect of increased aggression, one respondent speaks of the hostility towards journalists having ‘a new quality because there is this incivility (*Verrohung* in the German original) that spills over from the digital world to the real world’, where ‘people feel that they are part of a large majority or of an imagined will of the people’ (Georg Restle/Monitor). Another respondent used the same term (*Verrohung*) to suggest that ‘people feel emboldened to express their opinion aggressively’, adding that the atmosphere has changed considerably and that ‘one gets to the point much faster where people react in a verbally aggressive manner’ (Kontraste, R1). Regarding this turn towards increased incivility, a third respondent further mentioned that he considers a series of Neonazi riots in the Saxon city of Chemnitz—as recently as 2018—as a turning point in that it witnessed a massive focus on press and representatives of the media, thereby making it ‘the first time that I thought: can I still responsibly attend such events without a security detail?’ (Georg Restle & Monitor).

Regarding the demand for ‘balanced’ reporting, finally, one respondent claimed that there is an increasing demand that all perspectives are equally given voice and that this is a consequence of a fake news narrative that claims that mainstream journalism is biased and partial. According to this respondent, this demand stems in no small part from within the leadership of public-service broadcasting itself: ‘this has definitely increased because of Corona, this issue of balance. This is incessantly hammered into our brains. We also constantly have to justify ourselves, also in our own houses, also vis-à-vis the hierarchy’ (Anja Reschke/Panorama). According to the same respondent, this claim is also made within her own show’s editorial board, ‘among people who know quite well what journalism is’ and this is an effect of ‘the absolutely clear framing that ‘you are left-green, you’re blind on your left eye’ (Anja Reschke/Panorama). This theme of demands for ‘balanced reporting’ is also addressed by another respondent, who argues that this is intimately connected to the Alternative for Germany (AfD). According to this respondent, the AfD is a party that constantly claims to be discriminated against and whose claims that the media are not reporting truthfully have resulted in a regrettable ‘both-side-ism’: that neutrality and objectivity have been misunderstood as the need to hear ‘both sides’ equally, even if one side represents the scientific consensus and the other side is merely a singular opinion (Kontraste, R1).

The Link to Populism

As a last point in this empirical analysis, we need to explore the link between populism and the hostility towards journalism described so far. After all, the point of this chapter is not to discuss attacks on critical journalists and their implications for democracy as such, but more specifically what role populist actors play in such processes and what that means in terms of the development of political culture in the post-truth condition. On this point, some of the respondents connect the broader delegitimation of mainstream media/journalism to populist parties such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD). One respondent pointed out that the AfD's role in this context is very clear and that the party is by no means trying to disguise its contempt for mainstream media (Kontraste, R2). Another respondent remarked that this contempt is 'clearly also politically calculated' and that the party's efforts to brand mainstream media as 'government propaganda' is something they need 'for the majorities that they want to win on the right margin. Because as public-service media, we are supposed to be 'state media' (Georg Restle/Monitor). Another respondent emphasized that the AfD is 'not like any other party in that it wants a different system, it has a different view of democracy and also on journalism. And I don't think that this is clear to everyone' (Anja Reschke/Panorama). The same respondent also argued that the AfD is different from all other parties in the sense that it is the only party that does not subscribe to 'the fundamental consensus' that the press plays a fundamental role in democracy 'even if people get angry when they are criticized'. This fundamental consensus is present in German society at large, but it is diminishing and, indeed, '*missing* in some segments of society'—'and in my perception, these segments are currently loud and call the shots' (Anja Reschke/Panorama). However, one respondent also pointed out that the current hostility towards mainstream media can also be found among populists on the left of the political spectrum, even if it is not as open as among right-wing populists (Kontraste, R2).

DISCUSSION: SILENCING THE VOICE OF MAINSTREAM JOURNALISM?

In discussing the impact of the populist assault on mainstream media/journalism, it is important to draw attention to two key aspects. One is the impact that this assault has on journalists themselves, i.e., whether it has the—presumably desired—effect of silencing the voice of critical journalism. The other is the impact of the clear and explicit refusal

of populist actors to engage in discussion, let alone deliberation with journalists—and, to go even one step further, to even allow their supporters—to engage in discussions with journalists. This reluctance/refusal is connected to the distinction between elites and the people that is constitutive of populism (see below).

Beginning with the aspect of silencing the voice of critical journalism, the findings of the interview study contain both good and bad news. The bad news is fairly obvious: the observation that physical and verbal intimidation is a common experience for journalists is clearly not a good sign for a healthy liberal democracy and its public sphere. Even more concerning is that the forms of intimidation reported by the respondents do not only occur anonymously and/or in online settings, but also happen in face-to-face encounters between journalists and protestors on the street. Even more concerning is the observation that organizers of certain protests apparently feel emboldened to single out specific journalists and point out their presence to already hostile crowds. According to our respondents, such ‘markings’ have become standard practice and are evidently intended to send the message that journalists are unwelcome, that everyone is aware of their presence and that virtually anything can happen to them.

All of the interviewed journalists have furthermore had experiences of insults, threats of physical violence, and even death threats that, in some cases, were concrete enough to be considered serious by law enforcement authorities. In addition, our respondents have also reported how common obstructions of their work are. Particularly noteworthy in this respect is the practice of designating certain individuals (referred to by the journalists as ‘ushers’) whose job is to ensure that no participants of a given protest end up speaking to journalists or giving them interviews.

However, there is also good news in the findings from the interview study. Although verbal and physical intimidation and abuse are a common experience for the interviewed journalists, the interviews have also revealed a strong sense of commitment to the journalistic profession. None of the interviewed journalists indicated that they would consider changing professions and underlined that their choice to become a journalist was motivated in large part by their conviction of the importance of journalism in (liberal) democracy. Consequently, the responses from the journalists reflected a strong and unequivocal refusal to allow themselves to be intimidated despite all verbal and physical intimidation and abuse.

It is also good news that one common reaction of the interviewed journalists when facing verbal and physical abuse was a feeling of ‘jetzt erst

recht!', a statement along the lines of 'now more than ever', suggesting that if their journalistic work elicits this kind of undemocratic reaction, then evidently even more of this work is needed. Similarly, one respondent also emphasized that 'we're going where it hurts', suggesting that the journalistic profession is never comfortable and will always prompt negative and even outright hostile reactions. In other words, the strong message resulting from the interviews is that the interviewed journalists will not be intimidated, let alone silenced, almost regardless of the physical and verbal abuse and intimidation they are exposed to.

Yet although this refusal to be intimidated is clearly good news, a number of the interviewed journalists *did indicate* that they would eventually like to move on to positions that involve less street-level work in hostile environments such as, e.g., protests or demonstrations. By the same token, some respondents also pointed out that not all of their current colleagues are equally willing to cover protests/demonstrations and that there are indeed specific camera crews that choose *not* to get such assignments.

In addition to silencing the voice of journalists, a second point worth discussing here is the impact of the assault on mainstream journalism on the development of a potentially new post-truth populist paradigm. The role of populism and populist actors needs to be highlighted in this discussion. Our interview respondents confirmed their perception of the central role of populist and far-right actors in expressing hostility towards mainstream media. The role of the AfD and its supporters was explicitly mentioned in this context, which is clearly not a surprising finding given the party's delegitimizing critique of mainstream journalism that is well documented in the literature (see theoretical discussion in section "[Post-truth Politics and the Populist Assault on Mainstream Journalism](#)"). Central to the discussion on the role of populism in the development of a post-truth political culture is the explicit refusal of populist actors to engage in deliberation with mainstream media. Through fake news accusations and labels such as 'lying press' or 'system media', populists attempt to delegitimize mainstream journalists and construe them as part of the deceitful liberal elite. Moreover, they evidently also refuse to speak to such alleged fake news outlets and, as the analysis has shown, even undertake significant efforts to *obstruct* journalists' efforts to speak to participants of demonstrations. This observation is important in relation to a point raised by Waisbord (2018), i.e., it is precisely populism's binary distinction between corrupt elites and the pure people

(and, by extension, between elite lies and popular truths) that makes a ‘collective effort to produce agreed-upon facts and reach consensus on the correspondence between assertions and reality’ impossible (Waisbord, 2018, p. 18). This is due to the assertion that whatever the elites say is to be considered a lie by definition; hence populism’s ‘opposition to facts and truth determined by knowledge-producing elites such as scientists and experts’ (ibid., 19).

This point is connected directly to the discussion on the apparently declining role of facts in political discourse—and on what constitutes facts in the first place (see the theoretical discussion in section “[Post-truth Politics and the Populist Assault on Mainstream Journalism](#)”). In this chapter, the argument has been made that while not being able to claim objective validity *permanently*, facts are evidently *not* simply arbitrary statements devoid of any substantiating empirical evidence—hence the fundamental objection to the idea of *alternative* facts that grossly blur the boundary between fact and mere opinion. But in order for commonly accepted facts to be possible in the first place, the evidence supporting them has to be discussed collectively—and this is, according to Waisbord, what populists refuse to participate in precisely *because of* their fundamental rejection of ‘knowledge-producing elites such as scientists and experts’—hence the epistemic crisis of democracy that is characterized *not least* by the demise of commonly accepted standards for establishing and ascertaining facts.

Both the fake-news narrative (and, with it, the delegitimation of mainstream journalism) *and* the physical and verbal intimidation of journalists need to be seen against this backdrop: they are two sides of the same coin, i.e., the idea that journalists are part of the corrupt and deceitful liberal elite that therefore should not only not be talked or listened to, but that should moreover be silenced actively. Consequently, the argument made here is that physical and verbal intimidation is indeed an effort to silence the voice of critical journalism, but it also has to be seen as a way of terminating discussion on relevant facts before it can even unfold. With this in mind, it is also clear that populist discourse is not an emancipatory project of giving voice to the allegedly silenced/marginalized/unheard voice of the people, but it is rather a project of imposing a singular version of truth. These aspects also need to be seen in the wider context of the development of the public sphere in post-truth politics (in the digital age). Populism also plays a role in this context, but this will be the topic of another research.

CONCLUSION

The chapter has shown that instances of verbal and physical intimidation of journalists are a common phenomenon in Germany. All interviewed journalists share the experience of having been insulted, threatened, or singled out by speakers and/or organizers of demonstrations. Some have even received death threats that law enforcement authorities considered to be serious enough to warrant police protection. In the case of female journalists, sexualized verbal abuse and intimidation were also very common. The more prominent of our respondents consequently need to make cautious decisions about the option of being accompanied by a security detail whenever they agree to participate in public events. This constitutes an obvious threat to the role of critical journalism in any liberal democracy, but the statements of the interviewed journalists are also testament to their commitment to the journalistic profession as well as to their refusal to be intimidated by forces whose agenda is clearly and, in some cases, even openly opposed to the values of liberal democracy. There is a clear and, presumably, also a *causal* link between the kinds of hostility experienced by journalists and the type of agitation against the institution of journalism that is vocalized by representatives of the populist right in the country. This type of agitation goes beyond the boundaries of what may be considered legitimate critique of journalistic work, thus prompting important questions about the link between the hostility experienced by journalists and the potential emergence of post-truth populism as a new political paradigm. In this chapter, the argument has been made that the real risk of such a development resides in what may still lie ahead: beyond the apparently obvious effort to silence the voice of critical journalism, the anti-deliberative attitude displayed by right-wing populists is indicative of the epistemic crisis of democracy; this epistemic crisis is highlighted by the reluctance of populist actors and their supporters to participate even in discussions about shared facts that should form the basis of politics. By propagating *alternative* facts rather than engaging in a joint effort to probe the evidentiary basis of factual propositions, they further undermine the shared epistemic basis needed for the proper functioning of democracy or, for that matter, the democratic public sphere. On a brighter note, we can conclude by pointing out the spirit of resilience that the interview respondents have demonstrated in view of the populist challenge. At least for now, it seems that the critical voice of journalism is far from being silenced.

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APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Could you briefly describe your role at [name of the outlet]?
2. Do you have any special interests or areas of expertise in your journalistic work? If so, could you describe them?
3. Have you reported on major demonstrations in recent years, such as those related to the refugee crisis of 2015–2016, the COVID-19 pandemic (restrictions, vaccination campaigns, etc.), the war in Ukraine, etc.? If so, to what extent?
4. Could you describe the general atmosphere at these demonstrations?
5. Have you experienced any kind of hostility due to your role as a journalist at such events?
6. Have you experienced any kind of hostility due to your role as a journalist at other events, such as political rallies?
7. Have you experienced such incidents in your personal life or private sphere?
8. How often do you experience such incidents?
9. Could you describe how these incidents have unfolded?
 - a. Have you been verbally abused or insulted? In what context or at what type of event? Can you provide specific examples of such verbal abuse or insults?
 - b. Have you ever been physically attacked? In what context or at what type of event? Could you describe one or more of these incidents in detail?
10. Would you say that there is a typical group of people from whom hostility or attacks at events are to be expected?
11. Do you consider the possibility or likelihood of hostility or attacks when reporting on events such as demonstrations or political rallies?
12. To what extent does this affect or impair your work?

- a. Do you approach such events differently in any way?
 - b. Do you try to avoid specific individuals or groups?
13. Are hostilities or attacks on journalists a new phenomenon? Do you notice any trends?
 14. Have you ever considered changing professions due to such experiences? Do you know other journalists who have considered this?
 15. Are there support services available for journalists who have experienced such incidents?

How do you assess the impact of such hostility on the role of journalism in liberal democracy?

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Counterknowledge and Conspiracy Theories



‘The First in the Service of Truth’: Construction of Counterknowledge Claims and the Case of Janša’s SDS’ Media Outlets

Melika Mahmutović^{ID} and *Marko Lovec*^{ID}

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump’s presidency, populism studies have been increasingly dominated by debates about ‘post-truth’. The phenomena have been understood as ‘two-headed beast’ (Rifkind, 2017), while the current conditions of public communication are seen as favorable for the kind of post-truth politics that is represented by populism (Waisbord, 2018, p. 18). Authors point to the epochal rupture in the fabric of democracy, an era where Truth and Reason are overtaken by alternative facts and individual gut feelings (Farkas & Schou, 2020). In such ‘a paranoid habitus’ (Harambam & Aupers, 2015), we are witnessing the loss of the ‘symbolic authority of truth’ (Newman, 2019), further pointing to the high epistemic gap developing between the knowledge as it arises from common sense and personal experience, and what is known from and about expert models and projections (Brubaker, 2021, p. 75). Characteristic of these changes in the public sphere are the intensified marginalization of factually-based evidence, the growing dispersion

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of false claims, the phenomena of fake news and conspiracy theories, as well as the fragmentation and polarization of the public sphere (Numerato et al., 2019, p. 83). The concept of post-truth does not only concern the spread of correct or incorrect information but explains how its communication serves political actors as they accuse their opponents of spreading false or manipulative content or constructing their own version of reality (Kluknavská & Eisele, 2021, p. 1584). This means that the matter is not so much about whether or not one tells the truth but what kind of actions are performed by claims of ‘facts’ and ‘truth’ (ibid.).

Most scholars working on post-truth agree that this phenomenon highlights the changing mechanisms of social construction and legitimization of knowledge, marked by the decline of trust in institutions which have traditionally been seen as its symbolic guardians: mainstream media, science, universities (d’Ancona, 2017; Hameleers, 2022; Numerato et al., 2019; Saarinen et al., 2020; Waisbord, 2018). In this sense, as Fuller (2018) argues, the post-truth era is seen as ‘the inevitable outcome of greater epistemic democracy’, which is the result of more open access to instruments of knowledge production and subsequent dismantling of the old epistemic hierarchies. Together, these occurrences lead to what Saurette and Gunster (2011) have coined as ‘epistemological populism’, a kind of populism favoring common people’s knowledge over the knowledge produced by the experts.

We understand these arguments by taking into account what Galanopoulus and Stavrakakis (2019, p. 1) term the ‘epistemic superiority’ of mainstream politicians, which is used to illustrate their ‘supreme rationality’ and, thus, to condemn the irrationalism and lies of their opponents. However, Hameleers (2022, p. 217) has shown that not all (right-wing) populist truth claims are based on the same logic, and they are used differently to consolidate different political agendas and the reality they wish to communicate. In a study on populists who describe epistemic authorities as part of the ‘conspiring regime of truth’, Harambam and Aupers (2015) show that these actors do not challenge scientific epistemology as such, but rather see ‘establishment’ science as corrupt and therefore as needing to be challenged with alternative authorities and knowledge. Likewise, Ylä-Anttila (2018, p. 3) has argued that populist actors do not inherently oppose expertise on the basis of ‘folk’ or ‘common’ knowledge or wisdom, as much of the literature assumes, but rather advocate a particular kind of counter-expertise, or what he coins ‘counterknowledge’. Here we see the importance of going beyond overly

simplistic accounts of contestations of epistemic authority and of showing how populist actors establish their own production of knowledge, beyond acting 'merely as irrational political agents' (Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis, 2019).

In order to probe into these questions, we turn to the unexplored nexus of populism and post-truth in Slovenia, particularly the case of Janez Janša and Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS). We build on Ylä-Anttila's (2018) argument to suggest that Janša and SDS employ the strategy of 'counterknowledge' to assert their belief in alternative narratives of truth. The analysis includes articles published on countermedia news sites *Demokracija* and *Nova24tv.si*, as well as coverage of statements made by party representatives and by Janša in particular. We show that SDS' counterknowledge discourse is based on four prevailing, interrelated frames: fake media, fake institutions, truth-washing, and dominant ideology, and structures. By exploring how SDS relates to knowledge production through these four frames, this chapter contributes to a more nuanced understanding of populism and its relation to post-truth, as well as bringing new empirical insights into Slovenian populist politics.

In what follows, we firstly set out the contours of the debate about the post-truth and its meaning, which we follow by inquiring into the status of truth *per se*. Then, we turn to deliberations about populism in its relation to the phenomenon of post-truth and establish our understanding of counterknowledge as employed by populist actors. After this we introduce the Slovenian case, by providing illustration of populist logic employed by SDS and Janša. This section is followed by our empirical analysis. We conclude with discussion of our key findings.

POST-TRUTH DISCOURSE/DISCOURSE ON POST-TRUTH

Since it was declared the word of the year by Oxford Dictionary in 2016, 'post-truth' has been a prominent part of contemporary scholarly and media debates on politics, and around knowledge production and communication (BBC 2016). But such 'elite anxiety' about political ignorance and its consequences is not new. As Runciman (2016) elaborates, two prominent fears permeate this anxiety—that democracy will be ruled by the poor, who will steal the power from the rich; and that democracy will turn into a rule of the ignorant, who use their power for vacuous things. And while the Brexit referendum and Trump's presidency have reactivated these anxieties, can we assert with certainty that

the emerging divide is one between knowledge and ignorance rather than between one worldview and another? (Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis, 2019, p. 408; Runciman, 2016). As Hannah Arendt (1967) has argued decades ago, ‘No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues’.

And yet, beyond pointing to the relation between the creation of truth claims and the normal functioning of political systems, many scholars warn about the societal and political dangers of post-truth (Bory et al., 2023; Brubaker, 2021; Hameleers & Van der Meer, 2021; Rietdijk, 2021; Saarinen et al., 2020). Levy (2017) investigates post-truth’s negative impact on knowledge, while Frankfurt (2005), Davis (2017) and Kristiansen and Kaussler (2018) explore the ‘bullshit’ connected to post-truth narratives. Authors have also assessed post-truth in relation to partisanship, explaining partisan commitments as correlated to a belief in post-truth narratives, where some forms of epistemic partisanship can be reasonable and realistically expected (Ahlstrom-Vij, 2021; Hameleers, 2022; Rini, 2017; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019). It has also been claimed that post-truth generates specific emotional dynamics, with discourse separating those who are represented as knowing ‘the facts’ and those seen to be merely emotional (Boler & Davis, 2018; Duncombe, 2019; Durnová, 2019; Savolainen et al., 2020).

Authors have also largely focused on the ‘folk theorizing of science’ which takes place in political debates, with Brandmayr (2021, p. 48) arguing that these increasingly involve complex and technical issues which reveal clashing public epistemologies that define how truth can be distinguished from falsehood. In this sense, Hawkins (2010, pp. 7, 38) argued that the virtues of folk wisdom and spontaneous expressions of popular will become highly idealized and used to challenge experts and professionals. Bullshit claims have also been connected to this issue, their traction explained by successful integration into folk wisdom (Hopkin & Rosamond, 2018, p. 651). In the scholarship reviewed, it is not just that empirical evaluations are issued, but they are situated in a socio-political context further informed by moral deliberations about what truth or knowledge are (Harambam & Aupers, 2015, p. 469).

Hence, what we see within the current debate is that the term post-truth has acquired, to use Ernesto Laclau’s (2005, pp. 129–133) terminology, a position of a floating signifier, which tries to conceptually apprehend the logic of the displacement of a stable political frontier. In

this way, post-truth is used in drastically different and sometimes opposing political projects as a means of constructing political identities, conflicts and antagonisms (Farkas & Schou, 2018, p. 300). When given different meanings, the term then becomes part of a broader hegemonic struggle of defining the shape and contents of contemporary politics (Farkas & Schou, 2018; York, 2018). 'History is not the terrain on which a unified and coherent story would unfold', Laclau (2005, p. 146) has claimed, and assessing the post-truth phenomenon has to be positioned within this context, beyond offering it as a diagnosis of a deeply normative discourse on what the truth is and how politics should be defined. In other words, it is important to show how it is itself part of a hegemonic political struggle.

Understanding (Post)-truth

Echoing some of the concerns raised above, not that long ago, Habgood-Coote (2019) issued a call to academics to stop using the terms 'fake news' and 'post-truth'. He argued that the terms were ambiguous, used in a propagandistic way, and even unnecessary. However, countering this view, Rietdijk (2021, p. 1) argued that the sole existence of political discourse exhibiting a lack of concern for facts and expertise is undeniable and hence epistemically problematic. More authors than not share this sentiment. Already in 2004, Keyes (2004, p. 17) warned about the effects of the post-truth era, embracing a new category, beyond the dichotomy of truth and lies: ambiguous statements that fall somewhere in the middle.

Hyvönen (2018, p. 33) suggested that post-truth can be understood as a two-sided process; it emerges from different factors eroding the 'common world' and making the truth more and more irrelevant in the political discourse, while also coinciding with what he calls 'careless speech'. Here, careless speech is an antinomy of Foucault's (2001) 'fearless speech', and also related to Arendt's view of the 'care for the world' being a precondition for democratic politics. This means that post-truth discourse shows an unwillingness to engage with other perspectives, while being unconcerned not just with truth as such, but also with the world as a common space where things become public (Hyvönen, 2018, p. 33). This carelessness is not necessarily seen in the full transgression of truth, as much as in the way it is ignored or bypassed, 'drowned out in a cacophony of competing narratives' (Newman, 2019, p. 1). Higgins (2016) shows this as well, by pointing to a difference between post-truth and political lying—in a post-truth world, honesty is not pre-empted as the default

position. Overall, the post-truth condition breeds a state in which objective facts have less of an influence in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief (Oxford Dictionary in Conrad, 2021, p. 302).

This further connects to the issue of relativism. As Wagener (2020, p. 165) elaborates, the ideal of truth in its image of Western rationality is more and more blurred, and perspectives rather than factual knowledge itself prevail. Such relativity of truth endangers ‘the very strength of reasoning as a basic human feature which crosses the boundaries established by emotions, traditions, sociocultural contexts, beliefs and desires’ (ibid.). For Viale (2001, p. 15), the failure to adopt a priori standards of rationality then leads us into a socio-cultural relativism. We continue to deal with such relativism as differences between what is true and what is not, are not being guided by anything more authoritative than our individual points of view (Frankfurt, 2006). This might be called ‘epistemic relativism’, or the idea that the distinction between truth and falsehood is based not in an objective reality but in various social conventions, which is why there are many different and opposing, but still valid, ways of knowing the world (Malik, 2017).¹ Rodgers (2017) talks of this in terms of ‘competing claims on truth, each insisting of its veracity’: in other words, truths rather than the truth. The post-truth phenomenon hence highlights the low importance of truth in political sphere and the relativism increasingly prevalent in Western societies (Salgado, 2018, p. 318). These two are thus related phenomena, as both feed scepticism about people’s capacity and desire to acquire knowledge, produced by experts or dilettantes alike, which would be unsullied by local conditions, ideologies, world-views and power relations (Zackariasson, 2018, p. 2). When these influences are conceded, the notion of objective or disinterested knowledge and expertise becomes jeopardized (ibid.).

¹ Issues which we cover in this chapter point to a particular version of a political cognitive relativism, which refers to any claims that truth or falsity of a certain statement are relative to an individual or to a social group (Sokal, 2008, p. 248). Accusation is then made that rejecting such epistemological relativism is motivated by political interests, as a way of defending a position of power given to scientists who insist that scientific knowledge is superior to other ways of knowing (Ruser, 2021, p. 4). Here we see a kind of entanglement of epistemological critique of science with a political critique of the way scientific knowledge is used in modern societies and what role it holds, which is emblematic of the post-truth condition which we investigate here.

Populism and the Truth Game

These ideas contributed to the popularity of politically charged accounts of post-truth, fake news as well as conspiracy thinking. These are further supported by research connecting the post-truth condition to populist politics. For Waisbord (2018, p. 18), the surge of populism is symptomatic of the consolidation of post-truth communication as a distinctive feature of contemporary politics. Here, populism is standing in opposition to the prospect of truth telling as a collective effort to produce agreed-upon facts and reach consensus, thriving in the context of various challenges to the elite definition of truth and reality. The growing prevalence of conspiracy theories, the appeal to emotions, racist and xenophobic language, have all been marked as signs of the connection between populism and post-truth (Sengul, 2019, p. 97). Wodak (2015, p. 23) has argued that right-wing populists seemingly subscribe to what she calls the 'arrogance of ignorance', with appeals to common sense and anti-intellectualism marking a return to pre-modernist and pre-Enlightenment thinking.

As populists oppose not just political elites but, more broadly, all institutions they see to be representative of the 'establishment', they are, by and large, responsible for the creation of 'alternative epistemologies', which question how science produces knowledge, its methods and authority to make decisions, and arguments about what 'true' knowledge is (Mede & Schäfer, 2020, p. 478). By utilizing different media, populists are able to create and spread truth claims which are based on ordinary people's experiences and common sense, circumventing analyses and sources they do not trust (Hameleers, 2022, p. 213). This reflects what Saurette and Gunster (2011, p. 199) analyse as 'epistemological populism' that takes from rhetorical patterns of populist discourses to valorize the knowledge of the 'common people', that they have due to their closeness to everyday life. This knowledge is distinguished from the rarefied knowledge of elites which are alienated from everyday life and therefore from the common sense which is produced by it (ibid.). We can argue that such 'epistemological populism' creates what Nguyen (2020, pp. 2–10) analyses as echo chambers, which work by systematically isolating its members from outside epistemic sources. Such epistemic communities are created by establishing a serious disparity in trust between its members and non-members, who are epistemically discredited regardless of their actual epistemic worth. Hence, in this sense,

scientific elites and experts, as a subset of the general elite, are represented by populists as unreliable, malicious or dishonest and thus epistemically delegitimized (*ibid.*).

The effects of such rhetoric are further amplified by the increased engagement of intellectuals and scientists in highly publicized controversies (Brandmayr, 2021, p. 48). As they are firmly anchored in specific political communities, and are used strategically in proceedings over particular policy decisions, this makes them an easy target for populist claims of being biased or suspicious and therefore untrustworthy. These narratives are further labelled by Mede and Schäfer (2020, pp. 480–483) as ‘science-related populism’, which is concerned with truth-speaking sovereignty or the right to formulate truth claims. As scientific elites are seen as illegitimate, they are discarded for the legitimate truth-speaking sovereigns, the ordinary people (*ibid.*). Both proposed forms of populism therefore challenge the assumption that political discourse should be in some way mediated and reflexive, that it should involve reasoning and communication which is distinct from the immediate one which governs life in the private sphere. Resolution is thus given in the form of a political expression which directly reflects the will of the people and works to systematically purge institutions aiming to mediate between the public and the private sphere (Saurette & Gunster, 2011, p. 212). While we concede the merit of these accounts, they can be further nuanced by, firstly, clearly delineating the meaning of populism as such, and secondly, by applying that understanding to the populist relation to truth and knowledge production. Equating populism with the post-truth condition runs the risk of marking the populist antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’ as inherently demagogic or dishonest, leading to delegitimization of the former as ‘hysterical’ and driven by emotions rather than by objective knowledge (De Cleen, 2017, p. 270). Rather, we contend that such approaches to contestations of epistemic authority are overly simple and, as Galanopoulos and Stavrakakis (2019, p. 409) argue, embraced with reified epistemic superiority, issuing a claim of exclusive access to truth.² Latour (1993) talked about the process of purification, which in our case works to erase hybrids which cancel out

² Galanopoulos and Stavrakakis (2019) make this argument in regard to their analysis of the Greek context and thus predominantly left-wing populist actors. While our analysis focuses on right-wing populist actors, we justify the argument for our investigation through its strategic use and analytical value, that align with our understanding of the

boundaries set between truth and lies, science and belief, emotion and reason. Analyses which dominate scholarship work to reinforce this opposition between scientific rationality and the political mainstream, on the one hand, and irrational, post-truth populism, on the other, without properly assessing the meaning of the latter. Much of this stems from an inadequate conceptualization of populism.

Conceptualizing populism as a form of politics, and analysing its strategic potential rather than its ideological content, can help us avoid dismissing it as inherently distrustful of science expertise (De Cleen, 2017). Thereby, in our analysis we subscribe to Laclau's (2005) concept of political logic, which we use to assess populism as a particular form of politics that constructs demands coming from 'the people' against illegitimate 'elites'. This minimal discursive definition, based on elements of 'people centrism' and 'anti-elitism', does not necessarily entail anti-intellectualism or a denial of truth. Such an understanding of populism allows us to assess how populism creates demands and challenges existing regimes of power, shifting the focus from the contents of the populist project to the way demands are constructed. In our discussion on post-truth, then, we don't a priori assume the populist negation of expertise knowledge, but we seek to assess how populism is used to challenge knowledge elites.

To do so we further rely on Ylä-Anttila's (2018, pp. 4–5) concept of 'counterknowledge', which works to explain alternative knowledge systems whose construction and dissemination have political aims. Counterknowledge is defined as 'alternative knowledge which challenges establishment knowledge, replacing knowledge authorities with new ones, thus providing an opportunity for political mobilisation' (ibid.). This concept is useful as it does not equate to misinformation, nor does it entail a rejection of knowledge that is falsifiable. Also, unlike 'epistemological populism' or 'science-related populism', it does not assume populists necessarily propagate knowledge connected to common people's life experience, rejecting expertise and science altogether. Instead, counterknowledge acts as one of populist tools, working to achieve a kind of 'objectivist' system of alternative knowledge authorities (Ylä-Anttila, 2018, p. 21). As Galanopoulos and Stavrakakis (2019, p. 410) note,

ways in which the nexus between post-truth and populism can play out in the political arena.

discerning that populists can establish their own relation to the production of knowledge and not treat them as just irrational actors, does much for a more rigorous and solid explanation of populism's relation to the post-truth condition.

In our analysis, we employ a discourse-theoretical perspective on populism as a political logic and its understanding of 'post-truth' as a floating signifier, while seeking to delineate elements of SDS's counter-knowledge creation and dissemination utilized in its populist toolbox. Our aim here is not to discover the validity of information put forward by SDS, but to discover how their truth-claims are part of a hegemonic political struggle (Farkas & Schou, 2018, p. 309). In this way, we concur that probing into what is 'fake' and what is 'true' is itself a political practice, one that is taken up not just by political parties but also by scholars and media. Before turning to the empirical section of the chapter, we elaborate further on Janša and his political party's position in Slovenian politics, establishing it as a populist actor whose discourse is constructed through different elements of 'othering' and discrimination.

THE JANŠA PARADOX AND SLOVENIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Populism in the Slovenian case is assessed in the context of broader political and social changes which have occurred in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) since 1989 onwards, and the region's transition to liberal democracy and an open market economy (Bojinović Fenko et al., 2019; Lovec & Bojinović Fenko, 2019; Lovec et al., 2022). Proliferation of populist communication in Slovenia is further connected to the period of the dissolution of ex-Yugoslavia and the growth of ethnonationalism, which settled populism mostly in the caldera created by the rise of the extreme right in the region (Pajnik et al., 2016, pp. 137–138). While, during the socialist era, populism was seen to emulate exclusionary politics and propaganda, and was thought of as emblematic of Western capitalism, or even fascism and Nazism, since 1989 it has been more openly embraced and acknowledged in Slovenia and the rest of the region (Pajnik, 2019, p. 23). Once the familiar 'enemies' were gone, a kind of a vacuum emerged that had to be filled. The new enemies of

the post-socialist era were found in the 'Erased' people,³ migrants from ex-Yugoslavia, communists, liberal intellectual elites, Roma people, the Muslim minority or women and members of the LGBTQ community (Fink-Hafner, 2016, p. 1329).

Since then, many political parties occupied the Slovenian political space, with some slowly fading away, and some becoming a persistent factor of each election cycle. SDS is one such party, which keeps a steady voter base and represents a constant in Slovenian politics, not least through its polarizing effect on the public sphere (Hadalín, 2021, p. 241). The most prominent figure of the party and, in general, of the hard right in the country, is its leader, Janez Janša. Janša represents a kind of contradictory phenomenon⁴ as Rizman (1998, p. 259) argued, transforming from a 'former committed communist and orthodox Marxist' into 'an extreme anti-communist'. The complexity of 'Janšism' highlights the incongruities of the transition process in the wider region. Arrested and imprisoned by a military court in the former system, igniting mass protests that eventually led to his release, Janša became a defence minister of the first democratic government and since then has solidified his populist stance, which is marked by demagoguery, anti-communism and othering (Pajnik et al., 2016, p. 140). Talking about Orbán's 'laboratory of illiberalism', Krekó and Enyedi (2018, p. 43) see Janša as an inherent part of this, on par with other populist leaders from the CEE who comfortably operate within democratic electoral contests pushing for an 'executive-dominated, delegative form of governance', that does, to an extent, demand a 'strongman' emblematic of their personal ambitions. In general, Učēn (2007, p. 50) has found that CEE leaders, like Janša, utilize populism as a 'power-seeking political strategy' that is rooted in 'pure anti-establishment appeal'.

³ The erased people are mainly people born in other republics of the ex-Yugoslavia who were holders of Yugoslav citizenship/citizenship of other republics and lived in the former Socialist Republic of Slovenia. Once Slovenia became an independent state, those of them who did not (for whatever reason) obtain a Slovenian citizenship, were erased from the register of permanent residents in the Republic of Slovenia, with it losing their economic and social rights as well (Mirovni inštitut, 2023).

⁴ Miheljak (2022) recently noted that the biggest paradox of the Janša paradox is that media and critical public are the ones keeping him 'alive', 'collaborating' with him, through every written contribution, with every critical word. The irony of this assessment is not lost on us.

Through his public claims, Janša assigns Slovenians ‘essentially virtuous qualities’ that are pitted against elites who are ‘either old communist nomenclature or Janša’s socialist-liberal opposition’ (Kocijan, 2015, p. 83). Talking about ‘Janšism’, Kuzmanić (2005, p. 10) argues that this phenomenon cannot be reduced to nationalism solely. He rather calls it a ‘Volkish populist movement’, that is not without a nationalist element, but in which the populist inclination remains the dominant feature (*ibid.*). Janša also exhibits what Rizman (1998, p. 260) and Pajnik (2019, p. 24) called ‘victim populism’, as he presents himself and SDS as victims of both the previous communist regime and a conspiracy conjured by the left and the establishment in the post-communist democratic era. The conspiring of the left elite is assumed to be ingrained in country’s sub-systems, which is why SDS also constructs as enemies some state and civil-society institutions as well as the media, which are seen as remnants of the previous communist regime and are sedimented in the political system of Slovenia (Frank & Šori, 2015, p. 92).

In addition to anti-communist sentiments, SDS’s strategy of othering is prominently visible in different ‘discriminatory episodes’ in Slovenian politics (Pajnik et al., 2013). Relevant are their actions in relation to the ‘Erased’, as SDS has continually minimized the role of the Erasure, calling the affected people ‘the so-called Erased’. The party called for a referendum against the law on regulating the status of citizens of the former Yugoslavia, calling the proposed law a deviation from established principles and values of Slovenia (SDS, 2010). Janša connected the Erased with the aggression of the Yugoslav army towards Slovenia and accused the left of supporting their rights only in a plot to secure election votes (Čuček, 2006). This narrative connects to the more general position of SDS towards ethnic and religious minorities. As Pajnik et al. (2016, p. 114) explain, the purpose of such ‘othering’ is in the separation of ‘true Slovenians’ from Southerners, Muslims and Roma, as a way of clearly delineating between the national ‘us’ and foreign ‘outsiders’. SDS here relies on nativist, nationalist and essentialist arguments and the proliferation and open normalization of xenophobic ideas for the articulation of societal issues (Frank & Šori, 2015, p. 89). Discriminatory narratives do not stop at ethnic and religious questions, but are also very prominent in regard to sexual minorities and gender.

SDS relies on what Butler (1999, p. 194) terms the ‘heterosexual matrix’, a way of designating the neutralization of bodies and gender

in society in a kind of epistemic model of gender intelligibility, which assumes that bodies have to cohere to a stable identity further defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. SDS was a staunch critic of the new Family Code which was introduced by left-wing government in 2009, particularly of two of its innovations: the definition of 'family' was expanded from the traditional patriarchal understanding to a more gender-neutral understanding, and the introduction of marriage equality (Kuhar & Pajnik, 2020, p. 171). SDS was also against the proposed amendments to the Law on Marriage and Family Relationships, again on the same grounds, and advocated a referendum against it (Podolak, 2019, pp. 51–52). SDS maintained its opposition, despite losing this battle, because in 2023 the law was finally successfully passed. Taken together, the discriminatory elements of SDS and Janša's discourse establish two main features: namely the differentiation and purification of Slovenian identity and re-traditionalization of Slovenian society with more prominent references to conservative and religious values, unravelling what Pajnik et al. (2016, pp. 139–140) define as ethno-nationalist and ethno-religious populism.

SDS was in power over three periods, 2004–2008, 2012–2013 and 2020–2022. The last stint in power was arguably the most contested one, coinciding with the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and Slovenia's European Union (EU) Council presidency. Through the entire mandate, the public expressed its disillusionment with the government through what came to be known as 'Friday protests', held continuously until the elections in 2022 (STA, 2022). Arguably too, by the end of this period, Janša's counterknowledge dissemination reached its peak, which was most evident in his attitudes towards the establishment media and intellectuals, whose criticism of his regime was constantly dismissed. Only two weeks after the pandemic (and the new government mandate) began, Janša proclaimed the Slovenian Press Agency, the state's key communication channel, to be 'the ventilator of fake-news' (Veselinovič, 2020, p. 116). In May 2020, Janša used the government website to publish a self-authored essay, 'War with the media', in which he accused the media of being a mirror to propaganda instead of the truth (Janša 2020). Despite the increasing relevance of these developments, only some analyses have touched on Janša's attack on the public media, journalists and intellectuals (Pajnik & Hrženjak, 2024; Splichal, 2020; Vobič, 2022)—these are mostly in the field of journalism studies and media culture rather than political science—while most scholarship on populism in Slovenia

focuses on previously elaborated elements of its populist ‘othering’ tactics. In what follows, we try to fill this empirical lacuna by investigating in detail Janša’s and SDS’s relation to production of truth and knowledge, and by showing how their attempts of establishing epistemic authority play a role in their populist struggle for power and influence.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

Method and Materials

To explore the counterknowledge production of Janša and SDS, we utilized a frame analysis, understood as a discursive approach to the assessment of frames and antagonisms embedded in texts (Pajnik & Fabijan, 2023, p. 748). Goffman (1974, p. 21) conceived a frame as ‘schemata of interpretation’ rendering that which would ‘otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful’. Through the frame analysis we can therefore ‘locate, perceive, identify and label’ data under analysis (ibid.). This approach is especially salient in the assessment of political communication, as frames ‘call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements’ (Entman, 1993, p. 55). In this sense, political actors are involved in the struggle with other political actors and journalists over frames and their dominance. Frames thus play a role in the show of political power, but also as a register of the identity of actors or their interests that eventually come to dominate the texts (ibid.).

The dataset is comprised of news articles published by outlets Nova24tv.si and Demokracija, and individual speeches or statements made by Janša. Data was compiled by searching through online archives of those outlets and by using web search engines. We used the keywords ‘post-truth’, ‘post-fact’ and ‘fake-news’. Articles, speeches, or statements that were tagged by at least one of those key words were listed. The terms other than ‘post-truth’ were used as only a few articles were found by using the keyword ‘post-truth’; most texts were tagged with the label ‘fake-news’. Once we collected the data, we first cleared the list by removing the double entries, including the double publication of the articles in the two outlets and retweets by Janša. Next, we coded the data, by assigning additional labels/codes to each of the articles based on the contents. After coding, we classified categories as discursive frames and sub-frames following Aslanidis (2016, p. 98), which enabled

us to resonate with the ‘cognitive aspects of the populist message’ while also rooting the analysis in a more solid methodological framework (see Table 1). By utilizing frame analysis, we relied on what Bacchi (2009, p. 39) defines as ‘strategic framing’ which relates to ‘conscious and intentional selection of language and concepts to influence political debate and decision-making’.

Initial Findings

Assessing the interplay of codes, we could identify two clusters: one in 2018 and the other in 2021 (see Fig. 1). The first peak occurs during the 2018 parliamentary elections. At the time SDS was an opposition party that was isolated by most of the other parties. The second occurs in the late stage of the pandemic and before the Slovenian EU Council presidency, when SDS was the main government party. It faced allegations of corruption, interference with independent institutions and of overstepping its authority while its public support was low. In between those two periods, and especially in early 2020 at the start of the pandemic when SDS took power and its public support was high, the frequency of post-truth codes declined to zero. Because of its popularity and the way it was seen as a symbol of stability during the crisis, the SDS did not need to utilize counterknowledge/post-truth strategies to attract support. In contrast, once its own authority started being contested, the SDS increased its reliance on counterknowledge claims as a way of countering their critics and adversaries.

Fake media is the most frequent code which demonstrates that media is at the centre of the SDS’s post-truth discourse. Exports of fake news and antivaccine codes have been present since late 2020. Exports of fake news codes are related to the context of the EU Council presidency, and antivaccine codes to the COVID-19 pandemic context. Fake international media, minority and Nazi washing codes are more frequent during the early period. The frequency of ‘communist legacy’ codes is higher during the later period. Such alignment of codes suggests a change in SDS’ position and strategy, from being an isolated opposition party to becoming a governing party and facing strong criticism for trying to remould the state and society. It shows how coming to power was related to stronger, but also more moderate and specific, rhetoric targeting especially domestic critics and attempts to gain more mainstream international legitimacy. The

Table 1 Main frames and sub-frames identified in dataset

Fake media	<p><u>Fake media</u>: fake, biased, and instrumental reporting of the ‘dominant’ or ‘mainstream’ national media on the SDS/conservative forces, direct linkages between those media and progressive political forces, government and state institutions and agenda, with indications of power abuse and corruption</p> <p><u>Fake international media</u>: global media such as the NYT and CNN, information companies such as Google, and social networks such as Facebook, advance progressivist, leftist and globalist agenda while discriminating against conservative politicians such as Trump, Orban and Vučić</p> <p><u>Exports of fake news</u>: instrumentalization of foreign media and institutions by domestic media and experts linked to certain political groups by exporting fake news, taking advantage of the information asymmetry, lack of local knowledge and/or politically motivated reporting</p>
Fake institutions	<p><u>Quasi-independent institutions and experts</u>: the instrumental, biased, and politicized character of independent institutions, CSOs, experts and academia</p>
Truth-washing	<p><u>Legitimacy washing</u>: false and exaggerated stories about social groups and actors opposing or criticizing conservative forces, such as reporting on public protests, the government performance on the economy and social issues; reports about ‘real’ and ‘working people’, real civil society organizations and groups supporting the conservative government and rejecting the criticism as projecting and falsely representing popular support</p> <p><u>Minority washing</u>: false stories about human rights abuses in the cases of minorities and deprived groups such as refugees, ethnic minorities and women by fabrication, exaggeration and emotional appeal as well as covering up or hiding facts such as the real background of criminals when this conflicts with the progressive agenda</p> <p><u>Nazi-washing</u>: false stories depicting conservative and nativist political forces as proponents of radical ideologies such as Nazism and Fascism</p>

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Dominant ideology and structures	<p><u>Antivaccine</u>: fake news about COVID and Janša’s government policy on it by media and public actors</p> <p><u>Communist legacy</u>: political culture in Slovenia is impacted by illiberalism and authoritarianism, anti-pluralist elements, unequal and constrained political competition, state systems and sub-systems infected with false ideology, starting with education, the ‘deep’ or ‘parallel’ state, power abuse and corruption</p> <p><u>Fake liberalism</u>: tendencies to control, dictate, re-socialize, that violate basic rights and freedoms such as freedom of speech, expression, and one’s identity, on the side of the European institutions and globalist actors and institutions, associated with lack of local knowledge and political and ideological biases, including liberal-progressive agenda such as LGBTQ and neo-Marxism</p>
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focus on fake media also demonstrates this hybrid strategy as opposed to a full scale delegitimizing of various actors and institutions.

ANALYSING POST-TRUTH DISCOURSE

Fake Media Frame

Our analysis showed that the interplay of sub-frames ‘fake media’, ‘fake international media’ and ‘export of fake news’ produces counterknowledge claims used to delegitimize media institutions as fake or biased, necessarily associated with left-wing parties, a leftist agenda, activists, and foreign agents. In doing so, SDS aims to discredit the media, accusing it of propaganda and bias towards the opposition. They claim that information being shared is based on personal feelings and beliefs and not facts. By establishing such counterknowledge claims about the media, SDS aims to substitute the prevalent source of information—and thereby what is deemed to be *truth*—with the ones they claim to be trustworthy, objective and therefore legitimate.

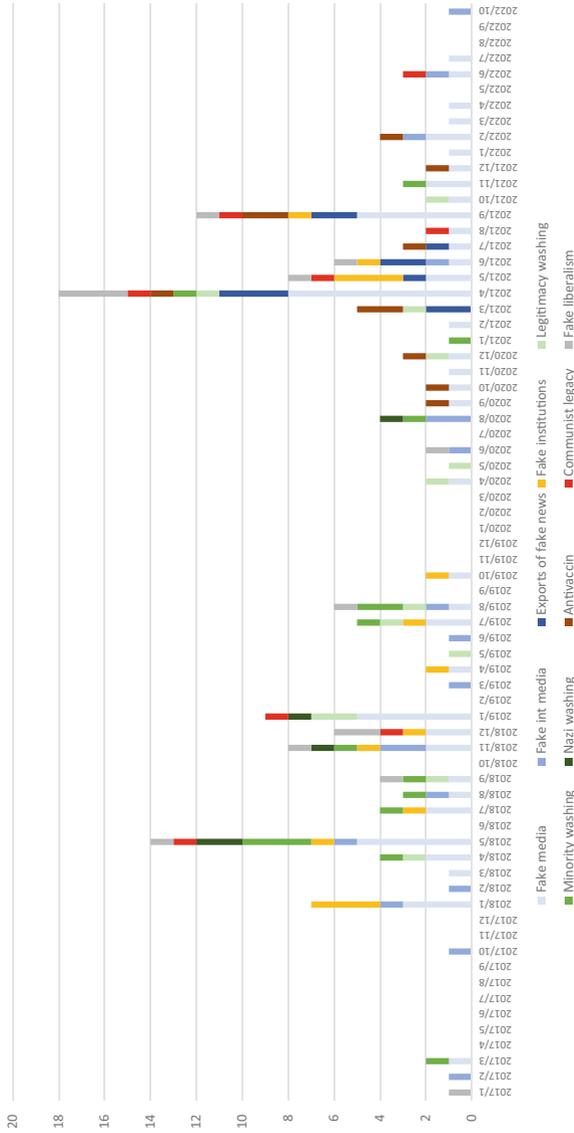


Fig. 1 Frequency of post-truth codes in articles published by Nova24tv.si and Demokracija and in Jansa's speeches and statements

Fake Media Sub-frame

The coverage by the ‘dominant’ and ‘mainstream’ Slovenian media of Janša, SDS and conservative political forces is portrayed as fake, biased, and instrumental; direct linkages are exposed between media and leftist political parties, government, and state structures; journalists are seen as activists furthering a leftist agenda, and at worst, as corrupt leftist agents. According to Matevž Tomšič (2022), a pro-SDS media expert, in an age of the post-truth:

what is true and what is not becomes more and more arbitrary /.../ facts, something of which existence can be proven and empirically verified, are becoming less and less important /.../ reference to people’s feelings and personal beliefs comes to the fore.

Within this sub-frame the ‘new media’ are said to ‘help spread misinformation and /.../ fake news’. These are considered as the main tool of politicians of the ‘problematic variety’, labelled as ‘populists’. The main claim that SDS constructs here is that traditional or mainstream media work in support of a particular kind of ‘political-ideological activism’ viewed to be ‘just a propaganda tool in the hands of the state or ruling parties’. For example, Tomšič further argues that this is done in a more and more open fashion and uses the recent election campaign in Slovenia as a typical example of ‘post-truth’:

Thirty years after the formal transition to democracy in Slovenia, most of the dominant media support only one political option; one that draws its power from the structures of the former communist regime. (ibid.)

The fake media sub-frame delegitimizes the media and represents their production as fake, which leads to blunt political expressions that deny media any credibility. To give an example, to a rhetorical question ‘what exactly is accurate in the information of our dominant media’, Vinko Gorenak, ex-SDS minister, and MP responds, ‘practically nothing’ (Nova24tv.si, 2020).

Fake International Media Sub-frame

The second sub-frame concerns the wider role of the media, beyond the domestic context. As one article suggests:

When Barack Obama was in power, the left-wing media acted as the government's PR' /.../ Even big agencies such as Reuters could not resist being infected by leftist virus /.../ Being only a week in office, Trump was already compared to dictators – if it was Clinton whose other name is corruption and crime they would report how beautiful the world is and how America is doing better. (Rant, 2017)

Within this sub-frame, it is not Trump who produced fake news—'it was CNN that invented the term to discredit its opponent /.../ Trump just used it against them' (I.Š., 2019b). Trump had to face such discrimination until the end of his term despite his great achievements, as:

they preferred to portray him exclusively as a threat to world democracy and kept silent about all his successes, which were not few. It was Trump who pointed out all the pitfalls of modern globalization, where the American worker was the one who got the most out of it. (G.B., 2021)

Such outlandish claims are then symbolically applied to the Slovenian context as further 'proof' of how the media tarnishes political actors of the Janša's ilk.

Export of Fake News Sub-frame

The negative reporting by certain foreign media about Janša became a topic when he took over the government. Under the export of 'fake news' sub-frame, this is explained by the failings of domestic and international media, which leads to the promulgation of fake news exports, which are then imported as objective news. This is compared to activities of various criminal groups that try to 'clean' the dirty money by investing it in some legal activity (Tomšič, 2021). The 'News Washing' operation in Slovenia is elaborated further by pro-SDS social media personality Libertarec (the Libertarian):

1. News is published through fake profiles and export it to a foreign journalist through activists.
2. RTV and 24ur (*popular media in Slovenia*) inflate the story.
3. Two days later, Mladina (*pro-left weekly*) publishes the same news, now citing a foreign journalist as a source. (Perš, 2021a)

Within this sub-frame, explanations for negative reporting are found in the media’s pre-determined views, with the credibility of international media being flagged as an issue. On this issue, one commentator writes:

They look down on Slovenia, they don’t know Slovenian conditions, or they don’t like to delve into what they are writing about /.../ they report in accordance with a pre-prepared agenda /.../, they are not ready to hear a different opinion /.../ ready to shamelessly trample on the basic principles of journalistic and reporting ethics. (Pirkovič in Mezeg, 2021)

Moreover, a certain sense of disillusionment is pointed to. According to one commentator, some journalists act as preachers; they are the only ones who claim to know the truth and must convince others. Others are prosecutors; they build their case by picking the arguments that support it and discarding the rest. The commentator further argues that journalists should instead act as scientists, trying to test their arguments (Čirič in Mezeg, 2021). People are, according to this narrative, expressing ‘disillusionment with foreign media’, ‘same as with liberalism’. It is argued that just as with liberalism, ‘journalism is an ideology’ (Tomšič in Mezeg, 2021). For the new journalists, to have an agenda is a sufficient criterion; they are activists for whom even facts are disturbing (ibid.). Just as with the coverage of Slovenia by foreign media, ‘attacks on Poland and Hungary’ were seen as ‘equally politically motivated because they do not follow [the] progressive ideological agenda’ (ibid). Building on this, Janša (STA, 2021) said that the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, who warned about the deterioration of media freedom and freedom of expression in Slovenia, was ‘part of a fake news network’.

FAKE INSTITUTIONS FRAME

Through the ‘fake institutions’ frame, SDS issues counterknowledge claims about institutions, portrayed to be using the terms ‘fake news’ and ‘hate speech’ as a pretext for their abuse of power. SDS argues here that arbitrarily regulating truth suppresses freedom of speech and freedom of expression. SDS thus suggests that institutions are not independent actors but are engulfed in wider plot to interfere with questions of truth and knowledge and who has the authority on truth.

Quasi-independent Institutions and Experts Sub-frame

Under this sub-frame, attempts to regulate public speech are presented as aiming to regulate the truths that are instrumental to power abuse and corruption, with fake news and hate speech largely seen as a pretext for this. Social media are often described as a challenge to the ‘dominance of the traditional mainstream media’ by ‘exposing their untrustworthiness’ and furthering their ‘credibility crisis’ (P.T., 2018). The reasoning for this is found in the bias of the institutions that make space only for particular kinds of voices:

It is typically left-liberals, journalists and scientists, who talk about fake news to claim authority /.../ They are wolfs in sheep’s clothing /.../ they milk state budget to produce fog. (I.Š., 2019a, b)

Commentators make claims about the attack on freedom of speech, on the grounds that it is ‘hate speech’. One commentator writes:

The media, so-called social activists and even, at least on the face of it, eminent lawyers attack all those who think differently. (J.Ž., 2018)

According to this frame, concern about ‘hate speech’ essentially gives the government a pretext to interfere with freedom of expression (Petek, 2019).

TRUTH WASHING FRAME

The third frame brings together different counterknowledge claims about ‘truth washing’. According to the first claim, voices critical of SDS are seen as being overrepresented in the media—and thus as illegitimately speaking on behalf of ‘the people’. Moreover, their authority over truth is falsely established, and instead should be given to actual ‘people’—workers, elderly people, patriotic people. Here, in particular, we see how SDS’s counterknowledge narrative works as a tool of its populist strategy: it exposes the ‘others’ by further discrediting their epistemic worth. Hence, any group which is seen as the ‘other’ is put in a chain of equivalence with the left wing and hence represented as untrustworthy, relying on fake news and being overly emotional.

Legitimacy Washing Sub-frame

Through this sub-frame, voices of critics of conservative forces in general and of SDS in particular, are cast as being overrepresented. Contrary to this, claims are issued about supporting voices and positive evidence being ignored and suppressed. In one article, it is claimed that:

a minor number of violent protesters are declared to be more important than the majority. In democracies, it is the majority who counts, and not a few minor tenths of a percent of the dissatisfied. (Gorenak, 2022)

In this way, it is suggested that critics are falsely represented as objective and independent when in fact their privileged media access covers their ‘corrupt and violent nature’—as opposed to the real, hard-working, patriotic ‘little’ people, who support conservative values. This is illustrated by claims that ‘a distraught pensioner, who earned her low pension with her own blisters’, is brought into opposition with the national press, whose head ‘earns more in a month than pensioner gets in a year /.../ lives out of other’s work /.../ enjoys from media that favour him the loyalty of a dog’ (Nova24tv.si, 2020). By advocating for the voices of the ‘small’ people such as the ‘distraught pensioner’, SDS frames ‘the elite’ as illegitimate not only in a political but also in epistemic sense, as their privileges rely on their own version of truth and reality.

Minority Washing Sub-frame

The ‘minority washing’ sub-frame casts vulnerable groups, such as refugees, ethnic minorities and women, as abused and falsely victimized to further leftist societal meddling based on emotional appeal. It is suggested that coverage of migrants is being ‘debunked’ and exposed as propaganda. One article states that ‘Migrant families drowning in the sea’ are ‘another fake news /.../ for the needs of the left-wing multiculturalization of society’ (C.Š., 2018). Further on, the author writes that:

Dying children in the ruins, the suffering of migrants on their way to Europe [has] so far repeatedly proven to be the backdrop with which they want to influence the emotions of media viewers [in order to] more easily accept the entry of hundreds of thousands of people of foreign, especially Muslim, culture. (ibid.)

We identified references to so-called ‘pedophrasty’, which is used to describe the abuse of children to advance a political agenda based on emotion and parental instinct:

All it takes is a picture of a small, possibly suffering, or dead child to evoke a strong enough emotional reaction in the target audience to immediately demand that something be done about it /.../ The mainstream media absolutely love Greta (Thunberg). Doubting the words of a child, and an autistic one ...? How heartless! Aren’t you ashamed? (Šokić, 2019)

Furthering this suggestion are claims of the inconsistency of the ‘new left’ (that no longer represents the ‘real working people’ but rather the ‘quasi-intellectualist’, the ‘degenerate class’ and the ‘transnational lumpenproletariat’), who are seen to be responsible for the effects of social engineering:

Namely, people feel all the progressiveness of the migrant crisis, which was staged with the aim of replacing them. The Social Democrats, who, /.../ should be the greatest defenders of workers, are thus their greatest enemy. That is, the more migrants there are in the country, the lower wages remain for all workers. (I.Š., 2019a, b)

Nazi Washing Sub-frame

Through the ‘Nazi washing’ sub-frame SDS suggests that media, politicians, NGOs, and experts advancing the progressive agenda falsely represent conservatives as extremists—as proponents of Nazism and fascism—while at the same time trying to conceal the inconvenient facts that go against their agenda. The latter is then typically associated with ethnic backgrounds of perpetrators of individual crimes. In light of the statement from a correspondent from Washington on *Odmevi* (an evening show on public TV) that a ‘white-skinned suspect’ was responsible for the crimes on the Capitol, one article explained the reporting, by the fact of him being:

The ardent supporter of American Democrats, Antifa and BLM. (Perš, 2021a, b)

Similar claims are issued that suggest that people are forced to believe certain progressive official truths and that even questioning the merits of certain facts is constrained in favour of a particular agenda:

Holocaust is taboo /.../ In some European countries it is forbidden to question official numbers /.../ We are forced to believe, not because of truth but because of political dictate /.../ So much for the freedom of thought we are supposed to have in an enlightened Europe. (I.Š., 2019a, b)

With this sub-frame, especially, we see a strong case of political cognitive relativism—each truth claim issued by Janša or SDS is relative to their social groups. In other words, they reject any truth given by non-members of their epistemic community, purely on the basis of their political opposition. This produces absurd claims, such as the one above, where their antagonism towards left-wing, anti-fascist options trumps historical accuracy and clashes with well-established facts.

Antivaccine Sub-frame

Faced with criticism for arbitrary, ineffective, and poorly communicated policy on COVID-19, Janša’s government has put the blame on media, activists, and the opposition. Speaking about the fight against COVID-19 at the EU Summit (M.L., 2020) Janša said that in Slovenia fake news is ‘often spread through mainstream media’. He argued that ‘this is forcing individual governments to take more drastic measures than would be needed if such information would not be spread’. The criticism of the government was equated with anti-vaccination movement and conspiracy theorists:

It seems the left parties have reached a point where they can only stay relevant with lies and fake news. (Murn, 2020)

As in the previous sub-frame, here we can assess the cognitive relativism, which is part and parcel of SDS counterknowledge, as illustrated by the claims that in criticizing Janša’s ineffective COVID-19 policy, mainstream media is guilty of conspiracy and is equated with the antivaccination movement. The merit of such criticisms is completely overlooked, and irrelevant to the promulgation of SDS’s counterknowledge.

DOMINANT IDEOLOGY AND STRUCTURES FRAME

In the ‘dominant ideology and structures’ frame, left-wing parties are portrayed as proponents of communism, and their truth-claims as necessarily unreliable and tainted by communist ideology. Any popular action or expressions of mass protest are marked as an attempt to restore a totalitarian system. In this way, the antagonistic ‘other’ in SDS counterknowledge is positioned as an interference and a distortion of facts. They see information as shared through mainstream channels regardless of its validity, while ideas which SDS stands for are suppressed and fought against.

Communist Legacy Sub-frame

In his commentary addressed to participants of the Bled Strategic Forum in 2021, Janša (2021, p. 6) argued that:

Since 2004 the EU has been a union of states with very different historical memories and experiences [due to] totalitarian rule for three generations.

Because of this legacy—and because structural transition that covers all social systems has not yet been completed—there are a lot of ‘misunderstandings’, such as those around the rule of law. He further argued against ‘radical centralism’ that would hinder an effective national policy response, and called for a ‘New Europe of sovereign equality and freedom of choice’ (ibid.). Similarly, in his speech on totalitarianism, Janša argued that society in Slovenia is still deeply embedded in communist groupthink:

We are witnessing mass denial in Slovenia, especially of the consequences and the very nature of the communist regime /.../ three parliamentary parties do not see communist regime as a bad thing and that one even uses it as a benchmark. (gov.si, 2021)

He once again criticizes European authorities for an ‘appeasing attitude’ towards communism. In similar terms, a commentator for Demokracija argued that:

The anti-democratic reflex manifested itself years ago most clearly in the framework of the so-called popular uprisings marked by violence. They uncompromisingly attacked policemen, public institutions, journalists, even

rescuers, hung puppets of politicians, threatened them at home, spread threats such as ‘death to Janša’, ‘death to Janšism’ /.../ Red stars and inscriptions on banners such as ‘elections bring only the same faces’ and that ‘even Hitler was elected’ clearly show that democratic elections are not a goal or a value for them at all. (Granda in Bertoneclj, 2021)

Echoing the overall goal of SDS counterknowledge system, the commentator goes on to state that:

We will do everything to prevent the establishment of an eco-socialist system, which essentially means the restoration of a totalitarian system /.../ socialism and communism have caused enormous damage in Slovenia. We see and feel the consequences even today /.../ caused by the ancestors of those who are now offering an alternative. (ibid.)

Much of what constitutes SDS counterknowledge has to do with connecting left-wing options to the Slovenian legacy of Communism. A priori framing their opposition as proponents of communist and totalitarian ideas suggests that any criticism or disagreement which comes out is only due to their commitment to the previous (and largely unwanted) regime. This way, SDS can strategically frame itself as the only real moral authority on truth and knowledge, casting every other option as tainted by the past, indoctrination, and groupthink.

Fake Liberalism Sub-frame

The sub-frame ‘fake liberalism’ aims to depict the media and mainstream institutions as using appeals for ‘liberalism’ and ‘democracy’ as a mask for attacking SDS. Along these lines, appeals are made for public debate to become freer and more equal, rather than being further distorted by the media:

One of the main mantras constantly repeated by domestic and foreign critics of the Janša governments is that it ‘interferes in the media landscape’ to ‘subjugate’ supposedly independent media. This is actually a distortion of the facts and a camouflage of the actual situation /.../ When someone calls them liars such journalists portray themselves as victims! (Tomšič, 2021)

Furthermore, claims are made that all political actors want to influence media coverage, but not all have the privilege of doing so. As a result, people don't have appropriate access to what is true or not, as one commentator argued:

People do not have the right to true information but to disseminate and receive it regardless of whether it is true or not /.../ today it is no longer permissible to defend a point of view e.g., that Europe belongs to Europeans, or that national borders are meant to be impossible for anyone to cross, or that it is necessary to transport shipwrecked people back to Africa, where they came from. (J.Ž., 2018)

On a more general basis, these are part of a wider problem:

Something is occurring in the old Europe that is worse than the old left /.../ 'progressive-totalitarian ideology' a mixture of irresponsibility and reordering. (F.K., 2021)

Because the opposition is preoccupied with criticism of SDS 'they cannot even define fake news'. As a result:

If there is no universal truth, everything is fake news (I.Š., 2019b)

In this sub-frame we see a culmination of SDS counterknowledge claims, as they make the final provocation against its opponents—criticism towards SDS is framed as a more sinister attempt to transform the very meaning of truth, to suggest that there is no such thing as universal truth. Janša and SDS illuminate in the 'other' the very thing they are aiming to achieve; they construct and disseminate information according to their party ideology and ethos. In this way, their truth claims are inherently bound up with political aims while they simultaneously accuse the 'other' of the very same thing.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It so happens that dedication to truth, often at the crux of the political and unalloyed reality, is not always a powerful unifying force. With this chapter we set out to investigate the interplay between populism and post-truth through the Slovenian case of Janez Janša and the SDS. In doing so, we investigated (post)-truth as a floating signifier which is used in various

ways as a means of constructing political identities and conflicts which are part of a broader hegemonic struggle. Assessing Janša's and SDS's post-truth discourse was done with the intention of uncovering elements of its counterknowledge, acting as one of the populist tools working to achieve a system of alternative sources of knowledge. Approaching the issue of post-truth in such a way, presumes a move away from analysis of the validity of information put forward by these actors towards an assessment of the way the truth-claims are part of a hegemonic struggle.

In our analysis we discovered four prevailing frames of Janša and SDS's counterknowledge. The first frame—'fake media'—comprises references to media, both local and international and the exporting of fake news. SDS accuses the media of being untrustworthy and as having a vendetta against Janša and the whole party. References to international media further strengthen these claims, as they seek to 'prove' that media, here and everywhere, works to discredit opponents of mainstream ideas. To achieve this, media exports fake news, their output being selected as part of an agenda that is politically motivated and numb to opposing opinions. Establishing such a relation to media enables SDS to further their populist claims; the media is necessarily seen as part of 'the elite', which is illegitimately claiming authority over truth and knowledge. Similarly, the second frame—'fake institutions'—is focused on references to quasi-independent institutions and experts. Closely connected to the previous frame, by strategically framing institutions as adhering to already established 'fake media', SDS pushes further claims of the total capture of truth by nefarious institutions and bodies.

The third frame—'truth washing'—shows attempts at the creation of 'echo chambers' that Nguyen (2020) talks about, as SDS works to construct a particular epistemic community which is to be wary about the outsiders, who are not to be trusted. In drawing sharp boundaries of legitimate epistemic sources, SDS then further illustrates who the outsiders are. With such 'minority washing' arguments, SDS suggests that representations of groups such as refugees, ethnic minorities and women are a deliberate attempt to turn them into victims as part of a leftist agenda based on emotional appeal. The final frame deals with claims related to 'dominant ideology and structures', primarily the communist legacy, and so-called fake liberalism. Janša regards the previous regime as inherently totalitarian and argues that communist groupthink still permeates Slovenian society, while criticism of SDS is a Trojan horse for the distortion

of public debate. The opposition is cast as fake liberal, its principal goal being to discredit Janša and SDS.

Going through these four frames we can confirm the cogency of Ylä-Anttila's (2018) counterknowledge argument. Janša and SDS do not necessarily oppose science or expert knowledge, nor do they solely privilege folk knowledge. Rather, they advocate a particular kind of counter-expertise, which arises from their own epistemic community. Here their populist logic comes through the most. SDS uses populist logic to simplify the Slovenian political arena: positioning SDS and likeminded conservative actors against left-wing parties, communist sympathizers, and activists. The latter is seen as unjustly occupying the political and media mainstream and therefore hegemonizing epistemological authority as well. This is why SDS employs counterknowledge to challenge these authorities whilst simultaneously using truth claims for political mobilization. They try to mobilize people—all those who are being lied to, who are manipulated by fake-news and the emotional appeals of the left. Furthermore, we see that, contrary to presumptions of epistemological populism and science-related populism, SDS is not rejecting expert science, nor is it arguing that people 'know better' due to their proximity to everyday life. Rather, they are rejecting the expertise of 'the elite', which, according to them, is working to suppress objective systems of knowledge which SDS is supposedly advocating for.

This conclusion somewhat complicates the vision of populists as irrational, irresponsible actors who are ignoring the truth. Instead, we see that SDS is actively trying to portray itself as a trustworthy option, the defender of not only the nation, Slovenians, and conservative values, but also of truth and objectivity, of free speech and expression. SDS's truth-claims are thus part of their hegemonic struggle used to intensify political antagonisms. In this sense, populism and the post-truth condition expose certain structural issues inherent in our political systems. What is revealed is not that there is no truth, but that it can be flawed and susceptible to attacks. Post-truth populists strategically exploit and consolidate this in order to strengthen their own power and legitimacy. By playing around with a hybrid strategy of political cognitive relativism, rather than a full-scale delegitimation of science and knowledge, SDS works to portray itself as the only reliable authority on truth, thereby constructing epistemic authority as another antagonistic frontier of their populist strategy. Taken together, insights from the Slovenian case help point to the importance of assessing how truth-claims are utilized by

populist actors, beyond branding them as necessarily irrational or ignorant. Rather, we see that populists very carefully construct truth claims, inscribed in the dichotomous schema of antagonistic frontiers in which their struggle plays out. Post-truth populists should thus not be treated as truth-deniers, but rather as symptoms of a crisis and as actors who actively work to further fuel and exploit this crisis. When assessing their performance, we must offer a nuanced view of the structural conditions which enable such phenomena. Populist parties and governments operating in the context of weakened democracies and institutions, such as SDS, are an excellent example of this.

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Three-Step Rhetorical Model of Conspiratorial Populism

Eiríkur Bergmann 

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary post-truth politics, employing conspiracy theories is among the most potent rhetorical tools available to populist leaders. In this chapter, I will identify and examine a threefold claim that nativist populists put forth in their support of the people via conspiracy theories (Bergmann, 2020). First, they tend to create an external threat to the nation discursively. *Second*, they accuse the domestic elite of betraying the people, often even of siding with external aggressors. *Third*, they position themselves as the true defenders of the ‘pure people’ they vow to protect against both the elite and these malignant outsiders, that is, against those they have discursively created. I argue that populist conspiracy theorists share these traits across both countries and themes.

Over time, numerous conspiracy theories have proliferated through extensive disinformation campaigns, offering alternative narratives of the global order that significantly diverge from conventional wisdom. These theories are championed by conspiratorial populists who assert that secretive and powerful elites control politics. These elites are accused of

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orchestrating global events to their benefit, to the detriment of the general populace.

The discussion here focuses on three prominent conspiracy theories, each gaining traction in different geographical regions in contemporary times. In Western Europe, the Eurabia conspiracy theory has found favour among many nativist populists. It has been leveraged to incite actions against those labelled as ‘dangerous others’—in the present context, often Muslims. In the United States, the Deep State conspiracy theory was vehemently propagated by Donald Trump. This theory posits the existence of a hidden network comprising bureaucrats, professional politicians, and interest agencies, purportedly manipulating society from the shadows. Trump notably invoked this theory to rally his supporters in his defence following his loss in the 2020 presidential election. Meanwhile, in Russia, Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin have long embraced a variety of anti-Western conspiracy theories. These have been strategically deployed to garner support for actions such as the invasion of Ukraine, demonstrating their use as a tool for geopolitical manoeuvring.

THE WEAPONISATION OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Conspiracy theories have always played a role in political discourse. Still, it’s only in recent times that we’ve begun to appreciate their significant impact on political beliefs and the overall political culture of our era. The ascendancy of far-right populist parties in recent years has paralleled a marked increase in the proliferation of conspiracy theories. This development can be partly linked to the transformation of the digital media environment and the modern ways in which information is shared (Bergmann, 2018). This shift has introduced alternative narratives that diverge from the traditional perspectives we once held.

The mainstream acceptance of populism underscores the significance of this shift. The emergence of populist leaders across Europe and the U.S. signifies that this movement is no longer relegated to the margins of political discourse. We are now in the age of the populist—specifically, the conspiratorial populist, where conspiracy theories have become intertwined with the fabric of democratic politics (Bergmann & Butter, 2020).

Research has indicated that exposure to conspiracy theories can erode trust in governmental institutions, posing a threat to democracy and

societal trust. Additionally, the proliferation of such theories has been identified as a driving force behind extremism.

To grasp the dynamics of current politics, it's crucial to understand how conspiracy theories shape people's worldviews and how populist politicians exploit these beliefs for political advantage. While numerous scholars, including Karen Douglas and her colleagues (Douglas et al., 2017), have explored the former aspect, my focus lies on the latter. The examination of how populists utilise conspiracy theories for political leverage is both timely and necessary. This analysis pays particular attention to the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and Neo-Nationalism, specifically how nativist populists harness conspiracy theories to promote their agendas and bolster support for their movements. This chapter delves into the strategic use of conspiracy theories as discursive tools of political warfare. The concept of weaponisation is dissected into two facets: one, the use of conspiracy theories by politicians as a strategic tool for political ends, and two, the incitement of violent acts by adherents influenced by such rhetoric. These aspects are evident in all three case studies presented in this analysis.

THE EURABIA CONSPIRACY THEORY

The notion of Eurabia has profoundly impacted the socio-political landscape of Europe. This concept, suggesting a deliberate strategy for the Muslim populace to supplant Europe's indigenous Christian communities, has evolved from marginal roots to a significant theme in European political discussions. Tied closely with the broader anxieties about the Great Replacement, the Eurabia theory has been embraced and magnified by various neo-nationalist and populist factions, fundamentally transforming European politics and societal structures (Bracke & Aguilar, 2024).

Originating in the late twentieth century, the Eurabia conspiracy theory garnered substantial momentum following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and amid the 2015 Refugee Crisis. Initially disseminated among extreme right-wing groups through xenophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric, these notions gradually infiltrated broader political and social dialogues. This transition was facilitated by global and regional occurrences that intensified concerns over immigration and cultural identity, marking a pivotal shift in its acceptance among mainstream political figures and media platforms. Such a transformation indicates and has

contributed to a rise in nativist populist parties in European political spheres (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018).

Figures such as Victor Orbán of Hungary, Giorgia Meloni of Italy, Marine Le Pen of France, and Geert Wilders of the Netherlands have lent credence to aspects of the Eurabia narrative (Monaci et al., 2023). Often, their support is veiled in discourse championing national culture and identity, thereby legitimising xenophobic and Islamophobic prejudices and casting Muslim immigrants as existential dangers to European civilisation. The politicisation of the Eurabia theory has proven to be an effective means to mobilise support, particularly from constituents disillusioned by globalisation and shifting demographic landscapes (Bergmann, 2021).

The Eurabia theory is not standalone but continues a legacy of conspiracy theories targeting groups like Jews and Catholics (Dyrendal, 2017). These conspiracies generally involve elaborate schemes to undermine national sovereignty, frequently employed to rationalise socio-political transformations or unrest. The narrative structure and purpose of the Eurabia theory closely resemble these historical conspiracies, showcasing a continual tendency towards scapegoating and instigating fear during periods of societal flux.

The integration of once-extremist rhetoric into mainstream political and public discourse signifies a notable cultural transition in Europe. Propagated by both traditional and new media platforms, this discourse has normalised formerly extremist views, leading to an upsurge in xenophobic and racist attitudes that have fostered societal division and polarisation (van Prooijen et al., 2015). The skewed portrayal of Muslim communities and the overstatement of their demographic and cultural impact have perpetuated these attitudes, creating a distorted view of reality that challenges rectification ('Pew Research Centre,' 2017).

The influence of the Eurabia theory is also evident in the stricter immigration policies enacted across Europe. Political entities, including mainstream parties, have shifted towards more stringent immigration and integration policies, mirroring a wider move towards more restrictive and exclusionary approaches (Goñda et al., 2020). This shift, while partly a response to the Eurabia theory, also reinforces its narrative by depicting immigration and multiculturalism as threats. Furthermore, public perceptions of Muslims and immigrants have been significantly shaped by this theory, often leading to exaggerated assumptions about their numbers and impact, thus fostering a climate of fear and mistrust.

The proliferation of the Eurabia theory poses a significant threat to the foundational values of the European Union and the state of liberal democracy in several member states (Davey & Ebner, 2019). By undermining principles of tolerance, diversity, and human rights, the spread of this theory signals a move towards ethno-nationalism and exclusionary politics, directly opposing the principles of liberal democracy. Beyond mere discourse, the implications for policy, governance, and European societal structure are profound.

While primarily a European phenomenon, the Eurabia theory both mirrors and contributes to a worldwide surge in nationalism and xenophobia. Its effects on international relations, migration policies, and the discourse on global cultural and religious diversity demonstrate the capacity of such narratives to cross borders and influence global dynamics, highlighting the significant role these narratives play in shaping international affairs and societal perceptions.

THE DEEP STATE CONSPIRACY THEORY

The conspiracy theory of the Deep State suggests the existence of a clandestine ruling class that exerts control over the United States government, effectively diminishing the authority of official governmental figures. This notion finds its roots in nations characterised by a history of military overthrows and a lack of democratic stability, gaining considerable traction in the political landscapes of the Middle East and North Africa from the 1960s onwards. The term ‘Deep State’ refers to the obscured power structures that function out of the public eye, encompassing sectors of the state machinery, criminal organisations, and powerful business entities (Gürpınar, 2019).

In American politics, the influence of conspiracy theories on political narratives and dynamics is longstanding (Hofstadter, 1964). For instance, the American populists of the late nineteenth century were driven by theories like the ‘Seven Financial Conspiracies,’ which accused English and American financiers of manipulating the populace (Sawyer, 2022). Similarly, the formation of the Republican Party in 1854 was spurred by the ‘Slave Power’ conspiracy theory, which articulated fears of domination by Southern slaveholders—a concern echoed by Abraham Lincoln and pivotal to his victory in the 1860 presidential election (Sawyer, 2022). In contemporary times, conspiracy theories continue to flourish within certain subcultures, spanning from allegations of governmental

disarmament schemes to apprehensions of a universal communist plot, showcasing their lasting and occasionally violent effect on American societal dynamics.

The Deep State concept achieved renewed attention in the U.S. with the emergence of the Tea Party and Donald Trump's 2016 presidential victory (Horwitz, 2021). Nonetheless, the idea of unseen entities influencing American politics pre-dates these events, highlighted by President Dwight D. Eisenhower's (1961), caution against the 'Military-Industrial Complex' (MIC) in his farewell speech. This concern over the tight nexus between the military and defence sectors has fostered theories regarding a 'shadow government' or a 'dual state' secretly directing national affairs. Such apprehensions have also fueled the notion of a clandestine 'fifth column' working internally to assist external foes.

The 'Red Scare,' epitomised by Senator Joseph McCarthy, was a period rife with the dread of communist penetration into the U.S. government and society, lasting from 1947 to 1957. McCarthy infamously, and without substantiation, proclaimed to possess a list of communists within the State Department, employing aggressive and public Senate investigations that engendered an atmosphere of fear and distrust (Butter, 2022).

The Watergate scandal in the 1970s propagated further scepticism towards a covert internal state, with suggestions that intelligence and other governmental bodies sought to subvert the Nixon administration. Such conspiratorial motifs have permeated American culture, as evident in literature, films, and television.

The terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 in the United States gave birth to numerous conspiracy theories, ranging from accusations of a deliberate lack of intervention by President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair for political leverage to theories of a Bush administration-led false flag operation, insider trading, and a missile attack on the Pentagon (Barkun, 2013). These theories propelled conspiracy thinking into the mainstream, revealing significant public scepticism towards the official narratives. The rise of the 9/11 Truth Movement mirrored the escalation of politically charged conspiracy theories during Obama's presidency.

The Birther conspiracy theory, which disputed Barack Obama's natural-born U.S. citizenship, found substantial support within right-wing circles during his presidency, with platforms like Fox News amplifying this

narrative, which also insinuated Obama's secret adherence to Islam, introducing an element of racism (Butter, 2022). Prominent figures, including Donald Trump and various Tea Party affiliates, propagated this theory, marking a period where previously peripheral conspiracy theories entered mainstream discourse. Surveys indicated widespread acceptance of these theories among Republicans, highlighting the potential of such narratives to polarise and shape political perspectives (Frankovic, 2016).

Donald Trump can firmly be classified as a populist figure. He might be the archetypical post-truth politician, as he didn't seem to care much about whether he was telling the truth or uttering mere fabrications. Fact-checkers have calculated that during his presidency he made over 30.000 false or misleading claims, leading to a 'Tsunami of Untruth' (Van der Linden, 2023). Trump notably incorporated conspiracy theories into his political strategy (Butter, 2022). His 2016 campaign, marked by straightforwardness, anti-elitism, and collectivism, resonated with voters harbouring nativist and conspiratorial views. As president, he often alluded to the Deep State conspiracy, suggesting that a secretive faction within the government was hindering his agenda. This theory, promoted by conservative media, hinted at the involvement of military and intelligence sectors. Trump tactically alluded to conspiracies without outright endorsement, maintaining a level of ambiguity that influenced public opinion, with surveys showing widespread belief in the existence of a Deep State, further polarising U.S. political discourse.

The QAnon movement, emerging in 2018, brought the Deep State conspiracy theory to the forefront, positing that a high-level insider, 'Q,' was exposing plots against President Trump, including allegations of a worldwide child sex-trafficking ring implicating prominent Democratic Party figures (Jones, 2023). Despite the effort of mainstream media to debunk these tales, QAnon amassed a significant following, particularly among the far-right. This spread had a significant impact, which, for example, is evident by studies indicating that more than half of Americans now endorse at least one conspiracy theory (Van der Linden, 2023).

ANTI-WESTERN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe witnessed a profound transformation in its political landscape. Russia's embrace and propagation of anti-Western conspiracy theories significantly influenced this change (Radnitz, 2023). These theories have not only mirrored but

also actively influenced Russia's identity and its interactions on the global stage in the post-Cold War era.

Russia has a longstanding history with conspiracy theories, such as anti-Jewish sentiments, dating back to the Soviet era. The era following 1991, however, marked a pivotal shift. Initially perceived as an opportunity to adopt Western-style liberal democracy, the post-Soviet transition's failure to bring about expected prosperity led to a disillusionment with Western principles across the ex-Soviet states (Radnitz, 2021).

The beginning of the twenty-first century saw Vladimir Putin rise to power, marking a critical turning point for Russia. Leaving Boris Yeltsin's Western-friendly approach, Putin's governance veered towards illiberalism, shaping Russia into a near-authoritarian state. This period saw a resurgence in nationalism and conspiracy theories, reframed the West as an antagonist rather than a partner (Yablokov, 2018). These theories became tools for challenging Western hegemony and asserting narratives of Russia's besieged identity and greatness.

A notable shift in Putin's political narrative occurred in the mid-2000s, highlighted by events such as the Moscow terror attacks and the emergence of the 'colour revolutions' in nearby countries (Yablokov & Chatterje-Doodly, 2023). Russia started to depict its challenges as stemming from a comprehensive Western conspiracy involving the U.S., the EU, NATO, and Western intelligence agencies. This perspective found echoes in Central European nations like Poland and Hungary, where conspiracy theories have underpinned efforts to consolidate political control and suppress civil liberties.

Media outlets have played a crucial role in spreading these conspiracy narratives. State-controlled media, particularly television, broadcasted government-sanctioned depictions of the West as a pervasive, malevolent force. Outlets like Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik News have served as international voices for these views, claiming to expose Western faults while using digital platforms and global networks to widen their reach (Yablokov & Chatterje-Doodly, 2023).

The content of these anti-Western conspiracy theories encompasses several recurring themes: NATO's expansion is portrayed as an attempt to encircle and debilitate Russia; domestic protests and opposition are seen as Western meddling; and the West is depicted as a decaying society, contrasted against Russia's moral and cultural ascendancy. These narratives have extended to accusing Russia of meddling in Western democratic events, such as the Brexit vote and the 2016 U.S. Presidential election,

and supporting European opposition movements to fracture Western cohesion (Snyder, 2018).

Under Putin, these anti-Western conspiracy theories have been strategically used to bolster the Kremlin's power, affirm Russia's national identity, and counteract Western influence. These narratives serve multiple purposes: domestically, they discredit the opposition, create a siege mentality, and rally support for the government; internationally, they aid Russia in projecting its power and influence, often through disruptive means in Western democracies. The revival of these conspiracy theories has had significant repercussions. Within Russia, they have facilitated the erosion of democratic standards and the fortification of an authoritarian regime (March, 2023). Internationally, they have strained relations with the West, destabilised the international order, and hindered collective responses to global challenges.

Instances involving the domestic protest punk band Pussy Riot and opposition leader Alexei Navalny demonstrate the Kremlin's approach to dissent, portraying them as Western agents and thereby justifying repressive measures against the opposition under the guise of protecting Russian sovereignty. This strategy has strengthened Putin's grip on power, casting him as the guardian of Russia against Western intrusion. In 2024, Navalny was found dead in prison after having been incarcerated for a long period on questionable grounds. Suspicions of the Kremlin being involved in his death were rampant (Roth, 2024).

Moreover, the dissemination of Russian conspiracy theories abroad has unsettled Western democracies, particularly through electoral interference, fostering global polarisation and complicating cooperative efforts against shared issues such as climate change, terrorism, and health crises. Leading up to the invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin utilised conspiracy-oriented narratives to justify military action, which I will return to discussing later in this chapter.

CONSPIRATORIAL POPULISM

Conspiracy theories vary widely, ranging from the investigation of specific incidents, such as the assassination of President Kennedy, to the broad depiction of human civilisation's history and present as being manipulated by hidden forces. This analysis here focuses on various conspiracy theories intentionally crafted and disseminated by those in power for political advantage. Utilising the narrative that sinister forces are orchestrating

events from the shadows is an effective means of political propaganda, effectively mobilizing support for those who promulgate such theories.

There is a notable correlation between the ascent of populist movements and the increasing visibility of conspiracy theories, highlighted by the natural tendency of populist figures to adopt conspiratorial views. Mark Fenster (2008) suggests that there is an intrinsic populist element to all conspiracy theories. It is, however, important to recognise that not every populist adheres to conspiracy theories, nor do all conspiracy theorists align with populist ideologies. Grigoris Markou (2022) posits that populism and conspiracy theories can operate independently of each other. However, the exploration in this chapter specifically examines how nativist populist groups are particularly inclined to fabricate and disseminate conspiracy theories.

Similar to populism, conspiracy theories offer critiques of powerful institutions, diverging from progressive critiques by simplifying the conflict into a binary opposition between the people and the elite, rather than presenting a detailed analysis of complex social structures. Populist conspiracism shifts attention away from the complexities of socio-economic issues towards animosity directed at specific individuals. In the context of our rapidly evolving, globalised, and technologically sophisticated world, the straightforward narratives offered by conspiracy theories hold a certain allure. One of their primary attractions is presenting a binary and oversimplified perspective of the world (Giry, 2017). By framing the world order as the result of evil deeds committed by elites against ordinary people, highly intricate social problems are reduced to a single, often simplistic explanation. This cognitive process can provide a sense of comfort.

Andrea Pirro and Paul Taggart (2023) articulate the concept of populist conspiracism as the dissemination of conspiracy theories by populist figures. They identify three intersecting themes between populism and conspiracy theories: Manichaeism, victimhood, and a scepticism towards representative politics. Analysing the intersection of populist ideologies and conspiracy theories reveals a shared perspective that views society as bifurcated into malevolent elites and the virtuous masses (Bergmann & Butter, 2020). This approach tends to oversimplify complex issues by pinning them on a single nefarious entity, effectively blaming a minor yet supposedly evil group for the myriad of societal challenges and issues. Additionally, both conspiracy theories and populism

tend to resonate with those who feel marginalised in socio-cultural and economic contexts.

This dichotomous view posits that the unsuspecting masses are preyed upon by sinister forces exploiting their innocence and goodness. Thus, both populists and conspiracy theorists adopt a Manichean outlook, crafting an external menace to their perceived in-group through their narratives. They employ a binary lens to interpret events, sharing a polarised perspective that narrates a struggle where a heroic underdog confronts a formidable villain. This polarisation, particularly within populism, manifests in the stark division drawn between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite.’

Michael Butter (2020) notes that populist leaders are more inclined to invoke conspiracy theories than their mainstream counterparts, with members of populist movements showing greater openness to such theories. Research indicates a link between a predisposition for populism and a belief in conspiracy theories (Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Thórisdóttir et al., 2020). Partick Sawyer (2022) further illustrates how adopting conspiratorial narratives can advantageously position a populist candidate in electoral contests; a sentiment echoed in the studies of Rooduijn et al. (2016) and Zimmermann and Kohring (2020), which highlight how the spread of political dissatisfaction and misinformation can benefit populist agendas.

Populist actors leverage conspiracy theories to mobilise voter support, casting themselves as champions of ‘the people’ in their battle against a supposed ‘existential evil.’ This shared focus on the ‘elite’ by both conspiracy theorists and populists, and their penchant for depicting conflicts in clear-cut, dualistic terms, paves the way for populists to weave these elements into a compelling narrative. Within this narrative framework, the so-called ‘corrupt’ elite are portrayed as directly antagonistic to ‘the people’s’ interests, involved in secretive and harmful conspiracies against the populace. Such narratives enable populist leaders to position themselves as steadfast defenders of ‘the people,’ validating their mission to save them from the ‘evil elite.’ This narrative alignment, in turn, fosters a deep and passionate support base among the electorate.

Numerous studies have documented the strategic use of conspiracy theories by politicians and activists to cultivate fear and distrust within societies. Karen Douglas (2017) highlights how Donald Trump strategically leveraged conspiracy theories to tap into the politicians’ and activists’ strategic use of conspiratorial suspicions of the electorate, using them as

a tool for political gain. This tactic is not limited to any one political ideology; figures such as Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, as well as groups like the Alternative für Deutschland and the Five-Star Movement in Italy, have made conspiracy theories a staple of their political messaging, often casting them in a positive light. Andrea Piro and Paul Taggart's (2023) research into the practices of Viktor Orbán, Donald Trump, and Hugo Chavez illustrates the intentional application of conspiracy theories in their governance strategies.

Populist leaders often present themselves as authentic champions of the populace, taking a stand against perceived external dangers while also casting aspersions on domestic elites for purportedly undermining the public's welfare. This strategy entails pinpointing so-called enemies of the state. In Turkey, for instance, the government under President Recep Erdogan has floated numerous conspiracy theories alleging foreign conspiracies aimed at destabilising the nation. Similarly, Poland's nationalist Law and Justice party accused post-communist elites of conspiring to reinstate authoritarian rule, as noted by Davies (2016).

The National Rally in France, originally established as Front National by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1973, is a vivid example of how populist movements embed conspiracy theories within their rhetoric. The party seamlessly blends populist ideology with conspiratorial narratives, framing the elite as co-conspirators against the common people. Initially focusing on a supposed communist plot during the Cold War, the National Rally claimed that communists were covertly manipulating global dynamics through entities like the UN, even suggesting their infiltration into the European Union and NATO, occasionally linking these plots to Jewish groups as part of a broader communist New World Order agenda. This stance allowed the party to critique the internationalisation efforts of France, accusing national elites of participating in a worldwide conspiracy against the French populace (Hauwaert, 2012).

Since its foundation, the National Rally has integrated conspiracy theories into its populist narrative, initially concentrating its critique on the French political establishment. By casting themselves as political outsiders, they accused the French elite of engaging in secretive dealings and collusion that betrayed national interests, asserting that mainstream political figures in France were complicit with international conspiracies, thus betraying the trust of the French people (Zúquete, 2018).

The Politics of Disinformation

As highlighted by Michael Butter and myself in 2020, there's a common tendency to conflate conspiracy theories with fake news and political disinformation, underscoring the importance of differentiating between bona fide conspiracy theories and other forms of populist narratives. Nevertheless, a critical aspect of understanding the spread of conspiracy theories is acknowledging the seismic shift in media dynamics brought on by the advent of digital media within just a few decades. This shift has significantly enabled conspiratorial populists to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, allowing them to directly share their divisive and polarising messages with the populace.

The distribution of false narratives to malign political rivals is hardly novel. Human societies have long circulated rumours, urban legends, and oral stories, with even reputable media outlets occasionally disseminating bogus stories throughout the twentieth century (Thalman, 2019). Thus, the practice of spreading false narratives is not unprecedented. However, the period after World War II until the 1990s represented a zenith of controlled information flow through editorial boards, a situation that began evolving in the 1990s and markedly changed with the onset of the twenty-first century, coinciding with significant shifts in media landscapes (Butter, 2020).

The emergence of 24-hour news cycles has particularly facilitated the broadcast of misleading information by conspiratorial populists, a trend that has amplified the explosive growth of online platforms and social media. In this evolved media environment, conspiracy theories have found fertile ground for rapid dissemination, masquerading as legitimate news and proliferating across the political divide in both Europe and America like a blizzard (Compton et al., 2021).

Alongside these shifts in how information is distributed, alternative narratives that contest established truths have found a foothold, buoyed by the spread of fake news and what has become known as the politics of disinformation. This era of post-truth politics sees an overabundance of information overshadowing factual accuracy, with public discourse leaning heavily on emotional appeals and personal beliefs rather than empirical evidence (Van der Linden, 2023).

While the intrinsic nature of fake news hasn't changed with the advent of online and social media, the scope and speed of its distribution have undergone a complete transformation. These platforms have granted the

public unparalleled and unfiltered access to an immense volume of information in a very short period, making the Internet the primary conduit for the propagation of conspiracy theories. The modern media landscape has thus made it easier than ever to weaponise conspiracy theories.

This deluge of information can be overwhelming, impairing the public's capacity to process the vast amounts of data they encounter meaningfully. The sheer volume of information makes it challenging for people to differentiate between truth and falsehood, leading to a scenario where, if everything is deemed true, then, essentially nothing is true. This saturation devalues rational discourse and undermines the principles of the Enlightenment, resulting in public debates that are increasingly detached from verifiable facts and allowing discredited notions to stand on equal footing with established truths (Mounk, 2018).

In the three overall cases explored here, there have been allegations of nefarious actors exploiting social media to manipulate public perception, bombarding users with content that barely reflects reality. This marks the dawn of an era dominated by information warfare, characterised by the malicious use of personal data as a weapon against individuals.

In this environment, conspiratorial populists thrive by fostering suspicions of the mainstream media and portraying facts as manifestations of an elitist conspiracy. With the eroding influence of traditional media's gate-keeping role, distinguishing between genuine news and fabricated reports distributed by dubious sources becomes an ever-greater challenge. Karen Douglas and her colleagues (2017) have shown that once a conspiracy theory gains traction, dispelling it proves exceedingly difficult.

This proliferation of false information extends into traditional media channels, where fake news infects the storytelling and is disseminated as truth. The spread of misinformation becomes cyclical when mainstream outlets, perhaps inadvertently, report these falsehoods as if they were verified facts, amplifying the reach and perceived credibility of fake news far beyond what social media platforms could achieve on their own. It is precisely this endorsement by mainstream media that lends unverified information its ultimate legitimacy (Bergmann, 2018).

In contemporary times, hardly any significant global event—be it military conflicts, aviation accidents, natural disasters, mass protests, or high-profile killings—escapes the clutches of conspiracy theories. Populist-driven conspiratorial thinking has deeply penetrated the fabric of democratic societies, transcending its previous status as a mere tool

of powerless dissenters or an indicator of democratic dysfunction. It has become an integral aspect of the democratic discourse.

These developments have facilitated the migration of once-fringe conspiracy theories into the mainstream discourse, occasionally even garnering acceptance among established political figures. This shift illustrates the expansive reach of conspiratorial populism, which under certain conditions can snowball, gaining momentum and scale akin to an avalanche hurtling downhill, demonstrating the pervasive and escalating influence of such narratives within society.

DANGER AND EXTREMISM

The increasing support for populist movements coupled with the rampant spread of conspiracy theories poses significant risks to societal stability. Populist conspiracy theorists often dismiss well-established scientific findings, placing their subjective beliefs on par with rigorously researched scientific data. As many scholars have warned, including (Barkun, 2013; Byford, 2011; Hofstadter, 1964; Popper, 1945), conspiracy theories carry the potential for harm. Hofstadter, in particular, viewed those who propagated conspiracy theories as a threat to public trust and societal harmony.

Historically, conspiracy theories have played roles in precipitating some of the most catastrophic events, including wars and genocides. Notorious leaders throughout history have embraced conspiracy theories, and various separatist groups have leaned into conspiracy theories as foundational to their ideologies. For instance, Jovan Byford (2011) observed that during the 1990s, Slobodan Milosevic's regime in Serbia heavily relied on conspiracy theories to frame the Yugoslav conflict. Similarly, Hugo Chavez's Venezuela used them to rationalise the country's economic woes and the repression of dissent, framing political opponents as traitors in league with foreign aggressors.

Researchers have frequently identified conspiracy theorists as a faction inclined towards violence and extremism, posing significant risks globally. Byford (2011) describes conspiracism as a constant element in fostering discrimination, anti-democratic sentiments, and violence, leading to authoritarianism and mass atrocities. Imhoff and Bruder (2014) established a direct correlation between right-wing authoritarianism and belief in conspiracy theories. Bartlett and Miller (2010) highlighted how conspiracy theories can serve as a 'radicalising multiplier' within

extremist groups, indicating a higher likelihood among populist movement supporters to endorse conspiracy theories.

In America, Joe Uscinski and Joe Parent (2014) have shown how conspiratorial thinking can drive antisocial behaviours. At the same time, Daniel Jolley and Karen Douglas (2014) found a connection between conspiracy theorists and racist attitudes, as well as a diminished commitment to human rights and civil liberties.

Bartlett and Miller (2010) outline a three-stage path to extremism facilitated by conspiracy theories: they begin by demonising an ‘other’ or ‘enemy,’ then delegitimise moderate and dissenting voices by labelling them as conspirators, and ultimately, they may incite violence, portraying it as a necessary action to awaken the populace.

Conspiracy theories are adaptable to any political ideology, and while they can emerge across the political spectrum, they are particularly potent within ultra-nationalist movements (Bergmann, 2020). Far-right populists, for instance, who buy into anti-immigrant conspiracy theories, have been known to resort to violence, believing they are defending society against external and internal threats.

These theories are common among extremist groups, not limited to the far-right but also among groups like ISIS. They typically place blame on external entities rather than internal members of society, thus undermining societal trust. Research by Jan-Willem van Prooijen and colleagues (2015) in social psychology demonstrates that conspiracy theories can escalate extremism, prompting people to act violently against perceived conspiratorial authorities. Thus, they represent a clear danger to societal harmony, eroding public trust in government.

The Manichean dichotomy inherent in conspiracy theories promotes the vilification and dehumanisation of perceived adversaries, creating a stark ‘us versus them’ mentality. This framework facilitates the projection of personal grievances onto external groups. J.M. Berger (2018) notes that conspiracy theories often suggest secretive control by out-groups over the fate of the in-group through obscure and sinister means.

In essence, the normalisation and mainstreaming of previously fringe conspiracy theories, such as those targeting immigrants and other marginalised communities, can pose a grave threat to the fabric of democratic societies.

WEAPONISATION FROM THE TOP

Conspiracy theories often flourish in environments saturated with fear and insecurity, emerging from feelings of helplessness. This phenomenon led Joe Uscinski and Joe Parent (2014) to characterise these theories as predominantly a haven for the disenfranchised. Thus, much of the scholarly and media focus has been on those who feel disempowered. However, as detailed in this text, it's crucial to recognise that influential elites too engage in disseminating political conspiracy theories for their own ends. A critical examination of conspiracy theories requires distinguishing between those who accept and believe these theories and the political operatives who craft and propagate them to advance their agendas.

Historical and contemporary analyses often spotlight the marginalised or those challenging the status quo from the periphery. However, it is also important to study the spread of conspiracy theories by the very centres of power in modern democracies, who present them as counter-narratives or even official positions (Bergmann, 2025). This trend is for example evident in modern Russia, Hungary, Italy, and the United States under Trump's administration, where such narratives have sometimes become the state's official stance.

Populist leaders, once in power, encounter the paradox of maintaining their outsider status while governing. One strategy to navigate this paradox involves leveraging conspiracy theories to claim continuous threats against the people and their representatives, including themselves. This approach keeps the populace in a perpetual state of vigilance and support, framing the government as besieged by invisible enemies. Such theories prove particularly useful when populists face governance challenges or failures, allowing them to shift blame away from their inadequacies. By alleging the existence of a secretive elite working against them, they attempt to distract from their own failings and secure continued public loyalty despite now being part of the political establishment they critique (Ibid).

The proliferation of conspiracy theories as a political instrument in modern Western democracies marks a significant shift, moving these theories from the fringes to a more central role in political discourse. This shift effectively mainstreams previously marginalised ideas, granting them legitimacy when endorsed by influential figures. Such a development poses a considerable challenge to the foundational principles of liberal democracies, emanating from the very centres of power. Michael Butter and Peter

Knight have documented how conspiracy theories increasingly translate into concrete actions, with a worrying trend towards actual violence among adherents. They note that narratives of crisis are being used to justify aggression against perceived adversaries, suggesting that violence is a necessary response to threats against one's group (Davey & Ebner, 2019). Experts like Schmidt et al. (2023) warn that the use of provocative language by prominent figures not only risks immediate harm but also cultivates a climate in which violence gains acceptance, especially when such rhetoric goes unchallenged.

Historically, the use of fearmongering by political elites is well-documented, with strategies of division and control being a staple in the arsenal of both autocrats and democratically elected leaders. Machiavelli's (1550) 'The Prince' is a prime example, advocating for manufacturing fear around external threats as a means of political control. Conspiracy theories have long been a tool for authoritarian leaders to silence opposition, with Jovan Byford (2011) observing that such theories are a common refuge for dictators and authoritarian regimes globally.

This examination here, however, highlights how contemporary populist political figures also utilise conspiracy theories strategically to bolster their political agendas. These theories are wielded as discursive weapons, enabling political actors to advance their own interests through the manipulation of public discourse. They illustrate a deliberate and calculated use of such narratives for political gain.

NON-CONSPIRATORIAL AND CONSPIRATORIAL FORMS

In analysing the three primary conspiracy theories here in focus—Eurabia in Europe, the Deep State in the U.S., and anti-Western sentiment in Russia—a common thread becomes apparent: they all stem from public concerns that, in some instances, may be viewed as legitimate. These include apprehensions over swift immigration leading to demographic shifts in Europe, unease about an overreaching bureaucracy in the U.S. wielding excessive influence over public policy, and suspicions in Russia regarding Western antagonism. Such worries can be seen as rational to a degree.

When considering the Eurabia theory, it is vital to make a nuanced distinction: voicing concerns over the impact of Muslim migration on Europe's societal and cultural fabric does not automatically translate into endorsing a conspiracy. History is replete with examples where invading

populations have displaced indigenous groups through acts of aggression, such as the European colonisation of the Americas and Australia, which saw the subjugation of native peoples. Therefore, the fear of demographic replacement is not unfounded in historical reality, especially in colonial contexts where white settlers feared reclamation efforts by indigenous peoples.

This historical backdrop enhances the potency of the Great Replacement theory, particularly within populist circles. It balances on the edge between conspiratorial rhetoric and a racially tinged warning narrative, thus attracting a wide array of adherents. Nonetheless, when this theory evolves into claims of a secret plot by Middle Eastern entities to dominate Europe, it unequivocally ventures into conspiracy theory territory.

Similarly, the Deep State concept can be interpreted through both conspiratorial and non-conspiratorial lenses. Acknowledging concerns about state or bureaucratic entities undermining elected officials' decisions does not necessarily amount to conspiracy theorising. Such a perspective might sometimes provide a legitimate critique of state power dynamics. Like the Eurabia theory, discussions on the Deep State can remain within the bounds of rational discourse until they allege a secret, nefarious group's systematic effort to erode democracy and public welfare, at which point they become conspiratorial.

Conversely, Russian concerns about Western hostility have a basis in reality, given actions by Western nations that could be perceived as adverse to Russian interests, such as NATO expansion, sanctions, and support for entities opposed to Russia. These concerns are rooted in historical actions perceived as threats to Russian national security and geopolitical stance.

However, the Kremlin's narrative goes further, portraying the West as involved in a deliberate plot to destabilise and weaken Russia through various means, including instigating internal unrest, covert operations, and attempts to reduce Russia's geopolitical influence. These conspiracy theories serve to frame the West as a malevolent actor against Russia.

The intriguing aspect of these theories is indeed found in their dual nature, manifesting in rational and conspiracy concerns, enhancing their appeal to diverse audiences. This analysis has shown how populist movements have harnessed these fears, sometimes hinting at conspiracy theories without fully articulating them, and at other times, openly promoting full-fledged conspiracy narratives. These include claims of deliberate ethnic cleansing in Europe, a hidden, malign force subverting democracy in the U.S., or the looming threat of a Western invasion of Russia.

Such populist conspiratorial thinking plays a crucial role in demonising perceived adversaries, often depicted as part of a conspiratorial elite. Thus, it fuels moral polarisation central to populist ideology. The identities of these purported conspirators vary, reflecting the ideological positions of the populist groups involved.

THE THREE-STEP RHETORIC

As was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, a threefold claim that nativist populists put forth in their support of the people can be identified—discursively creating an extraneous threat to the nation, accusing a domestic elite of betraying the people into the hands of the aggressors, and positioning themselves as the true defenders of the pure people they vow to protect, against both the elite and these malignant outsiders. Next, I will abridge all three cases for each rhetorical step.

First Step

In the context of the Eurabia conspiracy theory, Muslim migrants are portrayed as an external threat. This notion was, for example, notably utilised by the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, which capitalised on the Refugee Crisis by promoting the Great Replacement conspiracy theory in Germany (Davey & Ebner, 2019). The AfD framed migrants as external threats while depicting the Western German political elite as domestic betrayers. Similarly, as detailed in the book, Marine Le Pen echoed this sentiment in France. In the United Kingdom, figures like Nigel Farage used the Brexit vote as a platform to express concerns over the influx of Muslim migrants, particularly during the Syrian refugee crisis. Farage, for instance, claimed that ISIS combatants could infiltrate the UK disguised as Syrian refugees arriving from Turkey (Bennett, 2016). These examples and many others discussed in the book demonstrate how specific political figures and parties have used the theme of external threats—in this case, Muslim migrant—to advance their agendas and narratives.

In the United States, advocates of the Deep State theory perceive a threat against the American populace originating from a covert alliance of bureaucrats, intelligence agencies, and globalists, which includes elements of international finance (Porter, 2017). Within this narrative, even domestic entities are rhetorically externalised, portrayed as part of the Deep State, and thus alienated from the core nation. These groups

are discursively transformed into ‘others,’ effectively being considered outsiders to the true essence of the national community.

Utilising the three-step rhetorical model in Russia, we observe that the West is cast as an external threat in the Kremlin’s discourse. A recurring theme in state media suggests that the West seeks to destabilise Russia by backing opposition groups and advocating for regime changes (Radnitz, 2023). This narrative has been prominent in covering events like the 2014 Maidan protests in Ukraine and the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. Additionally, President Putin has characterised separatist movements in the Caucasus as elements of a Western-led conspiracy aimed at weakening Russia.

Second Step

In all three cases, there’s a vivid perception of treachery. The Eurabia conspiracy theory, which instils fear of subversion, is only its initial aspect. Its proponents are prone to portray an internal elite as traitors, comprised of globalists and social liberals. This theory fully materialises by alleging that a domestic elite, labelled as cultural Marxists, is deliberately surrendering ordinary citizens to external evil forces. This forms the first two stages of the neo-nationalist rhetorical triad: sounding an alarm about an impending, typically overstated, external menace (Muslim migrants) and accusing internal betrayers (the multiculturalist domestic elite) of treachery.

For instance, the Identitarian movement in France, Italy, and other countries in Western Europe blames mainstream liberal democratic leaders for weakening European culture by allowing unfettered immigration and foreign cultural influences (Zúquete, 2018). During the Brexit discussions, the EU was similarly accused of betraying British interests by permitting unchecked Muslim migration into the UK. Nigel Farage notably described them as ‘hordes’ of foreigners. The migration debate took on a distinctly xenophobic tone, associating migrants with the loss of British cultural identity and its degradation. A parallel scenario unfolded in Sweden, with the Sweden Democrats alleging that the Swedish government was covertly altering the country’s demographic construction (Gefira, 2018). They claim the government was executing a deliberate nation replacement strategy to combat the challenges of a dwindling birth rate.

In the United States, the proponents of the Deep State theory aimed to unravel a hidden government within the legitimately elected government, primarily globalists and members of the Democratic Party elite who were believed to be working against the public's interests. The theory further evolves into its second step, which involves a more direct accusation against the Democratic Party elite. These elites were depicted as influential figures and outright internal traitors (Blazakis et al., 2022). The theory suggests that these internal traitors within the Democratic Party, in collusion with foreign entities or ideologies, were orchestrating policies and actions that harm the nation's core principles and the well-being of its populace.

The internal traitors were accused of being in league with covert external actors—forces deemed antagonistic to American values and interests. This narrative paints a picture of a betrayal at the highest levels of government, where the good American people, often represented as the average, hardworking citizens, are portrayed as the victims of this betrayal. This dichotomy polarises public opinion and often fuels political rhetoric that is deeply divisive and mistrustful of established governmental institutions.

In Russia, dissenting voices were often dismissed as infiltrators serving Western interests. In the second step of the rhetorical model of conspiratorial populists, the government, led by Vladimir Putin, accused various domestic actors of colluding with these external adversaries. Putin claimed that the West funded opposition groups and NGOs in Russia to incite unrest and overthrow the government (Yablokov, 2018).

Protestors within the country were similarly branded as internal traitors. This narrative, framing external threats and internal betrayals, enables the Kremlin to label many opponents as state enemies. High-profile figures like opposition leader Alexei Navalny and the punk rock band Pussy Riot were categorised as agents of external forces.

This portrayal of internal dissent as part of a larger Western scheme to destabilise Russia has become a prevailing theme. Criticism from abroad, particularly regarding the treatment of figures like Pussy Riot, Navalny, or other protestors, was quickly dismissed as part of this alleged external conspiracy. This tactic of discursively externalising internal dissent allowed the Russian government to view critical international reporting as further evidence of a Western conspiracy. This political narrative gave the authorities a powerful tool to attribute nearly any internal challenge or setback to this perceived external enemy and its supposed domestic collaborators.

Third Step

The conspiratorial populist rhetorical model reaches its culmination when nativist leaders, like Le Pen in Europe, Trump in the US, and Putin in Russia, cast themselves as the protectors of the populace against both external threats and the treacherous domestic elite. These populists position themselves as the authentic defenders of their people.

In Europe, numerous neo-nationalist leaders have adopted this approach, particularly in propagating the Eurabia variant of the Great Replacement theory. Notable figures like Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen in France, Pia Kjaersgaard in Denmark, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Nigel Farage in the UK, Giorgia Meloni in Italy, and Jimmie Åkesson in Sweden all presented themselves as the legitimate guardians of their nations against perceived Muslim invasions (Smith, 2022).

Donald Trump and the entire MAGA movement have similarly adopted this role in the United States. They positioned themselves as the nation's saviours, completing the final phase of conspiratorial nativist populism by claiming to defend the American people against the Deep State.

Vladimir Putin has strategically positioned himself alongside the people in Russia, creating a unified front against external adversaries and perceived internal traitors. This approach effectively merges the leader and the populace into a single entity in discourse, a tactic similar to what Donald Trump employed in the United States with the Deep State theory and various European nativist populist leaders with the Eurabia theory.

This narrative framework is particularly evident when examining Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Blanco, 2022). The Kremlin employed the same three-step rhetorical model standard among conspiratorial nativist populists. This narrative casts the West as the external aggressor, while the Kyiv authorities are labelled internal traitors. The Kremlin and the Russian military were thus portrayed as the defenders against these threats, claiming to protect not only Russian sovereignty but also the ethnic Russians purportedly endangered in a hostile Ukraine. This rhetoric served to justify the invasion and rally domestic support by framing Russia as a besieged nation defending its people and interests.

In all the cases examined here, populist leaders used the three-step rhetorical framework characteristic of conspiratorial nativist populism. They first construct an external threat and then recast internal actors,

often protestors or other political opponents, as traitors. Completing this framework, these leaders position themselves as protectors of the nation against these fabricated external dangers in the third and final step. This strategy capitalises on fears instilled in the populace, allowing leaders to present a binary worldview. Within this narrative, dissenting voices are conveniently branded as enemies in a larger struggle, aligning with neither the people nor the national interest. In this process, the leader symbolically merges with the populace, creating a unified front against external adversaries and internal betrayers. This discourse not only galvanises support but also legitimises the suppression of opposition, framing the leader as the embodiment of the people's will and interest.

Leading to Violence

In this chapter, I have explored the multifaceted weaponisation of conspiracy theories. This concept has a two-dimensional meaning: Populist leaders use conspiracy theories discursively as rhetorical weapons, and they also inspire followers of conspiratorial leaders to commit violent acts. This tendency towards violence is often fuelled by processes of dehumanisation, akin to the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany, where derogatory terms like 'rats' and 'fungus' were used, stripping them of their humanity.

Focusing on the Eurabia conspiracy theory, we see this tactic now aimed at Muslims. This theory has inspired violent acts and terrorism, notably in high-profile attacks by Anders Behring Breivik in Norway, Thomas Mair in the UK, and the perpetrators of the Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand (Bergmann, 2018). These attackers framed their violence as a defensive response to the perceived threat posed by Muslim communities to European or Western civilisation. Such acts underscore the severe real-world consequences of these conspiratorial beliefs. These perpetrators, after casting their victims as out-groups with different values, found it easier to justify their violent actions.

The Eurabia conspiracy theory has markedly influenced European political and social landscapes, reflecting deeper socio-political transformations across the continent. Its progression from fringe to mainstream, exploited by political leaders and linked to extremist violence, underscores critical challenges for liberal democracies today. Europe's encounter with the complexities of an increasingly diverse society is exacerbated by the enduring presence of the Eurabia theory, underscoring the profound

impact of narratives on shaping public perception, policy-making, and historical direction.

In the United States, the tangible effects of conspiracy theories on inciting violence are evident. The Oklahoma City bombing by Timothy McVeigh on April 19, 1995, serves as a stark example. Driven by beliefs in Deep State conspiracies and anti-government sentiments, McVeigh's act, which claimed 168 lives, was a form of retribution for the Waco siege, fuelled by various conspiracy beliefs, including those about UFOs. His association with white supremacists and anti-government groups illustrates the widespread anti-government attitudes within certain U.S. factions.

The assault on a Washington, D.C., pizzeria by Edgar Maddison Welch in 2016, motivated by the baseless 'PizzaGate' conspiracy, and crimes perpetrated by QAnon adherents, believing they were fighting child exploitation, highlight the perilous impact of such theories. The emergence of groups like the Proud Boys and the Boogaloo movement amidst racial unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further underscores the role of conspiracy beliefs in spurring violence. Studies indicate that about 75 per cent of Trump voters believe the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him (Van der Linden, 2023). This helped to incite the January 6, 2021, Capitol riot, fuelled by conspiracy theories, with extremists seeking to reverse the 2020 election outcome. The attack signifies the deep entrenchment of such ideologies within American politics, notably the Republican Party.

In Russia, conspiracy theories have also spurred violent acts, particularly in the Kremlin's tactics against perceived adversaries. Allegations of Kremlin-directed assassinations, such as the cases of Alexander Litvinenko and the Skripals in the UK, as well as Alexi Navalny in 2024, though officially denied by Russia, are countered with claims of Western conspiracy. The narrative extends to Russia's involvement in Ukraine, blaming Western interference for the 2014 upheaval and justifying the Crimea annexation and Donbas intervention by alleging threats to ethnic Russians from supposed neo-Nazi factions in Ukraine. These claims escalated to rationalise the 2022 Ukraine invasion, reviving theories of Ukraine as a Western puppet and asserting the invasion's goals were to dismantle supposed Nazi influences, portray Ukraine as controlled by the West, and protect Russian-speaking minorities in eastern Ukraine from perceived oppression.

Russia's defence for its actions in Ukraine—citing the need to purge Nazi elements, depicting Ukraine as a Western vassal, and alleging the protection of Russian speakers—mixes truth and fabrication to cast Russia as a defender against Western hostility. This strategy of reinterpreting conflicts to garner support and depict Russia as the beleaguered party against dominant external foes illustrates the strategic deployment of conspiracy theories in populist rhetoric, leveraging partial truths to legitimise aggression and rally the people to back the authorities.

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PTP and Democracy



Populisms in Democracies Under the Post-truth Pressure: Giving New Life to Public Debate or Blurring It?

Elena García-Gutián 

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this chapter is to explore some debates that underlie the perception that we are inhabiting a post-truth context, in relation to the spread of populist movements and leaders that are challenging our understandings of democracy. To do that, first, following the work of authors like Pierre Rosanvallon and Nadia Urbinati, I reflect on the common traits of contemporary populism, despite its important cultural, ideological, and contextual differences. For these authors, populism involves an understanding of democracy that takes it to its limits and has authoritarian traits. Secondly, I assess the claim that we are living in a post-truth context, highlighting the different approaches to ‘post-truth’ and their political implications. This is related to the debate about facts and opinions and the way we envision the epistemic character of democratic politics. And the key point is the acceptance (or denial) of the normative content and presumption of rationality of the outcomes of democratic procedures approached from a systemic perspective. Third, I conclude that

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populism, understood as an alternative model of democracy, damages some of the core elements of liberal democracies, disregarding forms of complex representation of intermediary bodies and their role in the formation of better decisions, which is one of the sources of democracy's legitimacy. In this sense, one of the principal traits of populism is the distrust of intermediary bodies, which has an impact on the social and political status of scientific knowledge and the relative weight it should have in political decisions. This has become a very relevant topic, as there is a prevalent perception that the extension of populist views and styles of politics is transforming the role and functioning of the political public sphere and its relations with institutions. These changes—disruption, polarization, fragmentation—challenge the liberal democratic imaginary that is related to a way of producing scientific knowledge and using it in the justification of political decisions in the context of deep socioeconomic structural changes. I contrast populist claims with those of authors adopting a systemic view of democratic deliberation to redescribe the idea of the public sphere in contemporary democracies, as well as its proper relations with representative institutions.

EXPLORING THE POPULIST VISION OF DEMOCRACY

Over the last decades, the academic focus on populism has generated a contested and quite confusing panorama of different conceptualizations, methodological approaches, and typologies, giving place to sometimes contradictory assessments of its influence on contemporary democracies (for a summary, see Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). This has led some theorists to insist on its core minimum elements—the fracture between the elites and the people—despite other differences, opening its meaning to include various phenomena that lead to new differentiations and comparisons (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018); to abandon the idea of articulating an uncontested definition of the concept or its intrinsic elements and to put the focus on the specific anti-democratic policies developed when populist leaders and parties reach power (Urbinati, 2019); or to conclude that it is a specific contemporary ideology that defends a different model of democracy that takes the elements of liberal democracy to their limits (Rosanvallon, 2021). This is important to highlight, as the way we conceptualize populism has important implications for the

normative criteria used to identify the populist phenomena (actors, behaviors, and regimes), to describe and compare them, and, most crucially, to assess their impact on democracy.

The contemporary rise of populist leaders and political movements is explained as a response to a perceived crisis of democracy (Moffitt, 2015). Like demagogues of ancient democracies, they appear when there are problems of democratic legitimacy (Urbinati, 2019). Populists are then seen as providing an answer to internal tensions inherent to democracies (Canovan, 1999; Rosanvallon, 2021), but there is a wide debate about the impact they have on them. All the assessments are conditioned by the selected approach to analyzing the phenomena. If we consider populism a political style that is performed across a variety of political and cultural contexts (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014), it seems to be a natural adaptation to recent developments of democratic politics trying to adjust to new, deep structural changes, and their impact on democracy would depend more on other considerations than the populist elements (such as their left–right ideological position or their respect for some basic values). But as Moffitt and Tormey (2014, p. 391) point out, all politicians in any democracy speak in the name of ‘the people’ at some point, and many of them use the populist style without being populists (as their example of Tony Blair’s ‘Third Way’ shows). Other approaches that consider it a discourse or a soft ideology (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018) embrace too many cases and experiences, diluting the normative and explicative force of the term and being ambivalent about its final positive or negative impact on democracy. That is why, as a contemporary ideology that defends an alternative (real) form of democracy, the assessment of their transformations of the institutions of democracy changes in an important way. Adopting this perspective, let us also think about some connections with a post-truth context and their challenges to contemporary democracy.

The perspective of analysis is based on a consideration of populism as an ideology in the terms stated by Rosanvallon (2021), which connects with Urbinati’s (2019) proposal to leave aside the description of the concept and to focus on populist regimes and the ways they change democratic institutions. Otherwise, we risk diluting the essence of populism—as many emergent parties or movements adopt a populist language or are designated as populist in a pejorative sense. In Pierre Rosanvallon’s (2021) view, the common substratum that gives rise to populism is the failure of democracy to resolve its own contradictions in its attempts to

institute a society of equals. That involves defining a People and articulating its sovereignty, as well as the basic norms of equal justice. Although the common core of populism seems to provide a certain answer to these questions (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), it does so in very different historical and contextual manifestations. In this sense, Rosanvallon (2021) stresses that contemporary populisms grow because there is a populist culture that fosters them. Precisely, they offer a simplistic answer to problems generated by deep structural changes that have taken place in society and the economy, translating into a conception of politics that tries to avoid complexity. As a reaction, always stressing their critical momentum, populists provide solutions to structural transformations generated by digital culture and the economic system. Those transformations have promoted a radical individualization of identities, which works against an adequate articulation of a People and the general interest. This has been socially reflected in the loss of meaning of the categories that previously articulated democratic politics (i.e., social class), as well as in the plurality and fragmentation of the new ones.

We must conclude, then, that these developments merely exacerbate the internal tensions of democracy: the impossibility of representing people's sovereignty (objectively, as a unity) and of defining effective channels to express its authentic will. These tensions are periodically appeased by the different ways of understanding political representation, developing new ways of envisaging both institutional (decentralization, descriptive elements on electoral systems, non-elected institutions) and social (civil society, media, interest groups) representations (Saward, 2010). But even if we consider that these new modes of representation are a democratic improvement, more attuned to the complex reality of our societies, these tensions they claim to address are an ineliminable trait of democratic systems. Contemporary populism is thus defined by its assumption of an intolerable tension between elites and the people seen as a failure of representation. It is there where conceptions of representation are understood as direct representation through a leader (embodiment) and appeals to the direct participation of ordinary citizens (use of referendums, role as an audience) irrupt. For both Rosanvallon and Urbinati, an assumption of these common elements involves a different understanding of democracy.¹ Contemporary populists affirm a specific form of

¹ Rosanvallon (2021) criticizes the different conceptions and typologies of contemporary populism. He considers it an ideology focused on the conception of democracy

(real, more authentic) democracy different from the one identified with liberal democracy.² That is the reason why, contrary to many mainstream interpretations, Rosanvallon (2021) concludes that present-day populism is an ideology (and not a ‘thin’ one) that provides an alternative form of democracy, unique to the twenty-first century. This new form is one that is prone to degenerate into its authoritarian version, what Rosanvallon calls a ‘democratorship.’ Populism would be placed alongside two other ideal-types: the ‘minimalist’ (based on elections, as described by Schumpeter or Popper—often equated with liberal democracy) and the ‘essentialist’ (the one defended as ‘real democracy’, that aims to achieve a communal social order, of a radical or Marxist inspiration). All of them would still belong to the democratic family, providing a different internal balance of their core elements, but in a way that makes them prone to degenerate into oligarchical (minimalist) and totalitarian (essentialist) regimes, or, in the case of populism, what he calls a ‘democratorship’ (its authoritarian possibility) (Rosanvallon, 2021, p. 100).

The core element of the populist ideal type is a monistic vision of representation that sidelines the representative character of intermediate bodies (parties, experts, associations, public administration, control agencies, tribunals, etc.), stresses the moral damage caused by elites and increases political polarization (Urbinati, 2014, 2019), having serious implications for contemporary democracies. The danger is fully perceived when populist parties and leaders achieve power, as they distort representative institutions and challenge the separation that defines a democracy between will (institutional) and opinion (public debate), as well as their mutual influences (Urbinati, 2019). Instead of accepting the complexity

defended, that nowadays has become the center of ideological competition. Urbinati (2019) renounces conceptualizing populism or joining this theoretical debate, but also attributes it a dangerous understanding of democracy that becomes clear once (real) populists achieve a majority in power. Both authors approach the subject from their respective position of defending representative democracy.

² Liberal democracy, unlike its competitors, combines different elements of liberalism and democracy, elements which have nevertheless become inseparable and essential to the understanding of contemporary democracy. This is a point stressed by many authors as Habermas or Urbinati, but that is not accepted by many critics and defenders of ‘real democracy’. Habermas (1996, 2006) is clear when he speaks of constitutional democracy, liberal democracy or modern democracy as a basic structure that can be developed very differently in diverse contexts and historical periods. It highlights elements from different traditions of thought, that tend to balance them in a different way (as republicanism, liberalism or deliberative democracy do).

and the many sites of institutional representation and the social forms of representation implicit in the idea of the public sphere and its institutional connections (Habermas, 1996; Rosanvallon, 2008; Saward, 2010), populists try to solve problems through an appeal to the real (good) majority. In doing so, they directly link personal leadership with an audience through digital media, and use propaganda and communication to dismiss the opposition. They do not seek inclusive deliberation among a plurality of different perspectives, with many actors participating in a systemic way, but instead stress the symbolic dimension of representation (Pitkin, 1967) through an appeal to emotional identifications conducted with a rhetorical intimidatory style of politics.

Rosanvallon (2021) identifies five common traits of the populist attack on intermediate bodies based on this sharp division between the ordinary people and the elite. He points out that this anti-elitism involves a generalized suspicion of the knowledge provided by the actors incorporated into their definition of the elite (it can be technocrats, political parties, institutional bodies, the media, or international organizations). Against their expertise, there is a vindication of common sense that is attributed to the (majority of) ordinary citizens. These elites are thus considered enemies and as obstacles to solving the crisis. To overcome them, political compromise is rejected—a position that leads to extreme polarization. On the contrary, this fight against the enemies is understood as a justification for using lies and manipulating information to make it fit the basic narrative. Finally, the populist vindication of a direct form of representation focuses on its symbolic dimension (‘standing for’, based on emotional identifications to the detriment of other dimensions of the concept [see Pitkin, 1967]), stressing passions and emotional connections to probe the authenticity of the representative link, as well as expressing responsiveness toward citizens. Although these claims of directness are far from being something new, in the present context, their plausibility is evidenced by their relations with the audience through digital media, which are of invaluable assistance in bypassing intermediaries.

That explains why contemporary populists—understood in this way—feel comfortable with what has been designated as a post-truth context, as it allows them to exert a powerful influence that reinforces their claims. Post-truth has been rather vaguely and popularly defined as a social and political context where citizens’ opinions are mainly influenced by emotions and personal beliefs rather than by ‘qualified’ information and expertise that circulates through a process of public debate. Populisms

have not generated this context—they are its outcome in a sense—but they nonetheless contribute towards the emergence of a new political culture which is damaging to democracies.

POST-TRUTH REGIMES? FACTS, KNOWLEDGE, AND PUBLIC DEBATE IN DEMOCRACY

Nevertheless, this definition of post-truth does not reflect the polemics taking place under this label, as the way we understand and use the concept is also controversial. Its attributed meanings and common uses presuppose that it is interchangeable with other concepts, such as ‘fake news’, disinformation, or conspiracy theories, without taking into consideration that they all involve different theoretical and political debates. In this sense, we can see how reflection on post-truth involves such complex issues as: the meaning of truth; the production of scientific knowledge; the political effect of relativism present in critical or postmodern theories; the relationship between science and politics; and the epistemic character of democracy. But they are also related to more ordinary moral and political questions, such as the strategic use of conscious lies to justify political decisions or to frame political narratives that influence citizens’ preferences and public opinion formation.

The novelty of present-day concerns with truth seems to rely on a growing social acceptance that different ‘truths’ can coexist in the social body, which is related to what has been considered a ‘post-factual’ context. But it is more than that. The term also refers to a real situation where (scientifically validated) facts no longer have any particular influence on the shaping of public opinions or on debates taking place in the public sphere. This is often connected with having some leaders and parties in power that ignore facts when it comes to defending their policies.

Nevertheless, there are many other considerations when it comes to assessing the impact of ‘post-truth’. As Farkas and Schou (2018) point out, the spread of ‘fake news’ corresponds to polemics taking place in politics as the result of specific developments of digital capitalism that are challenging the functioning of our democracies (the role of the big tech companies that monopolize the digital world); how right-wing populist politicians use media to spread lies and criticize journalists; or how mainstream journalism is unable to fulfill the ethical standards and normative considerations attributed to our democracies (competition from social

media, the lack of financing, and the marketization of news). These factors all raise important questions that demand reflection on the essence of our democracies and how their institutions and procedures connect scientific knowledge, opinion, and political decision, in a way that generates (or not) epistemic content.

But what all these polemics highlight are the deep transformations experienced by our world—cultural changes affecting individuals, society, and politics—that are already having an impact on the functioning of democratic systems. For some, they validate the end of a coherent system of knowledge and politics that reflects the liberal heritage of the Enlightenment, involving a change in an epistemological paradigm that is at the base of the conception of our democratic systems. For others, these transformations require the redescription of some institutions and new regulations to support and try to make effective the normative principles that constitute the core of the democratic system (Trenz, 2024).

FACTS AND OPINION IN DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

Therefore, current controversies have produced a rich philosophical debate arising from a concern with the rejection of appeals to rational considerations in political life, equating politics with opinions detached from any conception of truth or rationality. Indeed, it has become a common practice of some politicians and movements to question the legitimacy of scientific truths without argumentation about their validity, presenting their claims as ‘alternative facts’.

This debate is a continuation of twentieth-century themes, with some authors asserting that postmodern theories have paved the way to this post-truth situation (D’Ancona, 2017).³ Denying the possibility of rationality, truthfulness, or objectivity in knowledge, they have stressed its relation to specific ideologies or regimes of power, justifying the belief that as all truth claims are politicized, they all have the same validity.

In this theoretical landscape, the pejorative use of the term post-truth is vindicated as a way of reclaiming a special status (truthfulness)

³ D’ Ancona’s (2017) work has become the reference to frame the debate. As Burdman (2018) points out, the present polemic refers to the role of political thinkers that justify political action as independent of reason, argumentation, or justification as Laclau, Buttler, or Brown. Stressing the irreducibility of pluralism and the agonistic character of politics, they reject to give any cognitive foundation to action (understood as open contestation).

for some species of facts. In distinguishing scientific, factual, or moral facts—that have their own methods of validation—what is stressed is that some factual truths cannot be considered mere opinions that avoid being subjected to a common procedure of justification/validation. These statements involve, firstly, an analysis of the relations between facts and truth, and, secondly, of how facts acquire a political meaning and inform politics, specifically in a democratic system that has expected of its institutions a search for truthfulness (Habermas, 1996) understood as a regulatory idea.

As part of the theoretical debate on post-truth as well as the institutional responses to it, the focus is then on what we can consider ‘factual truths’ and how they should be interpreted. It reflects on the scope and influence of emotions and interpretations on the recognition of some facts, and the attribution of meaning to them. From this perspective, there is a new reading of authors like Arendt, Habermas, pragmatists like Rorty, or Foucault (Newman, 2023) using their reflections on knowledge and power to vindicate some idea of truthfulness. And this revisitation of their theoretical proposals confirms that present debate also rests—as those that influenced their thoughts—on the role given to reason, argumentation, and justification in politics.

That is why references to the work of Hannah Arendt have become very popular in affirming a type of factuality independent of opinions or political deliberations. She conceived the existence of factual truth as the only base to generate an antidote to the totalitarian experience of creating a closed, alternative reality (as the suppression of identities in the Soviet regime showed), or the abusive spread of lies from those in power (the US government during the Vietnam war). And these examples are very persuasive to those who see parallels with some populist governments today who exhibit authoritarian characteristics.

Nevertheless, with her emphasis on the existence of factual truths that have a different character than opinions, she was not affirming the authority of ‘objective facts’ equated with a direct description of reality. She was also a critic of a technocratic vision of politics conceived as an application of scientific knowledge to problem-solving. All her work was a vindication of a collective form of acting politically, where scientific and factual truths have a place, but decisions are based on a political judgment that generates public opinions. Coming from a generation traumatized by totalitarianism and in a polarized political context, she tried to defend the freedom to choose political goals as a collective enterprise of those sharing a common world.

To explain the terms of the present debate, we need to share her concern to defend a form of factual truth from the manipulations of power—for example in the crude elimination of persons under the totalitarian Nazism and Soviet Union regimes, but also in the lies and coverups of governments in democratic societies.

Described in a simplistic way, Arendt considers that there are different types of truths—mathematic, scientific, or philosophical (rational)—but also what she refers to as factual truths, those belonging to the domain of history or justice—that should be differentiated from opinions (they do not depend on the agreement with others). Factual truths rest on evidence provided by testimonies as records, documents, witnesses, and their validity is supported by a common shared world (Arendt, 1993, p. 243). It is the work of academia, the press and scientific experts to protect them, but at the same time they can also be disputed, generating disagreements. In this sense, the meaning of factual truth is also open to debate, but in Arendt's view, the debate presupposes the veracity of facts. And this core of factuality preserves the common world we share. From this assumption, what follows is that we may try to persuade each other over the meaning of a certain fact, but the assertion of a fact draws a limitation to what is subject to persuasion, which is the properly political form of judgment (which has no cognitive validation) (Burdman, 2018, p. 491).

The conclusion is that the opposite of factual truths are not opinions, but deliberate falsehood or lies—acknowledging that there are different types of facts with different ways of asserting their validity. The liars present their statements as if they were their opinions, without defending their validity. From this perspective, recognizing that all governments use lies, journalists, academics, and the judiciary have a role in uncovering them. But the danger does not come from mere governmental or social lies; the threat is the systematic erosion of the truths, which destroys the public realm, making democratic life impossible. In this conception, there are (common) values, procedures, and actors that are the gatekeepers in charge of the fight against those lies. In constitutional states, the judiciary, higher learning institutions, and academics are the ones that establish criteria of truthfulness, but also give meaning to facts. In this regard, Arendt (1993, p. 261) stresses the special role of historians in establishing and defending factual truths, but also of journalists in their daily news reporting. That is why they need to be independent and protected from

power. But at the same time, their duty forces them to follow ethical standards of veracity and fact-checking.

As has been argued, the danger comes when lies are embraced by the community. In this situation of mass manipulation of truth and opinion, of ‘organized lying’ (Arendt, 1993, p. 231) there can be a rewriting of history and a change of mentality that would be reflected in governmental policies. And here Arendt attributes an exceptional function to the truth-tellers: those who are outside the political realm and act with objectivity; a position that is understood as based on intellectual integrity—free from self-interest—and a passion for curiosity.

Nevertheless, the use of these factual truths as a basis of opinion is a political act. That is why Arendt considers legitimate the political action of some ethnic and social groups in their fight for public recognition of certain facts. This weakens her radical defense of factual truth as such, except maybe where those facts really constitute part of the common world. It is the fight for meaning that has a political impact, and this implies insisting on its public acceptance.

Precisely what postmodern critiques stress is that even the recognition of facts involves mediation and is therefore embroiled in power relations. There are institutional networks that select factual truths and thus determine what is accepted in a hegemonic interpretive context. As Zerilli (2020) stresses in her interpretation of Arendt, there are systems of power, such as patriarchy, racism, colonialism, that obstruct the public acceptance of some factual truths as such. And this acceptance is key to having an influence on political judgment and action, as it gives them a weight in public opinion formation, voting, or public policy decision-making.

Arendt’s conclusion is that politics is based on political judgments that use some scientific and factual truths in the formation of public opinion constructed through persuasion. But she considers that there are other standards to assess the quality of opinions. Following Kant, she believes that our thinking is discursive, and matters of opinion depend on agreement and consent. That means that opinions should be formed through an open discussion, where all sides are taken into consideration, and decision is guided by an impartial generalization (judgment that presupposes adopting an ‘enlarged mentality’). And this perspective is the one embodied in the practices of liberal democracy.

But there are other approaches to the issue of objectivity in politics. Arendt (1993, p. 240) referred to the doubts of scientists and philosophers over the possibility of the existence of any fact independent of

its interpretation; the inevitability of selection within the chaotic world of events, and their dependence on the limited perspective of a narrative that gives them a sense (meaning). One of these authors assuming such doubts was Max Weber. He allows us to reflect on this relationship between knowledge and politics, giving democratic institutions (with their epicenter on representative parliaments) a role as knowledge providers, as they are intended to generate debate and political judgment. With his critique of rationalism and recognition of value pluralism, Weber discarded both epistemic positions, those that understand politics as an objective problem-solving activity through the correct application of empirical knowledge, and those utopian visions disconnected from reality.

In his essay ‘The ‘Objectivity’ of knowledge in social science and social policy’, Weber ([1904] 2004) defended the idea that there is no possible direct access to an empirical historical reality through the production of data without criteria. Knowledge is always a process of reducing complexity, and these criteria to interpret data are provided by an articulation of what he theorized as ideal-types. And Weber also stressed that all knowledge consists of a special kind of shared power, and is therefore part of political struggle (Palonen, 2017, p. 50). He assumes a type of rhetorical perspectivism, a view of knowledge as the competition between different points of view. This perspectivism is reflected in how scientific knowledge is produced, based on academic debates providing argumentation, but also in political knowledge and the role of political judgment in decision-making.

This vision of knowledge production, therefore, is what gives initial support to parliamentary institutions—following a perspective common to the liberal tradition (Arias-Maldonado, 2020). Parliamentary procedural debates, in which the arguments ‘for and against’ the proposals are publicly analyzed from different perspectives, are the mechanism for generating better political decisions that take into account the general interest.

In ‘Politics as Vocation’ Weber ([1919] 2015) insists that one of the qualities of the politician is to have a sense of reality. Decisions in politics must be based on knowledge—established through scientific and public debate—that sheds light on its foundations and contributes to advance its consequences and implications. But that knowledge cannot help to decide between goals and foundations. This is so because Weber assumes value pluralism as an (inevitable) distinguishing feature of modernity, insisting that political action, which constitutes one of the spheres of society,

cannot be governed by absolute principles. He stresses that the ideals that should guide political action are plural and can clash (in a context of the amorality of the modern State); that the world is the sphere of moral irrationality (as opposed to rationalist views), because good can be derived from evil and vice versa; and that politics is a struggle for power, and exercising it produces consequences that are beyond the ends and motivations of its agents. But participants in politics must responsibly assume the worst possible outcomes, with a potential to use violence to impose those decisions, if necessary. Hence the difficult duty of politicians who face these constraints and who, unlike bureaucrats, take sides and respond to their actions.

Weber's position reflected a concern with the growing bureaucratization of modern societies. Against it, he insisted on the need to articulate a political space with its own features that would avoid bureaucratic domination.

Inspired by Weber, Palonen (2018, p. 214) points out that to adopt a post-truth perspective implies the consideration that academic and political disputes are just a matter of competing opinions, which require arbitrary choices. On his view, the problem regarding the paradigmatic case, so often cited in the literature, of Trump's advisers lying about the size of the crowd at his Presidential inauguration in 2017, is not that they have normalized the use of alternative facts. It is, rather, that these advisers rejected any debate about validity of the sources of such a claim (i.e. discussing different methodologies for counting the audience numbers) or its interpretation. On the contrary, they simply doubled down on their claim without feeling obliged to produce any kind of evidence (thus assuming an authoritarian position). Referring to Weber, Palonen considers that there are supra-political criteria to assess the political judgments of political activity. They can be criticized in the name of science, as unworthy, or for its undesirable consequences.

But in Weber's approach, there is little place for the other dimension of democracies, as it focuses on politicians and the parliament, thus giving his position an elitist taint. Instead, in the work of Arendt—but more developed in Habermas and authors defending a deliberative perspective—there is an emphasis on the key role played by the political public sphere. As has been said, Arendt gives an important role to truth-tellers that expose and denounce governmental lies, and to certain institutions, like the judiciary, that attempt to hold them to account. But she also mentions the academy and journalists, who play an important

role in ordinary and extraordinary politics. All of them should be independent, but also adhere to certain ethical principles, such as impartiality and intellectual integrity.

THE EPISTEMIC CONTENT OF DEMOCRACIES

Arendt's separation of cognition and argumentation is what Habermas, in his impressive work, tried to reverse. This is from the perspective of a systemic view of democracy, conceived as a deliberative system that justifies its epistemic content attribution.

This conceptualization is grounded on the actual historical practices that constitute the core of liberal democracies; it is not a form of ideal-thinking (Habermas, 2022, p. 147). These practices have generated a normative content and involve certain presuppositions that are assumed by citizens, and which influence their behavior. For Habermas, constitutional states (liberal democracies) are envisioned as the cooperative search of deliberating citizens to find solutions to solve political problems, which is reflected in its basic institutions.⁴ Institutional legitimacy is thus based on the democratic processes that allow citizens to participate in the articulation of political opinions and a common will that is public, inclusive, and that is presumed to produce reasonable outcomes. It is normatively conceived as an inclusive space for the discursive clarification of competing claims to truth and the generalization of interests.

This conception of deliberation is achieved by the system, which has to fulfill three functions: to raise relevant issues, granting proper information and generating valid interpretations; to discursively process such contributions, providing proper arguments for and against; and to generate rationally motivated responses that would permit procedurally correct decisions. In this system, the function of the political public sphere is to guarantee a plurality of considered public opinions, that should be taken into consideration by political institutions. Their plurality is what guarantees inclusion and satisfies the requirements of a plural society.

⁴ Habermas develops the conceptualization of communicative power that constitute the center of Arendt reflections on democracy (Habermas, 1977). The concept of communicative power arises from the human ability to act together through communication directed to reach an agreement. It's implicit in the way modern democracies are organized, especially with the relation of a space for citizen communication that is non-political. Through their institutionalization, the common will is equated with opinions product of public agreements achieved in non-coercively intersubjective relations.

Nevertheless, there are intermediaries—for instance, the media—that have the special role of articulating interpretations out of the different and competing visions of the world and validating it as generally rationally accepted (Habermas, 2006). This role of the press and the media to provide valid interpretations requires it to follow some cognitive standards of judgments without which there can be neither the objectivity of the world of facts nor the identity and commonality of our intersubjectively shared world. But they have to construct these considered opinions out of the claims, knowledge, and information provided by the plurality of actors that participate in the public sphere as well (Habermas, 2006).

The public sphere, then, represents the arena where—based on science and other sources of information—political opinions are constructed through the mediation of many different actors. And all these actors are subject to some (specific but different) ethical standards demanded by deliberation. In the political public sphere—in a field that needs to be independent of power—we find academics, activists, intellectuals, and journalists. They are responsible for the control of political lies, but they have also to follow an ethical code for acting publicly, as per Arendt's reflections. Consequently, they are responsible for identifying and taking care of scientific and factual truths, but they also participate in its attribution of meaning, influencing, and articulating public opinion(s).

In the context of our concern for post-truth, in one of his latest works Habermas (2022) identified as the most problematic trend today the disruption of the public sphere generated by digital media. These platforms have altered the role of journalism as a mediator that is subjected to the normative requirement of generating systemic deliberation. The digital challenges may be the biggest menace to its function: to construct relevant and effective plural public opinions.

Habermas' understanding of the present disruption of national public sphere presupposes (Habermas, 2022, p. 159) that they are introducing a new (libertarian and corporate dominated) pattern of communication that erodes the integrating power of the communicative contexts provided by television, press, and the radio. The new social media have facilitated the dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories, increasing mistrust in truth (and politics) and encouraging the retreat to echo-chambers. And that involves a challenge of the (permanently contested, but real) presumption that there is an (intersubjectively shared despite competing interpretations) image of the world considered to be objective and accepted by everyone as normal and valid.

What is problematic is not being able to consider the public sphere ‘an inclusive space for possible discursive clarification of competing claims to truth and generalization of interests’ (Habermas, 2022, p. 166). This infrastructure is damaged when citizens no longer pay attention to relevant issues; or when it does not facilitate the formation of qualitatively filtered competing public opinions. But the qualitative standards to measure it are not the ‘objectivity’ of certain facts or the common identity of our intersubjective shared world.

Habermas thus considers a constitutional imperative to maintain a media structure that ensures the inclusive character of the public sphere and the deliberative character of opinions and the political will. And that justifies institutional intervention and regulations, that nevertheless are intended to guarantee their independence.

But in Habermas’ opinion (2022) the public sphere fulfills an essential but limited function—to define public opinion(s) helping citizens’ will formation and to prepare institutional agendas. Deliberation has to be approached from a systemic perspective, as its basic goals (inclusion, deliberation) can only be (partially) realized, and in the representative bodies of parliamentary lawmaking (Habermas, 2022, p. 150).

When we connect the focus on post-truth with democratic theory, we have to accept that political decisions cannot be just based on opinions. Decisions should be oriented towards finding common solutions to problems, based on the best information available. And there are different points of access for scientific, academic, and journalistic information, through experts who identify facts, but also contribute to their meaning.

As Christiano (2012, p. 43) points out, experts have different roles in democratic deliberation. They debate theories that support the adoption of some policies or their rejection, acting as an external filter for systemic deliberation. This process of filtering allows the articulation of public opinions, facilitating the choices of politicians, decision-makers, and citizens. From this perspective, the legitimation of political decisions depends on their recognition as acceptable by the community of experts. Politicians then choose to act on some of them, without being experts themselves, but with the conviction that they will produce the best policies, and also with the knowledge that they are responsible for its consequences. In a context of political and value pluralism, expertise is not so important in choosing goals but in helping to develop policies and

laws. And there exists an overlapping expertise that avoids the domination of a specialized knowledge that benefits particular social groups.

This consideration of facts and expert knowledge, nevertheless, is made in a context where there is always a political fight for the recognition of certain facts and interpretations, in a context of ineliminable complexity and indeterminacy (Christiano, 2012, p. 45). In this sense, the public sphere is also the realm where social groups and movements challenge facts and their social and political meaning, submitting them to public scrutiny and debate.

That is the reason why in order to analyze post-truth and disinformation narratives and solutions, a systemic perspective that goes beyond the idea of the public sphere is needed. These digital and political transformations are also having an impact on the institutional processes of collective decision-making. For example, there have been changes in the institutionalization of spaces for citizen participation in a governance narrative—for instance the creation of deliberative mini-publics (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2010; Fishkin, 2019; Smith, 2009)—or the design of new processes or public institutions contributing to feed legitimate debate, including experts in policy-making (Rosanvallon, 2018).

Nevertheless, if we consider that the normative requirements of deliberation can no longer be met in a democratic system, there is a risk that consensus will break down. But this reference to consensus should not be understood as a goal pursued in each step of deliberation, but as their presupposition, as expressed in constitutional norms (Habermas, 2022). In a context of deep value pluralism, these are the principles of the common world that support the assumptions that characterize the functioning of the public sphere, and which are under threat due to recent structural changes in the post-truth context.

Modern democratic institutions recognize that (any type of) truth is never final and rests on an assumption of factual, moral, and political pluralism. This is expressed in the idea of political representation, locating parliament at the center of the institutions; but it also assumes other forms of complex representations and equilibriums (the mediators) and their connections with a public sphere that is not colonized by institutions. The paradox is that the function of the system is to search for truth, assuming that is always provisional and open to debate (Arias-Maldonado, 2020). As Urbinati (2014) points out, democracy incorporates a distinction between opinion and will, and this gives the citizen the right to judge without the requirement of having expertise in a specific area. That is why

the system provides a network of institutions and mediators that present the best knowledge in the search of some truths, which, nevertheless, are used in shaping political decision-making but which do not determine it as such.

DIGITAL AND CULTURAL CHANGES AND THE RISE OF POPULISMS

Although there are many reinterpretations of these authors and their impact on present debates on post-truth, to approach the interconnections with contemporary populism we need to introduce another point. It is how democracies have incorporated these philosophical debates as presumptions expressed about its principles and procedures, and why contemporary populisms are contributing (or not) to the erosion of democracy with their style of politics and the institutional changes they make when they achieve power. This requires us also to reflect on the cultural changes that are taking place in our societies and how they are challenging our democratic systems.

Some authors are taking these problems seriously, but are rather skeptical about the possibility of addressing them through reforms or increasing regulation. Structural changes produced by digitalization have generated a ‘global platform economy and society’ that has altered the cultural context (Schlesinger, 2020, p. 1550; Van Dijck, 2021). As a result, these changes have increased distrust in cultural mediators (Harsin, 2023, p. 11) and promoted a type of communication that adopts the form of infotainment and self-promotion that has already had an impact on power relations. From this perspective, the debate on post-truth just shows how these new technologies erase the possibility of using scientific knowledge in political decision-making (plurality of epistemologies, disappearance of the common world) but also how they are changing systemic deliberation. These changes would be the real problem for democracies—not just the manipulation of information—and affect how citizens and their leaders act and think politically. It is something that facilitates the dominance of emotions over rationality in politics (Schlesinger, 2020, p. 1551).

This is clearly related to the way we understand political representation and how the crisis of representation is conceptualized. As Harsin (2023) states, the concern over post-truth refers to the production of knowledge and how it is related to politics. But in our democratic systems it also

raises the question of who are the mediators that provide the knowledge in processes of political decision-making. It is not just a mistrust in political parties, but in scientific experts, educators, and journalists. From this perspective, Harsin (2023, p. 4) argues that post-truth is ‘the sign of a widespread social mistrust that is the product of an extended feeling of deception.’

These digital changes have already generated a broad change in social relations that has had an impact on the democratic model. The context of the attention economy, celebrity culture, infotainment, etc. has consolidated in politics a model of audience democracy (Manin, 1997). As Urbinati (2014, p. 214; 2019, p. 44) has insisted, these structural changes have pushed us toward a new historical stage of representative government: audience democracy, in which populist movements and leaders find themselves very comfortable (Urbinati, 2019, 47). Internet and social media—which broadcasts instantaneous coverage of leaders’ speeches and decisions—creates the impression of an immediate democracy. Citizens can visualize politics, control, and give opinions on, what politicians do (surveillance/transparency); they can articulate their opinions in private and also bypass mediators to find information (DIY journalism). But it is a type of voyeuristic and emotional form of political engagement, bereft of any real commitment to long-term projects.

Therefore, the diagnoses of the crisis are diverse. Is it a crisis of liberal society, linked to a specific model of democracy and science, as some advance?

For Farkas and Schou (2019), post-truth does reflect a crisis of democracy: of its representative institutions; of its link to a neoliberal economic regime (power structure); of the cultural infrastructure, produced by digitalization, that supports it; of its presupposition of the possibility to domesticate politics into a form of governance; and of its interconnected technocratic liberal dream. And this is the normative model that populist politics wants to go beyond; here they invoke Laclau and Mouffe.

This is also Waisbord’s (2018) opinion, when he affirms that what is at stake is the crisis of the modern project of disciplinary knowledge based on the scientific model. This ‘technocratic utopia’ implies an acceptance of scientific rationality—as opposed to ideology—as the basis for institutional authority, as well as, for example, what counts as professional journalism. But digital technologies have favored what he considers are counter-epistemic communities, that defend disconnection from science and from traditional ways of providing information with a disregard of

gate keepers. In his opinion (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1872), truth as intersubjective agreement on conditions for the production of knowledge is only possible when publics share the same epistemology. And what we have now is, first, a strong anti-neoliberal stance: a regime of power that questions rationality and objectivity. Against the reign of technocrats, it vindicates the freedom of the political. But this is linked with a certain suspicion of liberal democratic regimes, that, paradoxically, is assumed by both the radical right as well as by some anti-globalization movements.

Present concerns about post-truth, therefore, are not the mere continuation of a theoretical conversation. In recent crises, we have witnessed the annoying contestation of assumed scientific facts in order to support political narratives and political decisions by some leaders and movements that use populist strategies.

This mistrust of scientific knowledge as the justification for political decisions has been exacerbated in the recent successive crisis by an appeal to ‘objectivity’, that did not allow for alternatives to be considered: for instance, the use of economic orthodoxy to justify austerity policies; the use of scientific evidence during the COVID crisis; and the role played by ‘non-political’ global institutions and actors (such as the IMF, ECB, OMS). The dominance of technocratic knowledge over politics, in the name of ‘objectivity’, has reinforced the populist disgust toward epistocratic elites.

Post-truth fears do not reflect just the problem of fake news or misinformation (this is just a partial way to approach them). There is a wider reflection on how facts are being put in an interpretive context that claims public recognition (Harsin, in this volume). But that takes place amidst an upsurge of populist politics that discards normal procedures of validation, argumentation, and avoids debate—thus refusing to recognize the legitimacy of other positions.

Their lies—whether considered as ‘alternative’ truths or not—as well as the extension of conspiracy theories, have a serious impact on democracy. This is connected with the question of the way digital platforms are helping to amplify and consolidate these narratives. They are altering the traditional way of understanding the validity of scientific knowledge (questioning some types of expertise), the construction of public opinions (questioning the mediation of the press), and the systemic representative political decision-making (rejecting political parties as well as other types of institutional or social mediators).

Many authors (see Speed & Mannion, 2017) have pointed out that although populism incorporates an element of anti-intellectual delegitimization, as all political decision-makers do, it relies on those experts who provide a point of view that coincides with its presuppositions, considering others part of the elite. The risk is that demagogic politicians tend to delegitimize expert knowledge, lie and try to monopolize democratic institutions. They do so within a conspiratorial monistic discourse, less inclined to accept evidence-based policies, which poses a risk to achieving certain ends (Lockie, 2017).

In this context, post-truth politics has produced fertile soil to spread doubts about what counts as facts, but also and more importantly, about the use of scientific authority to ground political decisions. At the same time, the rejection of those intermediate figures has also promoted a growing distrust of institutions and a retreat to narratives that correspond to ideological positions. The question is to evaluate if the ‘common world’ (Arendt, Habermas), that allows us to be part of a collective enterprise that can be governed democratically, is in danger or does not exist anymore—according to a certain dystopic mood that is generating public anxiety (Harsin, 2023, 15–16; Trenz, 2024).

These changes have been expressed symbolically as a crisis of representation. They have altered the forms, actors, and procedures that structure traditional forms of representation (institutional and non-institutional), favoring the spread of discourses, strategies, and styles of politics considered populist.

What characterizes contemporary societies is the creation of a complex network of forms of representation (Rosanvallon, 2008; Saward, 2010; Urbinati, 2014) that generates a process of systemic deliberation in democracies. It requires diffuse connections between the formation of public opinion and the institutional decision, in which we can find different opportunities for expert knowledge. And it is this complexity that populism tries to supersede.

As we have stated, the different and variegated uses of the term populism give place to different assessments of its impact on democracy. When we consider them as political strategies or discourses, they seem to adapt well to democracies once we have accepted that they already have experienced irreversible structural challenges. It then would be a question of using language and performances to fit in the context of audience democracies, offering a redescription of representation and political action

that tries to keep the normative requirements that still count as legitimate in the mind of citizens. Seen from this perspective, populisms can be useful in rethinking and strengthening democracy. They can serve as an impetus to introduce changes in institutions and legislation, reinforcing the normative standards of liberal democracies. These standards are never fully realized in practice, but they institutionalize change as an ineliminable trait, after the debate about its convenience, making democracies very resilient (Trenz, 2024).

Nevertheless, if we consider contemporary populisms as presenting an alternative idea of democracy that weakens the role of mediators and uses new technologies to legitimize direct links with the unified People, we see it from a different perspective. The risk of their monistic view of politics and their exclusion of the enemy is to organize what Arendt considered a ‘system of lies’, of the type that can erode the common understanding that makes democracy possible.

CONCLUSION

To be aware of these threats, we can go back to Rosanvallon’s description of populism as an ideology that thinks democracy from the perspective of the existence of a sharp division between the elite and the (ordinary) People. This binary division of society into two parts, and its unified, totalizing form of representation, turns intermediate bodies into objects of suspicion and enemies of the (good) People. The assumption of this radical split is both a product of a culture that favors it—as the technology that facilitates a (real) direct relation of the leader with the citizens without intermediaries—and, at the same time, the confirmation of the rightness of the proposed view of democratic legitimacy.

From the perspective of post-truth concerns, there is a clear link with the recent populist upsurge, which is its product and cause at the same time. Populists disregard the knowledge provided by the elite, which can be defined in terms of technocrats, political parties, institutional bodies, the media, international organizations, etc. Against their expertise, there is a vindication of a common sense attributed to the (majoritarian) ordinary citizens. It challenges the methods and sources used to validate scientific knowledge (as the example of the vaccines during the COVID) as well as its application in policy-making. And that includes the denial of the special role of some institutions (i.e. Central Banks, committees of experts, international organizations, parliaments) and actors (experts,

academics, journalists, activists, interest groups) which are part of the normative expectations of the democratic system in its aim to generate deliberation.

Those considered elites are thus named as enemies and envisioned as an obstacle in solving the crisis. Hence, the politics of compromise is rejected, political polarization is intensified, and genuine debate and the recognition of a pluralism of views and positions, as the normative requirements of democracy, are abandoned.

The situation of crisis, but also the moral content of the political antagonism (the good against the corrupt), contributes to justifying the strategic use of lies and the manipulation of information to fit with the populist narrative.

Finally, the populist vindication of a direct form of representation focuses on its symbolic dimension (Pitkin, 1967), stressing passions and emotional connections to probe the authenticity of the representative link and responsiveness toward citizens. In the present context, the plausibility of this directness is based on the relationship with the audience through digital media, bypassing intermediaries.

Populists change the division of labor that normally takes place in the public sphere as well as its connections with the political. From this perspective, there is an alteration of public debate as a result of the political strategies (Moffitt, 2015) pursued by populist movements, parties, or leaders, which challenge the very notion of the public sphere. But there is another alteration caused by the institutional changes they seek, as they reinforce the executive power through a control or dismantling of independent institutional agencies, tribunals, and public administration. While this is usually theorized in terms of a tension with the rule of law central to liberal democracies, approached from the perspective of representation, this is seen as a strategy to eliminate intermediary bodies and to concentrate power in the hands of the leader, whose representative character is understood as an embodiment of the popular will.

But we have to go back to Rosanvallon and Urbinati and their perception that the common core of populism involves a rejection of what is more democratic: a complex and depersonalized view of representation, with electoral/non-electoral institutional social forms of representing citizens—something that contributes to generating public debate. Public opinions and institutional decisions offer a place for scientific knowledge and factual truths, using Arendtian categories, that nevertheless do not

constitute the only basis for decisions. At the same time, plurality guarantees—as in scientific debate—that these facts are taken into consideration.

For some, the battle is lost, and the changes seem to require new political forms; for others, liberal democracies have shown their resilience through a permanent adaption to the new changes, using those normative common principles and values found in contemporary democracies. And vindicating systemic deliberation in liberal democracies might be an answer to a post-truth scenario.

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New Turn Populism: Ideological or Epistemic? An Inquiry into Explanatory Models of Populism and the Meaning of ‘Post-truth’

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NEW TURN POPULISM, POST-TRUTH AND IDEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

As highlighted by many political researchers, theoreticians, and informed citizens, over the last decade politics in mainstream liberal democracies has taken what I refer to in the following as a ‘new turn’ (see for instance Corbett & Walker, 2019; Havertz, 2019; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Lowndes, 2017; Manucci, 2017; Mounk, 2018; Mudde, 2017; Otjes & Louwse, 2015; Scheiring, 2021; Stanyer et al., 2017; Strandbrink, 2018; Weyland, 2017). The political shape of this development is, however, still partially hazy. There are crucial elements and layers in it which have not been sharply identified and systematically described, even though the challenges it represents for mainstream liberal democracy are extraordinary. As a new turn, however, this changing field is not understood in the present context as *historically* novel, but as a

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tectonic (cf Strandbrink, 2017, p. 5) shift of political modes of conversational and civic engagement. The ‘newness’ concerns the vastly increased salience and acceptance of political claims and arguments transcending truth-falsehood distinctions in populist thought over the last decade as unfolding in mainstream public spaces—symbolised by the epistemically disruptive first campaign of Donald Trump for American president in 2016. Barack Obama’s bid for POTUS in 2008 (and again, in 2012) was heralded as the first seriously successful digital mobilisation for political office anywhere. But the epistemic animation of, and the arguments put forth in, the Obama campaign were decisively *not* new turn. It seems as though something shifted between 2012 and 2016 that enabled a political style to emerge in mainstream liberal democratic political talk and action that was earlier unthinkable. This involved the affirmation and execution of a style of politics hitherto mainly appearing in extremist circles and non-epistemic fringe talk. This new turn is not characterised by deploying lies and propaganda in the traditional senses on a new scale (deceit and propaganda are standard fare in all political history), but by bypassing the core assumption that political talk needs to be assessable through reason, truth, rationality, or evidentiality. This cognitive randomness has not been visible in general democratic politics before. There has been a measure of multi- and cross-ideological agreement that political talk needs to be aligned with (some) epistemic standards for it to be legible and to compel people to political action and normative-ideological consideration. For new turn populism, this view is no longer valid. The prevalence of this post-epistemic style of politics in ‘normal’ liberal democracy is indeed new.

This contribution explores the viability of critical ideological explanations of NTP politics, suggesting that they are methodologically ill-equipped to understand its core operations. A conceptual scheme designed to make inroads into this problem is developed that forms a non-conditional space for assessing NTP politics, specifically targeting its unconventional practices of political talk and knowledge-building. This requires unpacking the role of language in politics, as well as visiting standard analytical dispositions in political science. A set of recommendations for scholars, states, policymakers, and citizens concerned with the integrity of liberal democratic conversational and political processes wraps up the argument.

READING NTP IDEOLOGICALLY

Multiple labels circulate describing aspects of NTP: neo-populism, neo-nationalism, post-truth politics, alt-right, new radical right, neo-tribalism, and similar concepts. Each label captures some aspect of its terrain, but ideological and sociological explanations have been especially crucial for assessing and understanding it. Sometimes they focus on the ideational nature of this iconoclastic political style, sometimes they associate specific social, cultural, and economic conditions with its emergence. In these explanatory models, the ideological theory is stronger than the sociological one, which is burdened by the weight of the perfectionist political-normative good life notions folded into it. I will revisit these interpretations further below. At first glance, addressing NTP ideologically thus seems more promising. But only at first glance. The reason to be wary here is that the ideological model depends on premises that—albeit useful when explaining conventional modern ideologies—have difficulties operating in the NTP domain. Ideological elements do, naturally, play out across NTP. But not in an ordinary sense. Levels of coherence, evaluation, and evidentiality in NTP are significantly lower and weaker than in traditional political-ideological talk. There are no traditional democratic leaders who refuse conceding that they've lost elections that they have in fact lost, and who mobilise democracy-endangering popular support around that delusion. Or who have their staff claiming to possess 'alternative facts' concerning easily observable events. Or who threaten to imprison their political adversaries for fabricated crimes. Or who reproduce corrosive narratives eroding democratic ideals orchestrated by autocratic countries' intelligence services. That citizens rally around leaders adopting this political style is cognitively and morally remarkable. Liberals, environmentalists, conservatives, social democrats, libertarians, feminists, and Christian democrats, all share a desire to present legible, coherent, assessable, and evidence-invoking arguments for why the values and world-descriptions they espouse should be used to reform and govern society.

This is not the case for NTP, the driving feature of which is contempt for 'elite' discourses drawing on coherence, evaluative legibility, robust reasoning, and evidentiality. Within NTP discourse legitimacy and accountability are construed in a different way. Political conversations in NTP registers thus operate differently from conversations in epistemic domains. Normal ideology-analytical frameworks are useful to analyse

epistemic populism, but not NTP. Critical ideology analysis cannot make sense of NTP. Ideology implies cognitive and theoretical structure. NTP falls outside of this domain. It belongs to another species. I will elaborate further on this distinction below, but let me address it briefly here. From an epistemological perspective we must all agree that political conversations and statements either unfold inside or outside of epistemic boundaries. There should also be reasonable agreement that what goes on outside of epistemic or ‘known cognitive’ domains has no logical bearing on lying or subterfuge. In order to lie and deceive one has to recognise that there is truth and reason. If one is unwilling to acknowledge basic conversational rules of vetting and verification, statements can neither be true nor false, at least not by intention. Propositions and whole lines of argument may still randomly happen to be credible or valid (regardless of intentions), but by accident and not design. This echoes the ‘post-truth’ condition. I suggest that it does not—contrary to the tenor of current interpretations—denote ‘that which is not true’, but rather ‘that which does not concern itself with truth and falsehood’. In the model below I set this intrinsically post-epistemic or ‘random cognitive’ domain and its locutionary space apart from domains and conversations concerning themselves with truth and falsehood.

Before turning to the core questions asked here, the roots of the ideological reading of NTP should be clarified. As Dutch political scientist Tjitske Akkerman argues in a 2003 analysis of populism’s relation to democracy, key interpretations of the early post-communist era populist framework construed it in opposition to ideological neo-liberalism (cf Corbett & Walker, 2019; Havertz, 2019, pp. 387–388; Scheiring, 2021; Urbinati, 1998). In the 1990s, this was the given approach considering the massive influence of neo-liberal norms and ideas in the process of remaking the world after the demise of the USSR and in the context of accelerating patterns of global political-economic interdependence. This was, however, populism before the new turn. Nadia Urbinati’s 1998 engagement with the conceptual and ideological structure of democracy/populism plays out in similar territory (cf Abts & Rummens, 2007; Filc, 2011). The association in this literature of populism with democracy or neo-liberalism flows from the scholarly preoccupation with ideological normativity, and it is therefore also blind to the emerging challenge for mainstream liberal democratic politics of NTP. Of course, full-fledged NTP was not active in standard politics at this stage, so nothing surprising there. It did not become a predominant political force until well into the

2010s. In an early account, Akkerman emphasises (2003, p. 158) that there are not ('no longer', as she somewhat obscurely posits) only right-but also left-leaning ideological populists, and concludes (cf De Cleen et al., 2021, p. 160; Eatwell, 2017, p. 364; Otjes & Louwse, 2015, p. 61; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014, p. 502) that as:

populism has at least two [ideological] faces, its role as a renewing force should be specified accordingly. Moreover, as far as radical populism aspires to restore the full sovereignty of the people, I would argue that the threat that populism poses to the constitutionalist dimension of democracy should not be underestimated.

It is notable how things have changed in the workings and perception of populism since Akkerman's analysis. As will be argued below, this concerns the role of knowledge-based reasoning about the problems of the political world, and what may or should be accomplished to set it right—i.e., the traditional domain of ideology. Akkerman is firmly anchored in the notion of ideological populism; another instalment in a modern series of identifiable and cogent meaning-giving packages of ideas and values. This is not yet NTP. Or, rather, the political scientific community is not yet ready to conceive of major political movements as post-ideological. There are no established analytical methods or concepts built on this assumption. Even the most tribal, hyper-nationalist, vicious, and exploitative movements of the modern era (including German, Italian, and Spanish fascism, Japanese or Prussian imperialism, Turkish and Greek extreme nationalism and Soviet-, Kampuchea-, or China-style state-socialism) were legibly ideological. They entertained clear notions of values, norms, and historical circumstances that needed to be accommodated or redressed. With NTP this is no longer the case. The difficulties related to interpreting it coherently are derived from an inner lack of purpose—apart from, perhaps, erasing that which went before, demolishing democratic statehood, crushing legal impartiality, dismantling authentic public talk and independent media, and propelling the great leader into uncontested power.

The bulk of political scientific analyses follow Akkerman's (cf Mudde, 2000 and a wealth of interventions in the same vein) view of ideological populism without epistemic consideration. Although synchronic with the emergence of NTP as a mainstream political moment between 2012

and 2016, even Rovira Kaltwasser's advanced historical 2014 interrogation of conceptual and normative lessons to learn from Latin American populism seems unable to move beyond the ordinary scheme. This is also the route followed by Levitsky and Ziblatt in their influential 2018 study on historical causes of the death of democracies. There are understandable limits to what empirical and historical political research may include in its fields of inquiry. Innovative contributions like Canovan (2006), Weyland (2017), Abts and Rummens (2007), or Ostiguy (2017) also fall short of expanding on the usual lines of inquiry. In their timely, magisterial volume on European populist political communication, Aalberg et al. (2017) are clearly oblivious to signs that populism operates differently than normal ideational, intrinsically rational/ideological movements. Instead, communication by populist actors is (as for any other ideological movement) rendered as strategic, therefore assessable using standard analytical concepts, tools, and methods (cf Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017, p. 9; Stanyer et al., 2017, p. 354). The propensity to approach populist (including NTP) politics in registers of reason also characterises poststructuralist contributions, but from a different angle. Drawing on the Essex School of ideology and discourse analysis, De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon propose (2021, pp. 156–157) that what I refer to here as NTP is indeed disruptive of core categories of 'reason'. For the time being I note that these writers expand on extant populism and NTP literature, but with a different undertow than the one chartered here. My object is to assess crucial differences between (how to study) *new turn* populist politics (which is post-epistemic) and standard epistemic (including populist) politics.

POLITICAL-CONVERSATIONAL LEGIBILITY AND NTP POLITICS

This contribution is, thus, premised on the observation that ideological readings dominate analyses of NTP politics, and that standard ideological appraisal indeed deflects attention from NTP's most defining feature: opposition to epistemically geared political talk. Established political scholarship in comparative and ideological/ideational analysis has some distance to travel to come to terms with the ramifications of this very unusual political style, within and outside of mature liberal democratic politics. In the following, I attempt to move beyond ideological evaluations on the argument that it ultimately doesn't matter a great deal if new brands of populism (or nationalism, or something else) are

pursued in liberal democratic political conversations *as long as* there are still conversations. The trouble starts when conversation is negated. To understand what NTP politics entails we therefore first have to understand what constitutes meaningful, effective political talk. I will not delve very deeply into this huge theoretical field, trodden by so many political philosophers and theorists since the 1960s, but only raise some basic, abbreviated considerations.

A precondition for political-conversational legibility and interpretability—ultimately, liberal democratic state and government legitimacy—is that propositions demanding attention play out within structures of dialogical reason that ensure testability and maintenance of their cogency and quality. The cogency and quality of political arguments in any political conversation is thus predicated on which background assumptions and linguistic styles are folded into the cognitive environments, according structure and legibility to them. This is a mainstay. So, what happens when propositions and arguments in the political sphere demand compliance without consideration for even basic dialogical expectations for political talk validity? What does that mean for the legitimacy and authority of government, the ongoing production of balanced and just public policy, civic communication, and, ultimately, liberal democratic norms?

As NTP is becoming more pronounced (which I take to be an agreed fact among specialists and citizens alike), political scholarship needs to work harder to unpack the principles driving it. In the theoretical section below, I will first address the difference between modernist epistemic politics and post-epistemic NTP in political conversation. I will then engage with two preconditions for political talk to contribute meaningfully to political conversations. Before turning the attention directly to this domain, however, let me briefly touch on the standing of dialogical reason-founded analysis of knowledge and political language in some recognised, classical areas of political theory and critique. On this note—and contrary to post-Marxist and poststructuralist discourse analyst critics who consider language itself a regulative action-guiding construct saturated by systematic norms and politics (with correspondingly thin notions of agency)—I posit we must regard political evaluative talk as at least semi-independent from the norms and politics it gauges.

If linguistic exchanges and constructs were predominantly normative-political (as prescribed by DA, CDA, and critical interpretational analysis), there would be no way to carry out even mundane tasks that require

alignment of action-guiding propositions from more than one person/agent—in a family, social circle, corporation, institution, court of justice, parliament, public authority, board of directors, or other communicative settings. To contend (like critical theories just mentioned) that these processes primarily distribute and maintain political power structures is counter-intuitive. The circulation of power is better seen as one of a multitude of overlapping, diverging, explanatory, normative, descriptive, mythical, disruptive, assembling, executive, and other-than-political functions of language. Language—and the power biases affirmed and challenged by it—cannot be all political. At the same time, nor can it be all non-political. Newcomers to discourse analysis often seem to miss this crucial fact.

The degree to which a certain social conversation is political or non-political in this sense is an open, empirical question, requiring engagement both with the problem of how language is conceptualised, and which functions or elements are considered integral to it—in principle, and in actual talk. Language cannot be always and exclusively political in a maximal sense, because it would then lose its explanatory and exploratory strength in relation to events which are themselves political—i.e., involve the nature of contested power relations, the existence and distribution of certain values in society, the foundation and legitimisation of authority, the maintenance of political community, legal and moral frameworks, civic rights, citizenship models, and similar things. One cannot explain, assess, or even identify political talk as distinct from other kinds of talk (or other modes of politics) if political power is the cardinal and defining aspect of conversations, overriding all else. This is logically impossible. *XY* cannot be explained by reference to *XY*. You may vocally respond to it, but cannot answer the question *What is a window?* by replying: *It is a window*. It makes no semantic or intellectual sense. Instead, you may try to explain ‘window’ by referring to its technical, optical, terminological, tactile, or functional qualities. For instance, by saying: *The kind of limited often four-sided thin flat see-through surface in houses and buildings that usually shatters loudly when a brick is thrown at it*. This is one of an infinite conversationally correct answers. States, spectator crowds, elections, democracies, and public spheres are bound to the same logic. They cannot be assessed by reference to themselves. Nor can trout, cars, or the colour red. To actually analyse (and not merely iterate) politics, other political concepts, arguments, notions, visions, and terminologies have to

be worked out and set in motion. There is a lesson from discourse analysis and theory here: in order for discourses to coalesce they have to be assonant. If the constructs they represent are forced to recognise the existence of dissonance, they can no longer be maintained and re-discoursing will ensue, just as in other cases of ideational reformation. Ideological systems are obviously discursively formed and packaged. But systems-external elements and events nonetheless exert influence and pressure on them that affect their prevalence and existence. For many discourse analysts, the operation of language on the world is uninteresting. For neo-positivists, linguistic patterns have no bearing on the construction of the world as we see it. Both sides overlap their hands.

Equality-minded socialists, Marxists, democrats, civil rights advocates, and feminists have thus typically pointed to the fact that large segments of mass populations have been prevented, by norms and actual violence, from participating in political processes and full citizenship practices, and have been ruled over by male, bourgeois, landed, or aristocratic elites. These critiques were plausible, legible, and contestable. They rested on structured historical observations, and their demands for civic justice and political fairness were anchored in articulated counter-cultural arguments (which were of course opposed by those sympathetic to *anciens régimes*; if not contesting the existence of historical structures arguing that they were appropriate and should not be changed). In this vein, crucial modern ideological struggles and debates have played out epistemically, and have only marginally been concerned with whether certain political, economic, judicial, civic, and social orders have existed in the first place. Under such normal epistemic and linguistic conditions, no serious controversy would be expected around whether a standard democratic presidential American election has been lost or won, or by whom. It would not be disputed whether an outgoing US president—with meticulous timing inciting manifestly violence-prone supporters to storm the seat of democratic government and ‘fight like hell’—has attempted to stage a coup d’état.

NTP represents something different in this context. It is, on the one hand, an age-old truth that politics doesn’t have to be aligned with truthfulness. But the surface simplicity of this adage tends to grind normal brains to a reflective halt. The observation that politics doesn’t have to be truthful is not the end station on the epistemic line of inquiry.

It seems evident that contemporary NTP politics unfolds in a post-epistemic register, where standard modernist distinctions between real-unreal, actual-imagined, true-false, solid-fluid, conspiratorial-evidential, and rational-irrational are meaningless. It therefore comes across as a mistake to conceive of it as a new instalment in a modern series of intellectual exchanges about different reality-norm evoking ideas and principles at odds with one another, as ideological struggles have traditionally done (and political scientists have postulated and subsequently studied). The key issue is to discern the boundaries of the epistemic domain required to produce legible political talk (a momentous task in and of itself) and clarify how NTP upholds and displaces these boundaries, acting back on the conditions of possibility for rational political talk in the first place. Of course, political leaders, parties, or movements are normally complex and fluid entities. So, we should not expect to be able to characterise specific leaders or movements as *entirely* NTP-driven or *entirely* not NTP-driven. It's a matter of balance. Ideological and rhetorical packages are multifaceted and may contain different principles and arguments alongside each other in and across specific policy areas. Packages nonetheless have to converge sufficiently. They have to arrange dominant principles and arguments in coherent, recognisable sets. These sets are deliberately upheld and set apart from other packages, as well as offering abstract ideational environments for sympathisers to mobilise in. On the logic developed here it should be recognised that NTP denotes strong primary tendencies in complex idea packages. No political movement or leader will ever match the image perfectly, just as they will not in other ideological configurations.

AN EPISTEMIC/POST-EPISTEMIC DOMAIN THEORY OF POLITICAL TALK

What, then, characterises conventional epistemic political talk? There are, to my mind, only three (dia)logical strategies to mobilise when addressing a certain political problem on the basis of certain (valid and viable) information. You may (1) acknowledge and be open about your readiness to engage in epistemically grounded political conversation and (if you represent a government) organise processes of policy formation on this information, whilst deliberately considering your own and your adversaries' ideological priorities, power position relative to your own, underlying moral dispositions, historical real-world constraints, degree of

idealism, etc. Or you may (2) make it appear that the body of valid and viable information associated with a certain situation or problem is inadequate and should not be relied upon for policy formation, whilst actually knowing, but not openly admitting, that this proposition is untrue. In addition to strategies (1) and (2), you may, lastly, (3) prefer to position yourself between (1) and (2) in order to obscure the political issue in question and take advantage of the subsequent difficulty to voice rational opposition or dissent, hence not impeding your own power ambitions or goals, and rendering critics functionally voiceless. All strategies are well-known, and there are endless examples. But they are also all epistemic in the sense that they recognise and operate around (not necessarily perfect, nor publicly acknowledged) knowledge. In principle, positions 1–3 may be summarised as follows:

1. *Fair play in known cognitive domains.* Emphasis on political reason, information viability, public and expert dialogue, and rational legitimacy.
2. *Foul play in known cognitive domains.* Emphasis on political deceit, disinformation, propaganda, and fabrication of propositions and world-descriptions known to be untrue.
3. *Shadow play in known cognitive domains.* Emphasis on deliberate public non-acknowledgement and blurring of the status of viable propositions and world-descriptions; non-commitment to (1) or (2) in order to enhance manoeuvrability.

These are model dispositions, possible to connect and analyse the prevalence of with all conceivable political actors, policy processes, and on any institutional level. A key question is, of course, how states, citizens, and other political agents conduct themselves and how vital relationships unfold in this triadic environment. But this is still old school, modernist politics in a rational cognitive culture associated with ideological assessment in the usual sense. NTP-based politics adds crucial dimensions to this standard domain—which, as is readily seen, cannot harbour non-epistemic propositions.

Strategies 1 through 3 all draw on a shared fundamental conception of sense-evoking cognitive work, and the idea that politics needs to unfold and be processed in known cognitive domains. NTP politics severs this link. It unfolds, as it were, outside of reason, on this level

resembling shamanism, evangelism, or occult mysticism. A core uniting feature of NTP reasoning is its indifference to rational assessment of the reforms or propositions it offers. Populist arguments on migration in Western democracies, for instance, posit that virtually all societal ills and problems are caused by immigrants. This is neither supported by numerical nor political facts. Nor does it acknowledge the importance of imported labour for democratic societies with ageing populations, or any dynamic effects of inter- or multiculturalist engagement. In most brands of contemporary right-wing populism migration is stubbornly portrayed as a blanket harbinger and symbol of evil. Although radically overplayed, it's a touchstone argument in European populist right movements. A physical four-state wall against Mexico to stem hordes of Latino drug dealers, rapists, and gang criminals from infesting the USA is a version of the same logic. It's a symbolical style of argument the likes of which are rarely suggested from non-populist politicians. Articulators of these and similar propositions may intend them primarily to inflame and galvanise audiences. In that case they are in principle open to advisement and ultimate correction, for instance by pointing out that they constitute lies or racist falsehoods. It seems preposterous to suggest that most migrants crossing the southern American border—nor the Mediterranean—are criminals. Driving these views, standard populists enter NTP territory.

NTP arguments are inherently impervious to evidence-based critique and objection. It doesn't matter if propositions are (or are intended to be) in any sense reasonable. The object is to mobilise support and safeguard power by any available means. A standard populist agent will accept that there are racist or mythological aspects in her argument, perhaps becoming reinforced in her conviction that ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, or religion defines personhood when encountering opposition. An agent of NTP will discard any attempt at correction or critique. When confronted with the argument that there are no statistically or biologically relevant differences to do with gender, ethnicity, or religion for peoples' intelligence or human worth, she will make the counterclaim that there are, citing spurious and non-vetted—perhaps conspiratorial—information of suitable kinds. NTP operates outside the boundaries of the cognitively knowable—although the potential risk of decomposing into random political thinking is overarching. In the UK's 2016 referendum campaign, militant Brexit advocacy exhibited obvious NTP traits. It didn't matter whether or not core propositions reflected reality. Populist and

hard nationalist interventions on the institutional and legal illegitimacy of the EU for some reason seemed keen to adopt this style. When the Hungarian nationalist Orbán government is shown the grave institutional and legal changes that have led to the deterioration of the country's democratic standing and legitimacy, it merely retorts that these are evil attempts to undermine the nation's fine record of democracy and liberty. The president of the Russian Federation of course argues in the same way, but Russia is not (or even trying to be) democratic. At the same time, NTP doesn't play out evenly across ideological spaces. Basic liberal normative programmes are very difficult to reconcile with NTP reasoning. The same goes for social democratic, corporatist, Christian democrat, and environmentalist doctrines. Human rights-derived ideological principles are also at odds with NTP.

There are different ways to describe the relationship between the core domains. To argue that NTP is a legible ideational subset of rational populism misses key characteristics, I suggest that another solution is appropriate, namely to treat NTP as a political species *sui generis*. Besides affecting liberal democratic systems' legibility and legitimacy profoundly, NTP presents political scientists and theorists with a quandary. To nudge closer to understanding NTP's post-epistemic nature, a further triad of propositional logics in a second communicative domain is helpful:

4. *Overt play in random cognitive domains*. Emphasis on public and explicit, but non-rational, fluid, and non-testable propositions and world-descriptions as drivers of policymaking and political action.
5. *Covert play in random cognitive domains*. Emphasis on mage-like leaders' intuitive, superior, and non-publicly accountable insights on the state of the world as drivers of policymaking and political action.
6. *Random play in random cognitive domains*. Emphasis on the constitutive inscrutability of political, economic, and social affairs, making them meaningless for average citizens and specialists alike to engage with to orient themselves, contest power, or otherwise.

Strategies 4 through 6 leave rational conversational terrains behind in favour of occult and shamanist politics. A common misinterpretation of NTP politics is borne out here: that it narrates, discourses, and enacts politics through cognitive fabrication, propaganda, and invalid reasoning, generally. This misconception rests on the assumption that NTP—like

epistemic politics and ideology—draws on known cognitive domains. This reading is understandable, seeing how political scientific scholarship is founded and embedded in rational scientific theories and methods—but it is nonetheless flawed. To manufacture, fabricate, troll, propagate, assert, facilitate, or orchestrate propositions that have little or nothing to do with actual or testable knowledge of events or circumstances is only meaningful in epistemic, not post-epistemic, domains. In random cognitive domains, concepts like these literally lose their meaning. Propaganda and truth fabrication cannot exist since there are no epistemic underpinnings to accord them propositional structure. Lies cannot exist in the absence of truths and without the possibility to make valid distinctions between the two. There can be no political propaganda or deceitfulness (as in alternatives 2–3) in strategies 4–6, i.e., in environments lacking epistemic criteria for propositions about the political world—be they of a norms-invoking or historical-positional-political nature. Failure to recognise this is a key flaw in ideological NTP explications. If, furthermore, the random, as opposed to the known, domain were to become an overriding political plateau and dominant mode of exchange, the liberal democracies we’ve become accustomed to will of course no longer exist. In important senses, this is a rift between civilisations, or cultures. It cannot be legibly unpacked using standard ideology-attentive frameworks.

In laying out the two blocks (the epistemic domain positions 1–3 and the post-epistemic 4–6) beside each other, a range of interpretational junctures emerge. The conflicting logics could be usefully visualised as a Venn diagram, where the proportion of the secondary/intermediate, overlapping area of the random domain to the whole random domain requires careful evaluation. When viewed from the random direction (say, located to the right in a horizontal Venn diagram) the overlapping area, on this logic, retains sufficient, cogent qualities to subject it meaningfully to traditional analysis. This, however, would in effect *not* be NTP politics proper, but the kind of ‘normal’ ideological populism (as in fascism; extreme right- or left-wing activism; ‘click democracy’; or even more fittingly Swedish political scientist Rune Premfors’ 2000 addition of ‘fast democracy’ to Benjamin Barber’s 1984 distinction between ‘strong’ and ‘thin’ democracies). The core of this field cannot be NTP. The question is how much of the entire right area is co-extensive with the left area. Several scenarios are imaginable. Right and left in this sense thus refer to the geometrical positions and mutual relationship in the Venn diagram of known 1–3 in relation to random 4–6 cognitive domains in this context.

There are no logical obstacles for proponents of other ideological stripes or denominations to present cognitive movement away from the domain of the known (Venn: left) towards the random (Venn: right). If Christian democrats were to overstress the basis for their movement in holy scripture and produce reform and policy initiatives correspondingly, this would imply leaving epistemic territory behind and entering random realms. Likewise, key anti-establishment leaders across the democratic world feed their bases statements and rhetoric that have no relation to verifiable political events or circumstances that actually obtain. They may be consciously lying, but they may also be delusional or have left the left-hand circle of the Venn diagram behind for other reasons. On the premise that ideology demands threshold levels of logical legibility, movement from the left to the right could be described as de-ideologisation, whereas movement in the opposite direction implies ideologisation—i.e., the formation and constitution of ways of talking, thinking, and processing politics in cogent packages. For this reason, new alt-right, alt-fact, and post-truth politics does not unfold in ideological registers. They must be read accordingly.

As this is not an empirical investigation into NTP's prevalence in any specific case, I will not take us into any empirical or operational problems associated with this suggested domain theory. It cannot, however, be the case that the right-hand domain of the random is entirely co-extensive with the left-hand domain of the known. The divergences in style are too wide and drastic for this to happen. It follows from the explication and premises above that this is not allowed. Politically, one might assume that there are American Republican party leaders (including Mitt Romney, the late John McCain, and Liz Cheney) who would have wished this were the case, but there is no rhetorical or conversational evidence to support this view. The domains must clearly be seen and described as non-co-extensive. The germane question is the size and stability of the overlapping area. Second to this is a clarification of how political movements, lines of argument, leaders, and conversations are distributed across and between the areas, on the premise that strategies 1–3 above operate in known cognitive fields, whereas 4–6 operate in random cognitive fields. The quandary posed by this for political scholarship requires rigorous self-reflecting contemplation.

POLITICAL THEORY AND POLITICAL TALK

As posited, scholarship inclined to approach NTP politics using normal and critical ideology analysis cannot avoid presuming that much of NTP phenomena and talk unfold legibly. I suggest that this presumption is fundamentally flawed, and that one key reason is that standard NTP scholarship is geared to approaching its subject matter ‘rationally’—i.e., as if it strove to converse legibly and validly. This reading requires exaggerating the size of the Venn diagram’s overlapping proto-cognitive area. But mysticist and post-epistemic political styles have ascended over the last decade in ways not captured on standard lines of analysis. It is not appropriate to respond by default to the disruption they represent in terms that render them in epistemic terms. Political scholarship and theory needs to recognise and sustain its gaze on this intensely convoluted plane, gearing itself to unpack qualities outside of usual conceptual vistas and domains. NTP is not an extension of regular politics in this sense, but clearly a hybrid and amorphous entity escaping established descriptive vocabularies. Hence, to adequately comprehend it, serious attention must be directed to conceptual clarification. Otherwise, we cannot expect to understand NTP more than feebly or evaluate the challenges it poses to democratic governance and civic interaction.

Even as the crucial exercise of categorising 1–6 in these domains is conceptual, an array of analyses is conceivable on the basis of its distinctions. One kernel issue would be to study whether a given political proposition, statement, conversation, line of argument, or policy proposal produced by a given leader or government is anchored in strategies 2–3 or in 4–5. To investigate this means to evaluate if political agents, leaders, parties, or environments espouse (and thus in earnest subscribe to) the fabricated views of the world they present. Authoritarian regimes, of course, use propaganda to filter and distort public perceptions (cf Russia, China, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other ‘normal’ autocratic states) of what goes on in society to affirm power and preempt critique—i.e., doing strategy 2–3 politics. To what extent key actors and agencies themselves embrace the deceitful and propagandistic views they put out is a logically different question. Do leaders, state representatives, and even populations over time come to believe in the messages repeated in the echo chambers (cf Sunstein, 2017, p. 5) they have manufactured? Does the Russian president and political leadership really believe that Russia’s atrocious war on Ukraine (since the annexation of Crimea in

2014) against all norms of international law, is not a war, that Russia is not an aggressor, and that Ukraine is not a real country? Does the Kremlin actually believe in the fable that the war that is not a war exists to purge Ukraine of Nazis—i.e., doing strategy 4–5 politics? Does the con artist at a certain stage begin to believe in his own con? Did Stalin actually believe that his reign was a reign of civic freedom and prosperity (having recently worked through Churchill’s extraordinary six volumes on the Second World War, I am tempted to respond *naï*)? In the language of the two Venn blocs: do propositions and arguments unfold in epistemic or post-epistemic territory? This defines the level of trust appropriately invested in them. Political scientists, methodologists, and conceptual theorists need to further pursue questions like these.

In light of the above, it seems compelling to suggest that to be legible, political conversations must be compliant with dialogical rationality and demonstrate anchorage in factual, semantic, conceptual, or similar meaning-giving structures. In other words, associating themselves, as William Connolly posits (1993, p. viii), with ‘minimal, universal standards of rationality’. This is the standard approach of political scholarship. Practically speaking, conversations over policy and politics have to unfold in this domain to be legible. One does not need to be a rationalist with a capital R in order to appreciate the strength of this observation. Interpretivist and discursive political scientific methods also relate to this underlying order, inasmuch as they strive to present reasonably defensible conclusions. Existing outside of this domain, propositions in strategies 4–6 do not, in fact, contribute to political conversation. This comes across as self-evident in the works of such diverse theorists as Jürgen Habermas, John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Will Kymlicka, Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, Chantal Mouffe, Alain Touraine, Umberto Eco, Bertrand Russell, Pippa Norris, Robert Dahl, Charles Lindblom, Quentin Skinner, Judith Butler, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Rancière, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jason Brennan, Hélène Landemore, David Miller, Nancy Fraser, James Bohman, John Dryzek, Jeremy Waldron, Ronald Dworkin, Jon Elster, Iris Marion Young, or, even, Michel Foucault. None of the works (with all of which I am reasonably familiar) associated with these writers—despite their very different character—conceive of politics as post-epistemic. All aspire to enact analytical talk within the epistemic range, while at the same time questioning its limits. Were their analyses not epistemic, they’d be non-scientific and unread.

Adding an additional dimension to the Venn logic above, its crucial right-left distinction could (at least for the domain of the known; I have difficulties visualising it in the anarchic flatness of random domains) be complemented by a superimposed top–bottom axis, indicating how qualified, well-supported, and precise certain contributions would be. Here, non-specialist conversations and propositions would tend to play out lower down, and more advanced conversations and propositions higher up. Scholars are of course schooled and trained to produce sophisticated, well-informed, reflexive, and critically robust analyses (tertiary education in itself is normally organised on the same general principle), moving political scientific analysts and students upwards on this axis. By engaging with advanced ideas and explications we learn more about the functions of knowledge in its complex dispositions, and are thus able to form more cogent political–analytical and society-evaluative views. The contributions of these theorists are (again, in their different fields) concerned with the enunciation and function of knowledge as a tool for liberation or oppression, a means of political communication and argument, a structure to establish or challenge meaning and power, a way to transcend or destabilise what is wrongly or correctly seen as already established knowledge, and as a lever for increased intellectual rigour. Political analysis and theory thus normally draw on axiomatic notions of dialogical and methodological reason, a model for which NTP poses extreme challenges.

ETYMOLOGICAL POPULISM AND ‘TRUE’ PEOPLES

Now, the core principle behind NTP is—in correspondence with the etymology of the word ‘populism’ which makes an ‘ism’ of the Latin word for ‘people’: *populus*—the clarity, purity, and priority of the will and needs of the ‘true people’. As Eatwell (2017, p. 365; cf De Cleen et al., 2021, p. 163) notes, the term’s origin is even more precise and refers to ancient Roman senators—*populares*—who made a point of courting the people (cf Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014, p. 494). In contemporary populism, this people (for instance American, British, French, Danish, Italian, Russian, Greek, or Finnish) is scripted as morally superior to and having a truer identity than the ‘non-peoples’ or ‘other people’ it is articulated in opposition to (cf Connolly, 1993, p. 67, who very effectively decomposes the logic of this notion of pure and true identities). In NTP discourse, this non-people is represented by the *true* people’s elite or foreign enemies. This is classic Jean-Jacques Rousseau, considering that his pivotal idea

of *une volonté générale* separates a mythical people's authentic composition, interests, and desires from what actual 'peoples' may (or may not) be, want, or need. This *Völkisch* element permeates post-epistemic NTP (cf De Cleen et al., 2021, p. 163; Eatwell, 2017, p. 82). This truer people re-emerges as the actual people, on whose behalf liberal democratic statehood, polity cultivation, and policymaking is enacted. Political ideas, wishes, desires, thoughts, and passions that emanate from the truer people are considered the core task of governments to align with. Whether they are epistemically grounded or not is irrelevant. As I have noted elsewhere (cf Strandbrink, 2018, p. 11) the well-known address by US Secretary of State Colin Powell to the UN Security Council in 2003—which falsely claimed that there was evidence that Iraq had developed WMDs, and which was used to justify the invasion of Iraq—nevertheless operated in a known cognitive domain, in the sense that it sought to evidence this claim. Barack Obama's last annual presidential address to the corps of political journalists in Washington DC in 2016 expresses the same epistemic sentiment. Something has fundamentally changed in the nature of political conversation, in the sense that the expectation to provide any factual evidence has been completely bypassed and made irrelevant.

The storming of the seat of American democratic government in January 2021, to 'reclaim' the nation from (in this peculiar narrative) a corrupt political elite, illustrates this change (a kind of radical populist event deemed 'very unlikely in most current democratic regimes' by Abts and Rummens as late as 2007, p. 421). To legitimate these neopolitical actions outside of legal and political boundaries, one has to evoke a more compelling logic than what is available in rational political language and evidence-evoking conversations. To refer to the existence of a truer, ultimately more real, people behind the one addressed by existing legal and institutional politics in a normal democracy—and by implication the leaders who claim to be their representatives—is the key vehicle here. Since the more real desires and interests of these truer people are already ingrained in the nature of each *populus*, no dialogue or deliberation is required to decide what these actually are or which course of action should be pursued on their basis—something intuitively known and embraced by leaders (cf Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 407; Akkerman, 2003, p. 151; Canovan, 2006, p. 242; Filc, 2011, p. 223; Urbinati, 1998, p. 116). In this ideational environment, revelation trumps conversation. This personalism relies on the same principles as sovereign monarchic

totalitarianism: the ruling person ‘is’ the people or nation (cf Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 412; Strandbrink, 2019, p. 230).

On the NTP worldview, this crucial knowledge is instinctively available to a class of leaders who entertain mystical connections to the true people’s real wants and needs. The idea of leadership is modelled on the role of shamans and mages in premodern societies, or sect leaders in modern cults. Embracing this ethos implies making oneself and one’s environment impervious to standard rational conversation. A link between evangelical Christianity and the American Republican party in its current phase suggests itself here. Messianic elements drive both, adding to their strangeness from mainstream European political perspectives—which have feebler Messianic traits in more variegated spaces than their American political counterparts. The NTP model thus transcends core premises for political and linguistic engagement. In contrast, modernist European politics has typically been about promoting and mobilising certain sets of values and prescriptions for political action and legitimation (and opposing other sets). In this sense, the culture embedding and nurturing liberal democracy is inherently pluralist. It cannot perform any of its policy-producing, task-allocating, or *demos*-representational duties if there are not multiple values, interests, actors, and normative perspectives to take into consideration.

The most decisive point of conjunction for the democratic and liberal traditions is a commitment to institutional and procedural frameworks to identify, harbour, adjudicate between, and accommodate legitimate value conflicts. This requires that public talk is sufficiently lucid and receptive towards reasonable demands for political voice and recognition, and that there are regulative structures to support rational talk (and de-facilitate arbitrary, manipulative, flawed, shamanistic, under-processed, and mendacious propositions). In the absence of viable regulative structures, I fail to see how political conversations will be able to reach epistemic validity. Propositions in the post-epistemic 4–6 domain cannot claim conversational consideration and may, without denying reason, like vast volumes of post-epistemic ‘conversations’ in social media, be excluded from the class of propositions credible political action or policymaking need to tap into (cf Manucci, 2017, p. 475; Strandbrink, 2020, p. 213). NTP represents something new in this sense. The shape of a change emerges that may transform democracy from an epistemic and governable/testable to a post-epistemic and non-governable/non-testable domain without democracy.

CONCLUSION: FOUR APPROACHES TO THE WORLD OF NTP

As a broad critical environment, political theory and philosophy, as well as political science in general normally—as I have tried to demonstrate in this contribution—subscribe to the proviso that scientific analyses, propositions, arguments, and inferences require lucid form and structure. Qualified intersubjective appraisal of key operations, methods, theoretical frameworks, concepts, and arguments is clearly standard conduct, institutionalised in the culture of academic seminars and publishing in scientific journals. Does this also require commitment to an interpretational framework that demands that politics must unfold in similar domains to be justifiable? Liberal democratic legal, administrative, educational, civic, and citizenship structures obviously share the same baseline of dialogic reason-making. Core normative-political notions of fairness, justice, equality, empowerment, entitlement, autonomy, and impartiality cannot be conceptualised without this kind of framework. Standard political science apparently lacks appropriate theoretical machinery here. As already noted, even Rovira Kaltwasser, in his germane chapter in the field-defining *Oxford Handbook of Populism* on ‘how to respond to’ populism, misses (2017, p. 503; cf Scheiring, 2021, p. 1585) the post-epistemic dimension of NTP; and hence cannot begin to unpack its key ramifications. I keep wondering how to latch on to his proposition (given that NTP resides in ‘random cognitive domains’):

This means that the way ahead lies in identifying the anxieties of the voting public with the aim of trying to find a better balance between responsiveness and responsibility. Of course, this should lead to engagement in a critical and difficult dialogue with populist forces in order to show why the solutions they propose are usually not adequate while acknowledging that that the problems they detect are real.

‘Way ahead’? ‘Real’? As demonstrated in this chapter, political activities by NTP actors, agents, movements, and leaders oppose the notion that any criteria or process exists which allows robust distinctions to be made and upheld between real or unreal, valid or invalid, or true or false; and by existing defines which range of world-evaluating propositions and views play out in known and random domains. Here, Rovira Kaltwasser buys unequivocally into the normatively overburdened sociological alternative

that was omitted at the outset of this piece in favour of exploring the gist and boundaries of ideological analysis. To allow oneself to be flooded by random political propositions lacking bearing on real-world events and circumstances is a dead conversational strategy. To propose, like Rovira Kaltwasser and like-minded critics of new-right populism (and, by extension NTP), that demands emanating from this sector should be taken as signs of ‘real’ political problems, holds little water in the light of the above. NTP is, in itself, a far more significant problem to address.

A range of strategies emerge as a response. As argued above, standard conceptual and methodological tools and repertoires are ill-equipped to evaluate post-epistemic NTP dimensions and strategies. If studies draw on assumptions of rationality and expectations of evidencing (even in a minimal sense), they will not begin to capture what unfolds in fundamentally random cognitive domains characterised by occult mysticist thinking. Populist propositions and demands have—as other communicative input wishing to be legible—to be articulated in known cognitive domains in an assessable manner. Ideationally inclined analysts and critics have to adjust their methods and thinking accordingly. On this note, political science assumes academic and political conversations to operate in synchronic epistemic formats. Crucial on both planes is the acknowledgement of the need for intelligible political talk, as explicated above, drawing on lucid dialogical form and cogent structure of address. Normative liberal democracy is as entrenched here as political theory and analysis.

As shown by positions 1–6 above, however, NTP unfolds and defines itself outside of these frameworks. In cases where it does not, it is not NTP but something else. The most pressing issue in this context is *how much and exactly what* of populist politics is situated in the right area of the Venn diagram discussed in the foregoing. Standard analyses of populism miss this question entirely, assuming that all relevant areas of new populism are rationally disposed and accessible to normal methodological critiques—thus effectively making populism a methodological subset of standard ideological politics in the usual modern sense. There are no current studies resembling the case I make here for this being the less significant aspect of contemporary populist politics.

The categorisations developed above point to four kernel dispositions for political theory, science, and analysis to cultivate in relation to NTP as it currently unfolds:

- *Enhanced theoretical assertion.* Amplifies commitment to viable epistemic frameworks, also in the light of recent systems level events. Orientation vis-à-vis NTP: militant.
- *Enhanced theoretical decoupling.* Disregards recent systems level events and insulates scholarship from the ramifications of post-epistemic power norms. Orientation vis-à-vis NTP: indifferent.
- *Alignment of theory with rational political talk.* Regards scholarship as an asset in political-ideological conflicts over epistemic domains in the light of recent systems level events. Orientation vis-à-vis NTP: critical.
- *Alignment of theory with non-rational political talk.* Embraces recent systems level events, regardless of implications for political scholarship and liberal democratic politics. Orientation vis-à-vis NTP: accommodating.

The list indicates the stakes. As scholars, we cannot avoid choosing. Furthermore, political science and theory will inevitably experience a more pressing need to measure options since the basis and exertion of political power and the quality and legitimacy of government are core fields of study. A key takeaway from the above is that empirical studies of NTP politics should be designed to cover the epistemic field dimensions unpacked here. To refer to NTP and similar movements in traditional analytical language will not do them justice. The matter explained would not be the key matter. The first disposition aligns with standard advanced ideational-conversational political research—it represents good scientific sense, but lacks adequate tools for gauging vital parts of NTP politics. No matter how hard you pound it with your best available hammer—if it's a screw and not a nail that you strike the results will be bad.

The second disposition means retreating into the scientific ivory tower. This is a time-honoured strategy, not without merits. Specialisation is of course crucial for analytical and conceptual advancement. This is a readily accepted view of most scientific fields, but strangely often rejected for the social and political sciences and humanities. Here, non-processed renderings and ruminations on complex issues are often presented as level or comparable with advanced investigations, particularly in egalitarian cultures (like Sweden's, but unlike France's or Britain's). Citizens and journalists very often express impatience and disbelief with advanced scholarly analyses of social and political affairs. When it comes to education, taxation, health, labour, faith, or traffic people are astonishingly

quick to reject specialist knowledge and theoretically grounded input. This does not happen to the same extent in the technical, medical, life, or natural sciences. Perhaps because social scientific terminology comes across as less abstract, at least superficially. Or perhaps because everybody seems to consider themselves better judges of what goes in their immediate social environments than specialised scholars.

The third disposition means politicising scientific theory and analysis. This is also a common approach, which is nonetheless destructive for cultivating a critical analytical gaze. The purpose of systematic academic learning and teaching is to develop, challenge, expand on, discard, test, and transcend current levels and landscapes of knowledge. This may indirectly contribute to reshaping society, but political research and theory must not be confused with ideology. The fourth disposition may emerge as a core professional academic alternative across open societies if and as NTP ultimately becomes the dominant political force in a formerly liberal democratic world. It resembles the third disposition's willingness to work scientifically on political command. Academic research on that footing would no longer translate to knowledge engagement. It seems as if the last two dispositions are impossible to combine with serious knowledge production. Political and social science seems compelled to align with either of the first two alternatives. Researchers would do well to make sure they're aware of this in cogent democratic environments.

This contribution has now finished the task of sorting out the conceptual-epistemic puzzle posed by the NTP disposition. It has been suggested that—contrary to kernel assumptions in standard political and political scientific life—NTP is not engaged in pursuing politics in known cognitive domains. Instead of interpreting this brand of politics as ideological, questions need to be formulated concerning its non-commitment to transparent political conversation in known cognitive domains—a requirement in and of itself for politics of any kind to play out legibly. On this note, it has been argued that NTP politics negates key modern expectations that political life unfolds and should be negotiated rationally. NTP occupies a different cognitive domain, which has been labelled 'random' as opposed to 'known'. From this depiction (which I do not doubt the accuracy of), I have tried to spell out key implications for political scholarship and theory, ultimately identifying four strategies to respond to NTP trends and challenges. This compels me to contend that critical political scholarship should not and cannot—if it desires to preserve its intellectual integrity and wishes to continue striving to produce valuable

analysis of the state of the (political) world—replace its commitment to rational conversations in known cognitive domains. This, however, may prove to be a losing game if the NTP-political trends of recent years continue to consolidate, making an enemy of standard scientific practice in the process. In that case, epistemic liberal democracy, civic dialogue, and crisp political scholarship may find themselves replaced by something else entirely.

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Populist Democracy and the Post-truth Condition

Jón Ólafsson

INTRODUCTION

In the language of pragmatism truth is the opinion ‘which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate’ (Peirce, 1992, p. 139). This claim rests on the idea that inquiry is a community affair and ‘all who investigate’ refers to a community of inquirers, in particular scientists who conduct research on the same subjects—independently of whether they are in fact working together or not. But the pragmatic characterization of truth has more commonly been extended to include not only scientific research narrowly constructed, but public discourse in general: Open and free discussion will in the long run root out errors and misconceptions; it is truth-oriented, which means that if common standards of inquiry and verification are applied to beliefs and claims open and free discussion will produce truths, while also continuing to raise doubts, as long as there are good reasons to do so.

In this chapter I will talk about the ‘post-truth condition’ as the commonly experienced situation where open and free discussion cannot be expected to produce (in the end) correct information, i.e. where open

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and free discussion cannot be assumed to be truth-oriented. This has pragmatic consequences: if we think of truth as the opinion which will in the end prevail, given a community of inquirers, we must also assume that their discussion, whatever their differences, rests on common norms of inquiry which will move them in the same direction towards affirming what is correct rather than incorrect. They will, as William James put it, ‘shun error, seek truth’ (James, 1912, p. 19). The post-truth condition makes this a highly implausible ideal and therefore undermines the potential of inquiry to settle disagreements.

It should be said at the outset that my use of the phrase ‘post-truth condition’—which of course evokes association with the ‘postmodern condition’, is not meant to suggest an analogy of ‘post-truth’ and ‘post-modern’. There are parallels, however, which I think are important. Both terms refer to a permanent change in epistemic orientation. Postmodern thinking makes it impossible to think about knowledge in isolation from power relations and thereby is a source of cynicism about objective value neutral truths. Post-truth, on the other hand, refers to an erosion of standards of verification which undermines efforts of inquiry to satisfactorily solve disagreements of any kind (see similar reasoning in Benesch, 2020).

My aim is not to produce a normative conclusion about how we ‘ought to’ reverse the social developments that have led to the post-truth condition, but rather to explore its relation to populism and to liberalism and liberal democracy. I argue that in order to better understand the post-truth condition it is helpful to construct two different, but ultimately equally valid, narratives of its origins. The first narrative characterizes it as a reaction to liberalism’s epistocratic tendencies, which have put expert knowledge at the forefront of policy-making, thereby making the inclusion of ordinary citizens in policy discussion and their policy engagement very difficult.¹ In this narrative, populism in its current form can be set

¹ I am using the concept of epistocracy in a sense that deviates slightly (but only slightly) from the most common use of the term. In current democratic theory epistocrats quarrel with epistemic democrats about the wisdom of direct or participatory democracy, where epistemic democrats argue that the epistemic benefits of cognitive diversity are greater than the achievements of top-level expertise, at least in many significant cases. If they are right we should be more concerned with creating diverse groups of ordinary citizens to deal with many political tasks and put less emphasis on narrow expertise. The epistocrats have grave doubts about this and refer to ample empirical evidence showing the extreme ignorance of the ordinary citizen in most matters that have to do with the complex policy-making necessary in contemporary democracies. For my purposes those who express

in a chronological context as emerging during a time when established truths are challenged, not because there are objective reasons to doubt them, but because the power of those who promote them is being challenged, creating a demand for a different kind of politics which we can call post-truth politics.

The second narrative constructs the ‘post-truth’ condition as an inherent part of the populist surge so that post-truth politics are simply seen as integral to populist politics. Post-truth fuels populism and makes it work. Populism, by rejecting the balancing act of what Nadia Urbinati calls ‘intermediary bodies’, places the claim to truth in the voice of the leader whose relationship to a particular audience presents it as an incarnation of the public as a whole (Urbinati, 2019, pp. 25, 192). This effects a ‘transformation’ of democracy and introduces a new kind of public discourse worryingly detached from factual truth, not abandoning truth as a value, but instrumentalizing it. The populist leader acquires an authoritative voice whose judgement of truth is unquestioned.

I think we should refrain from the temptation to see one of the narratives as the correct one or as superior to the other, but it is useful to keep them apart. The first narrative is helpful in understanding how liberal democracy incites hostility, the second in understanding how populism’s direct and unmediated claim to representation is also a source of post-truth politics. The second narrative provides a way to critically examine the values and practices of liberal democracy, its aspiration vs. its rule. There are good reasons to acknowledge that the post-truth condition is a reaction to epistocratic developments in liberalism which serve to justify invasive and sometimes also oppressive policies. But there are also good reasons to explain post-truth politics as a consequence of populism, which speaks to a different side of liberalism, what I will call liberal indifference and will characterize in this chapter as a liberal inability to directly address inequalities, injustices and interventions that emerge as effects of liberal rule, including enormous and growing economic inequalities.

I suggest that the resistance to populism—prevalent in liberal and academic discourse—is undermined by a reluctance to engage in a robust

doubts about direct democracy because of general ignorance and the epistemic democrats equally qualify as epistocrats and so do liberals who argue that in a properly functioning democracy policies should be based on expert knowledge whenever relevant to policy issues (see Brennan & Landemore, 2022; Lessig, 2023; Somini, 2016).

re-examination of liberal politics, questioning its basic governing assumptions. This also makes it difficult to pin down what exactly the crisis of democracy consists in or to articulate it. The most sustained and widely discussed conception of democratic innovation, seen partly at least as a response to populism, has the form of direct public engagement in policy- and decision-making. But such innovations, frequently practiced as they are, have not unleashed any such re-evaluation. Even though some of the more radical reformers among promoters of democratic innovations do argue that competitive politics should be abolished in favor of more cooperative ways to share and delegate power, such as sortition and democratic lotteries of various kinds, criticism of liberal democracy is not what democratic innovations tend to be about, but rather about strengthening its appeal and making its institutional structure—its epistemic infrastructure—more inclusive and stable (Landemore, 2020; Van Reybrouck, 2016). I will therefore try to show in this paper that democratic reform should aim at a richer understanding of liberal democracy's shortcomings, two of which I will outline here: epistocratic liberalism and liberal indifference. But before I do that, I will discuss how the two intermingling narratives or genealogies of post-truth help connecting it with the shortcomings of liberalism.

POPULISM AND POST-TRUTH: THE INTERMINGLING NARRATIVES

The distinction I draw between the two narratives looks to the work of some authors who have tried to explain populism to a larger audience and their approach to the question of how populism has emerged in its current form, i.e. what kind of cultural conditions made populism possible, as well as what kind of political conditions populism has created or made possible. It is generally uncontested that, whatever else populism has done, it has upset or even eroded some central liberal values which now can no longer be taken for granted in democratic politics. Populism has transformed political discourse by displacing central values protecting e.g. human rights, private life and objectivity that had become so firmly established in democratic politics that their systematic marginalization seemed hardly possible.

Lee McIntyre, in his accessibly written volume on post-truth, argues that disregard for objective truth is the hallmark of populists. But McIntyre places the blame not on populism, but rather on postmodernism (he

does not discuss populism per se in this book, rather, he focuses on individual populists such as Donald Trump). According to him, in order to understand post-truth we need to ‘make sense of the different ways that people *subvert* truth’ (McIntyre, 2018, p. 7). Subverting truth takes on several forms, but importantly it is characterized by a certain resistance to acknowledging truth as a conversation stopper. So, if I make a claim, say, about murder rates, crime rates or some statistically verifiable issue, and am confronted with reliable evidence that my claim is untrue, that should stop the discussion since the only reasonable reaction to clear evidence contradicting a claim I am making is to give it up. I cannot both continue making the claim and accept the new information.

The post-truth climate, however, will allow that a particular truth claim is neither denied nor accepted, downgrading its verificatory force. McIntyre uses an amusing (and somewhat horrifying) discussion with former US politician Newt Gingrich where ‘feelings of the voters’ are contrasted with statistical evidence, showing that these feelings do not correspond to facts, to which Gingrich replies that rather than indulge in theorizing, he will ‘stand by’ the people who feel differently. The value of the evidence is downgraded. Rather than accept it and refrain from making a claim to the contrary, a pseudo-opposition is created between ‘theories’ and voter perception, as if these were equally important sources of belief. McIntyre then argues that postmodernist thinking, in rejecting objective truth—rather than accepting the evidence and its logical consequences—makes it a natural step to oppose it yet without rejecting it. And there we are. Postmodernism at least has contributed to the apparent acceptability of downgrading truth. In other words, postmodernism, on McIntyre’s account, has made it more difficult to support the integrity of science and the search for scientific facts, and contributed to eroding the very epistemic standards that make communication—and to some extent democracy itself—possible (see also Misak & Talisse, 2021).

McIntyre’s account is a good example of a post-truth genealogy that places its origins before the rise of populism, rather than seeking to explain its emergence as a part of the populist wave (see also Kalpokas, 2019). In this sense, post-truth supports populism—one might even argue that it prepares the ground for populism. ‘Thus’ as McIntyre puts it, ‘is postmodernism the godfather of post-truth’ (McIntyre, 2018, p. 150). McIntyre’s solution is to see populism not as a culprit but rather a product of post-truth, but he conveniently places the blame on a controversial

movement or development in Western philosophical thought, rather than on the shortcomings of liberal democracy.

Mudde and Kaltwasser aim to place populism within the context of liberal democracy in their *Populism: A very short introduction*, referring to it as ‘the (bad) conscience of liberal democracy’ (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 116). Although they do not discuss post-truth in their attempt to explain populism, they see it as a result of a tension caused by discontent and frustration about consequences of liberal policies. They, however, see it as a trust problem rather than a problem threatening the foundations of liberal democracy. ‘The best way to deal with populism’, they argue, ‘is to engage ... in an open dialogue with populist actors and supporters’ (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 118).

In both these examples, taken from introductory volumes on post-truth and populism, the idea that populism is the source of post-truth politics does not emerge: in McIntyre’s book the blame is put on postmodernism; while Mudde and Kaltwasser do not acknowledge the particular problem, but simply describe populism as a certain correctible aberration of liberal democracy.

Democratic theorists and political scientists tend to emphasize the complexity of democracy, which sometimes makes the populist look like a little stupid, junior fellow who is trying to enter the political fray asking the right questions but inevitably coming up with the wrong answers (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 118). There are simple misunderstandings and naïve solutions offered to complex problems that could not really be understood except by people with deep academic knowledge of democracy. ‘Populism is simple, democracy is complex’. This is another way to express the same thought (Müller, 2017, quoting Ralf Dahrendorf, p. 11). In a world where populists are slightly mistaken people who don’t understand the enormity of policy- and decision-making tasks, they will also not be seen as a great threat. Political and legal theorists will carefully and patiently explain this to them. They will emphasize the importance of political and historical knowledge and call for quality work involving the best people. They will also be slightly dismissive of going too far in involving ordinary citizens too much in the policy-making process itself, pointing out that not only does evidence show that most people really lack the necessary knowledge for dealing with most complex policy issues, but are even lacking in their understanding of their ignorance and very far from being able to gain the necessary competences to overcome that (Ólafsson, 2017; see also Kitcher, 2001; Somin, 2016).

As a group of citizens who had been elected to a Constituent Assembly in Iceland was preparing to start their deliberations on constitutional revision in 2011, one political scientist carefully selected and published on his website a bibliography of some 80 books and papers arguing that knowledge of these works should be considered minimal for anyone who wanted to meaningfully engage in constitutional revision (Ólafsson, 2020). Epistocratic tendencies, such as these, are also evident in frequent calls for increased quality in policy-making more generally—the complaint that politicians lack the necessary skills to engage in deliberation, and that to save democracy such problems must primarily be addressed. We have on the one hand the common-sense idea that policy and public decision-making should be of high professional quality, on the other the demand for public engagement. To put that engagement under the evaluative judgement of experts trivializes it, but this is largely ignored by proponents of deliberative and epistemic democracy. It is important for my purposes to draw a clear distinction between, on the one hand, the claim that ordinary citizens are too ignorant to engage in policy-making, and on the other, that the post-truth condition removes truth-orientedness from public discourse. The first problem is greatly overstated, whereas the second is real (see also Hannon, 2022).

The narrative according to which post-truth is a consequence of populism and has come to threaten political discourse more and more as populism rises to prominence can be reconstructed in several different ways. In one such reconstruction, post-truth is like a virus spread and maintained by populism (see Peters et al., 2022). The infection analogy can be sustained and reinforced through some empirical evidence according to which disinformation spreads many times faster than ordinary information (ordinary information may of course be right or wrong but is not designed specifically to maximize reception) (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Another reconstruction connects it to the politics of difference, where a growing number of democratic constituencies feel alienated from policies increasingly designed to acknowledge and accommodate groups underrepresented in the past, ethnic and cultural minorities, with growing economic inequality eroding the security of dominant majorities who become more open to movements and leaders presenting fringe, marginal and extreme views. Once these groups become attracted, and then addicted, to the militant rhetoric of the populists, liberal values become less important and the sensitivity to standards of verification change (see e.g. Hartley, 2023). Even when populist leaders contradict

themselves, knowingly make false statements, deny the obvious, make established (including scientific) standards of verification suspect, these groups still follow them and instead of demanding higher standards or better arguments from these leaders, accept and defend their rhetoric, helping to spread low quality information rather than working against it.

Jan Werner Müller, in his influential book on populism, does not discuss truth or post-truth as such, but for my purposes his analysis of populism places its genealogy within the second narrative, i.e. seeing in contemporary populism the causal factors that threaten to fundamentally change the way truth affects political discourse. Müller strongly opposes the characterization of populist/authoritarian government as merely ‘illiberal’, since populism in his view subverts democracy itself, in ways that traditional opponents of liberalism would not engage in, for instance, by disposing of values connected not only to liberalism but to democracy more generally, such as the understanding and acceptance of minority rights, and by insisting on their moral role to represent the whole of the people. This also places Müller in clear opposition to Mudde and Kaltwasser, who see ‘illiberalism’ as an important part of populism’s message. ‘Populists’ Müller argues ‘will persist with their representative claim no matter what; because their claim is of a moral and symbolic—not an empirical—nature, it cannot be disproven’ (Müller, 2017, p. 39).

The moral and symbolic dimension as the post (empirical) truth characteristic of populism is one kind of truth subversion—from Müller’s point of view populism gives rise to that subversion, i.e. it is not a result of it. Populism is, according to him, ‘not ... a codified doctrine, but it is a set of distinct claims and has ... an inner logic’ (Müller, 2017, p. 10). Müller does not spell this inner logic out in much detail, but clearly understands it to include replacing ‘empirical truth’ with ‘moral truth’. Populism needs moral binaries—such as integrity of ordinary people versus corruption of elites—but freely moves such markers around in an opportunistic, rather than a principled, way. Thus, populism radically changes political discourse, subverting or undermining its principles and values including objective/empirical truth: ‘Populism’, Müller argues, ‘is neither the authentic part of modern democratic politics nor a kind of pathology caused by irrational citizens. It is the permanent shadow of representative politics’ (Müller, 2017, p. 11). Populism is according to Müller ‘undemocratic’. Yet the proper response is not to refer to its irresponsibility (that can ‘be an all-too-convenient way to discredit criticism of certain policies’ [Müller, 2017, p. 14]). The point is rather

that populism cannot afford uncertainty, and therefore must implement strategies to minimize or entirely abolish ‘open-ended’ policy debates: i.e. debates that treat options as equal and seek to expose them to the same or similar scrutiny, which would necessitate an objective criterion to judge correctness.

From this perspective, populism is not only the breeding ground of post-truth: it desperately needs it, and this need is what transforms political discourse, rendering established standards obsolete and undermining truth-orientedness, which is a necessary condition for open and free discussion to offer support to democratic choice and belief-formation. It thus creates circumstances that render Jon Stewart’s observation ‘Democracy dies in discussion’ more than just a joke (Stewart, 2024). From this perspective, the post-truth transformation of political discourse is a necessary result of populism.

While Müller’s account of how populism functions is helpful, it doesn’t give any strong or convincing account of why populism is in such high demand. His narrative puts the emergence of post-truth politics inside the populist surge, but it is necessary to dig deeper to see it as an important part of populism’s authoritarian message. That message requires that public discourse be molded to serve power, where totalitarianism is the extreme case. Populism, like totalitarianism, depends on its successful construction of the moral superiority of a leader who cuts the crap, tells people what they feel is right and doesn’t care about opposition or other arguments. Ultimately, the leader also presents the external voice; the criterion of correctness. A quick look at Soviet socialism shows how it established as the supreme source of truth the ‘external voice’ of the leader. According to Aleksei Yurchak, the great difference between high Stalinism and later periods in Soviet history has to do with Stalin’s authoritative voice (Yurchak, 2006, p. 10; see also Lefort, 1986, pp. 211–212).

Yurchak explains this with what he calls ‘Lefort’s paradox’—a paradox that Claude Lefort placed within modern ideologies, between ‘ideological enunciation’ i.e. the ideals that form the aspirational basis of an ideology, and ‘ideological rule’ which emerges in the organization of political authority. The paradox can be extended to liberal democracy, which aspires to political equality through pluralism, education and equal opportunity, whereas its actual rule is bound to contribute to economic inequality leading to elite capture of the state and its resources. Liberal democracy, however, lacks the means to overcome the paradox by the

means of an external voice. It becomes ‘the power of no one’ (Lefort, 1986, p. 305). Instead, liberals simply claim that those who note the paradox are naïve. As Mudde and Kaltwasser put it, populism asks the right questions, but the answers are wrong; the populist fails to see the complexity of the situation, the suggested answer will not solve anything, they will just make matters worse. In this sense, it is possible to draw an analogy between Stalinism and late Socialism, on the one hand, and populism and liberal democracy, on the other. According to Yurchak, as Stalinism was replaced with collective party leadership, the enunciation/rule leadership became a problem. The external voice of the leader was gone; the party was unable to replace it (Yurchak, 2006, p. 14). Populism operates along the rifts created by the same paradox. Liberal democracy is unable to provide the means to overcome the paradox, and therefore its attraction fades away with time. Populism provides the external voice which takes the place of the supreme arbiter. Populism therefore has the means to mediate between populist promises and authoritarian rule, which may explain the apparent lack of concern of those inclined to support populist politicians about the danger of authoritarian subversion of democratic liberties.

The conception of the external voice can be further elaborated with help of Nadia Urbinati’s discussion of populist transformation of democracy. Urbinati is concerned with representation rather than with populist subversion of truth. Representation in the populist imaginary, differs fundamentally from liberal democracy’s representation, constrained by its institutional infrastructure—its ‘intermediary bodies’—which, from a liberal point of view, guarantees the integrity of democratic procedures. But if the claims made in the supreme voice of the leader trump all other claims due to a direct audience-leader relationship, not only is representation transformed, but the whole of political discourse. Urbinati’s analysis should therefore also be placed within the second narrative. In her view it is populism that transforms democracy, and it does so mainly because it creates a post-truth condition which undermines the idea of a neutral procedure that can be trusted independently of individual actors who claim to oppose the system. In her view this is what populism is a tool or vessel for, and it can serve any political ambition (Urbinati, 2019, p. 34).

Both Urbinati and Müller look to the needs of the populist agenda to explain the emergence of the post-truth condition. In their narrative populism transforms democracy, and a part of that transformation is to weaken and ultimately destroy liberal democracy’s infrastructure. Lefort’s

paradox, applied to liberalism, offers a view on how liberal rule may fail to respond to liberal aspirations and ultimately fail to overcome liberal indifference: the acquiescence to the negative consequences of liberal government, for the simple reason that they are not the results of specific cases of injustice.

The narrative that treats the post-truth condition independently of populism may evoke shortcomings of liberalism more directly, especially its epistocratic inclinations manifest in the view that the best knowledge should not only guide policies but determine them, which means e.g. the justification of policies that place restrictions on individual freedom based on scientific knowledge about the consequences of certain patterns of behavior. One way to respond to epistocratic tendencies in liberalism is to engage the public much more in policy-making. I will now explore, from this perspective, democratic innovations that focus on improving policy- and decision-making, especially through the inclusive direct engagement of ordinary citizens. Among principal motivations of such innovations is to create conditions of political equality and reasonableness to conduct high quality deliberation without the excesses of populism (Smith & Setälä, 2018). I argue that while such innovations may have a positive effect in giving deliberation a greater role, they miss the larger point about post-truth as a reaction to liberalism's epistocratic tendencies.

TRUTH REVISITED IN MINI-PUBLICS

Whatever way we describe post-truth politics—as the deliberate attempt to subvert truth when it is inconvenient, as subverting standards of verification and demanding that some baseless claims should be taken just as seriously or more seriously than claims made on the basis of solid evidence or argument, or simply as vulgar relativism—it is difficult to see it as non-threatening to democratic politics. But the central question is about the deeper issue, the perception that epistemic standards or epistemic values have been temporarily, or permanently, damaged and public reason thereby seriously undermined, pushing public discourse off track so that we can no longer assume that open and free public discussion is truth-oriented.

This concern is easily seen in the very lively debates around democratic innovations, most of which involve so-called mini-publics: attempts to organize democratic deliberation in groups that are selected in some acceptable way to ensure inclusion and sociological representation. One of

the motivating factors of what we could call the mini-public turn in deliberative democracy is the distrust of open and free discussion. Since low standards of verification, abundance of disinformation and manipulation of platforms is seen to permeate public space, deliberative democrats have turned to what I like to call ‘safe space democracy’, that relies on creating deliberative conditions where rules of engagement are clear and generally accepted, and where the demand for good argument and evidence-based reasoning guides discussion.

The focus on mini-publics also speaks to the importance of truth in political debates as well as in decision- and policy-making in general. In the reasoning space of a deliberative mini-public, participants cannot do what is frequently the case in open, free discussion, such as show indifference to evidence or argument. Group discussion is impossible unless the whole group has more or less a common understanding of what amounts to a conclusive argument, what evidence is relevant and what is not, etc. Mini-publics therefore aim to correct or improve the communicative conditions of the political dialogue, contributing to both increased discursive quality and a limited but fair participatory framework (Curato et al., 2021; Sintomer, 2023).

Mini-publics address the problem of opinion formation by attempting to create the ideal truth situation which can be described as fulfilling what Robert Talisse describes as the commitments of ‘folk epistemology’: creating a discussion platform that promotes commitment to reasoning, argument and evidence in order to discuss and justify belief and the expectation that truth may be reached, i.e. that the pragmatic expectation can be seen as realistic, that in the long run disagreement will be limited to what people can reasonably have different opinions on, given that they share epistemic commitments (Talisse, 2009). They produce spaces of mediated discussion where the epistemic norms are reinforced by the moral norms of civility and fairness and where participants can expect others to listen to them as they also commit to listening to others.

Within the safe spaces of mini-publics, post-truth and populism quickly disappear as if they had never existed, and when the effect of mini-public discussion is measured, as happens e.g. in a Deliberative Poll, it appears that participation in a protected discussion of this sort can have considerable and lasting effects on what people believe. One might take that as evidence showing the floating nature of both populism and post-truth, and how they depend on the treacherous environment of identity politics and polarization. It might lead us to believe that the solution to the crisis

of democracy would be to supplement (or even replace) competitive politics with sortitioned mini-publics or civic assemblies that would replace the public at large.

A greatly increased role for mini-publics has been a topic of some debate in democratic theory, where Cristina Lafont (and others) have presented strong arguments against that based on democratic legitimacy (Lafont, 2019). It is worth looking at that question from a different perspective, bracketing for the moment the question of democratic legitimacy. The success of mini-publics in sanitizing belief-formation and belief-revision from the sometimes irrelevant—sometimes outright irrational—external factors that contaminate it in so-called open and free public discussion (often conducted on social media) is considered to be one of their principal strengths. The argument for this rests on the conviction that in the safe space of a mini-public, people have a better chance to think deeply and authentically about the issues. As Lawrence Lessig has recently put it: ‘ordinary people, properly constituted, given a chance to understand and deliberate, would produce better political judgments on a wide range of critical issues than any group of elected representatives’ (Lessig, 2023). The mini-public reproduces something according to this that representative democracy has failed to do: the assembly conditions where the people—ordinary citizens—excel over elected representatives, and in some sense also over experts, since once free of the toxic environment of current social media noise and attempts by various elites to capture and control debate, it is assumed that the people will be able to move quickly into a deliberative mode and an assembly is created that has more in common with ancient Athens and the Western origins of democracy, than with the competition dominating the contemporary marketplace of political power and ideas (Fishkin, 2009).

Let’s assume that common epistemic commitments—commitments that could not be reasonably rejected as shared principles—in fact suffice to justify democracy, as, for example, Robert Talisse and Cheryl Misak have recently argued (Misak & Talisse, 2021). Then we should prefer that kind of decision-making which does not deviate from these principles over other forms of decision-making. It follows that the deliberation of an inclusive and well managed mini-public is an example of a desirable democratic procedure which would, in the long run, at least produce decisions that correspond to the best knowledge at each time. We might even have a strong reason to prefer the conclusions of such a mini-public to our own reasoning, given awareness of our own limitations. In order to

fully accept this, we would also need to accept an instrumental definition of democracy—i.e. see it as primarily a method to make binding decisions for other people and base our evaluation of it on its expected success in producing overall good policies over bad ones.

Will this move help restore liberal values to their proper place and save democracy? Probably not. An obvious question would be, following Mudde's and Kaltwasser's distinction between the supply and demand side of populism, whether increased reliance on mini-publics would also lessen or remove the demand for populist rhetoric. To do so this improved form of decision-making—which might certainly speak to the aspirational side of liberalism, its 'ideological enunciation'—would also need to provide the critical edge to reform liberal rule in some meaningful way. The mini-public may offer innovative and effective ways to improve democratic governance, but that does not mean that it will address critical issues such as inequalities or structural constraints caused by social and cultural difference unless specifically directed to do so by some external authority. Since mini-publics are uncritical of liberalism's epistocratic side and are expected to increase the epistemic quality of decision-making, they will not develop criticism in that direction either. Mini-public rule would essentially be epistocratic.

It follows that the democratic effect of mini-publics must not be over-estimated. Whatever else these innovative forms of democratic policy- and decision-making achieve, they neither address post-truth nor provide a corrective that reaches outside of their safe spaces. Mini-publics, even if they are organized in a way that makes it possible to ascertain that within them discussion follows the epistemic and moral norms of democratic deliberation, capture only a small part of political agency. The exercise in a mini-public may not even count as political agency at all since in the ideal case it is concentrated on particular decision-making issues rather than on opinion formation in the broader sense. The mini-public, then, does not help to avoid populism, but rather takes its place as a vessel for achieving particular goals (see Urbinati, 2019). Deference to mini-publics is fully comparable to deference to a government commission or expert committee, and whatever else can be usefully inserted into the policy-making process. Therefore, they could also be given tasks that are usually solved by unelected officials and thereby to some extent speak to the populist concern about excessive powers of officialdom. Mini-publics, on the other hand, can certainly serve to address populist concerns, although not necessarily serve a populist agenda. For the populist agenda to be

served, control over results cannot be handed over to a random assembly because post-truth, after all, is primarily about control—not only about eroding standards of verification, but also establishing new standards of control.

Deliberative democracy, which currently is strongly connected to mini-public platforms rather than the public sphere at large, is among the main innovations that are seen to address the ‘crisis of democracy’ and to improve representative democracy through an effort to involve the public more strongly in policy-making. But deliberative democracy remains focused on the transparency and quality of decision-making rather than critically exploring the relations between knowledge and policy-making. It therefore offers no meaningful reaction to post-truth or populism.

POPULISM AND LIBERAL INDIFFERENCE

Liberal democrats extol two central virtues of liberalism which together are the main contributors to the liberal way of life (so to speak). This first is the promotion of *pluralism*; and second the protection of *private life*. The first virtue ensures that liberalism not only tolerates, but celebrates, a diversity of views and culture and encourages individuals to seek happiness according to their own needs and desires. The second virtue means that no one is coerced to participate in social or political affairs in order to affirm or maintain citizenship. Together they present liberalism’s rejection of control over individuals. Citizens are entitled to life in peace, and the liberal society should for the most part just leave them alone.

The indifference to public life that liberalism, thus, if not encourages, then at least makes both possible and attractive, is for some critics of liberalism its curse (Taylor, 1994; Walzer, 1990). It may serve to justify social apathy and callousness toward human suffering as well as the reluctance of those better positioned in society to acknowledge a common responsibility for general societal well-being.

While populism is primarily seen as a challenge to liberalism, it does not attack these virtues of liberalism directly. Rather, it strategically undermines liberal indifference, claiming that it primarily serves elites. The claim rests on the assumption that the moral foundation of liberalism has no universal appeal, but simply justifies a political and economic structure which favors the already better positioned. This is the moral perspective that allows the discrediting of good argument and solid evidence. One might see it as a generalized version of an *ad hominem* argument: once a

broad definition of the elite is sufficiently common knowledge, any argument coming from the scientific establishment, the media, etc. can be successfully downgraded as the elite view.

The rejection of epistemic norms thus depends on a widely accepted moral argument against liberalism, which turns the relationship between knowledge and morality on its head. Epistemic norms function differently from moral norms: Communication depends on morally neutral epistemic norms which place certain standards of knowledge above reasonable rejection, whereas the opposite is the case with moral norms which may differ considerably from one person to another. But the rhetorical appeal of populism is drawn from a moral outrage through which epistemic norms are just moral norms which can be rejected because they primarily serve the interests of a dominating group in society. Liberalism's indifference, then, is expressed in the refusal to give up the distinction between moral and epistemic norms. Yet, if liberal democracy is to reclaim its appeal to epistemic standards powerful enough to uphold the communicative force of conclusive evidence or the stronger argument, the moral concerns that liberalism evokes must be addressed rather than ignored.

The liberal paradox discussed in connection with Lefort's paradox points to the incompatibility of liberal aspirations and rule, which is solved by the populist intervention of the authoritative voice. We find a second paradox in liberalism, which results from the incompatibility between, on the one hand, liberal indifference, and, on the other, the liberal expertise-orientedness which can be seen in a strong tendency to defer to expertise (or at least claim to do so) in dealing with complex political issues. On the face of it one might not necessarily want to refer to this as a paradox: should it not be the first duty of responsible government to shape its decision-making to fit with best knowledge at any given time? While that question can certainly be answered in the affirmative, liberalism is also traditionally averse to paternalism, and even expert knowledge from a liberal point of view should not trump the individual right to self-determination.

Epistocracy is mostly used these days for a form of government where experts are given direct power, but here it is extended to refer also to a form of government that requires citizens to accept policies solely on the basis of expert advice. Epistocratic reasoning, in this latter sense, is most clearly seen in debates about climate change, where unequivocal scientific evidence strongly suggests that only very radical measures can reverse global warming. In the case of climate change the discussion is less

about individual behaviors, more about industry regulation and efforts to reduce industrial emissions.

A different aspect of collective action, however, comes up in public health, as seen by much vicious debate surrounding Covid-19 issues. From the point of view of liberal indifference, one would expect liberal government to place responsibility for personal health in the hands of individuals themselves. When public welfare is at stake liberal principles certainly allow coercive measures to some extent. It is here, however, that epistocratic tendencies will appear. As experience has shown, most Western countries openly set themselves the goal to reduce the number of deaths—i.e. minimize infection rates—as their proper response to the 2020–2022 global pandemic. This is justified in light of the extremely high level of knowledge about the nature and behavior of pandemics, but it does conflict with the principle of indifference according to which liberal government trusts individuals to make their own decisions regarding personal welfare. From that perspective, pandemic measures would have focused on another task of liberal government, i.e. to take measures to make sure that social and public health services would not become so overwhelmed that health care systems or other infrastructure would collapse. To some extent, of course, this latter task would have required the same measures, but the motivation and the overall objectives would have been different. I am not going to discuss Covid-19 policies in this chapter, but clearly the almost universal approach of liberal governments (Sweden and perhaps a few other countries initially proposed different policies) was to apply a strategy aimed at protecting individual lives with coercive measures, rather than ensure the workability of systems.

Ironically this epistocratic approach backfired. Policies such as requiring universal vaccinations, longer periods of lockdowns, etc. evoked reactions from groups that challenged the scientific establishment. Negative responses came also from those who felt that the measures were too invasive in personal lives. Some interventions showed that cultural and social customs and traditions were simply treated as irrelevant, and this enraged commentators whose critique was not of science as such but rather its sublimation (Agamben, 2021). In this way, governments acted as if it was their role to impose certain values on individuals, insisting that the effort to prevent infections should always be prioritized.

In the public sphere, the criticism of the liberal-epistocratic approach to the pandemic has emerged primarily in hostile reactions to the scientific

establishment and in the proliferation of claims that highlight negative effects of vaccinations, the secret aims of governments as well as conspiracy theories of many kinds, leading to direct confrontations between the defenders of the establishment and its populist critics. This most common criticism does not confront liberal epistocracy as such, but rather challenges its credentials. From a liberal perspective, however, one could easily imagine another line of criticism which, instead of attacking the scientific consensus, would go against public health collectivism, arguing that coercive health policies could only be justified on the basis of a real concern that otherwise vital functions of society would collapse. In other words, even if populism's post-truth approach to public health policies fails, it may help to expose how liberal government moves towards the epistocratic, where scientific knowledge serves to justify policy that directs government toward what is possible rather than making it stick to what is necessary; the irony being, however, in the interpretation that sees this in the light of asserting power over the public, in liberal indifference rather than as care.

DOES DEMOCRACY NEED SAVING?

I argue in this chapter that the problem of truth, which post-truth politics so vividly poses, has its roots in the practices of liberal democracy, and that it is therefore useful to look for its origins independently of (or prior to) the rise of the currently dominating form of populism. To connect it to postmodernism is unsatisfactory for several reasons: For one, postmodernism, even if it has aroused intense objections and accusations of subverting moral, political and cognitive values, has had negligible political influence. Even if we have great examples of smart populist politicians who can reference postmodernist philosophers in order to claim deeper philosophical roots for their rhetorical rejection of epistemic standards, these references are decorative rather than substantive. Secondly, it is misleading to present a critique of scientific realism and grand narratives as if it implied a full equivocation of all narratives. It is fully compatible with an idea of shared epistemic standards that most of our views of the social and the external world are produced by established epistemic practices rather than corresponding to objective, independent reality, and can therefore not as such beget post-truth (see Latour, 1991). Its roots must be sought in a different place, within, as I will argue, political discourse itself.

As Michael Hannon points out in a recent paper, there is an important difference between the idea that truth as a concept and value has disappeared from public discourse, on the one hand, and, on the other, that public discourse is not based in shared standards of verification and epistemic acceptability: the idea that the concept of truth has been abandoned wholesale is in his view ‘deeply implausible’ (Hannon, 2023, p. 42). Even under less-than-ideal epistemic conditions we still need the concept of truth for both expressing doubts and claiming that something, rather than other, is the case. The populist strategy in discarding well founded truth claims is not based on a theory of truth, but on a view of liberal dominance on which the credibility of sources is then seen to depend.

Much of the debate on issues that invoke a populist-liberal controversy on standards of verification results from a denial of the findings of science in regard to highly contentious issues such as vaccines, climate change and Covid. The GMO discussion is an interesting outlier in the discussion, since it has provoked hostile reaction and suspicion not from the populist camp, but rather from leftist environmentalist circles, i.e. from groups that usually place themselves in opposition to populism and, in other matters, may be fully compliant with the scientific consensus. Such divisions show a reluctance to accept truth independently of a perceived agenda.

So, while I agree with Hannon that whatever else the post-truth condition implies it does not abandon truth, but rather abandons truth as an independent authority that deserves full submission independently of any particular agenda, post-truth cannot be dismissed as a low intensity opposition to the emerging consensus, able to make some trouble and perhaps slow things down, but not serious enough to permanently undermine the truth-orientedness of public discourse. The problem is embedded in institutional authority. If the scientific consensus is reliant on institutional authority, where not only the veracity of common knowledge is vetted and guaranteed but where the power to determine policies based on established knowledge is to a large extent vested, there is clearly space for resistance even though such resistance will be undermined by the point that it implies not only opposition to authority but the denial of scientific standards of verification. To illustrate my claim here I want to discuss a recent example of a confrontation of this kind.

Florida’s surgeon general, Joseph Lapado, was reported to be going against ‘medical advice’ in making the question of unvaccinated children staying home or going to school a choice to be made by parents/

guardians (Blum, 2024). *The New York Times* presented this as an anti-science position, quoting other public health officials, medical and public health experts and practitioners. Lapado is also reported to have ‘called for a halt’ in Covid vaccines, citing ‘widely debunked concerns that contaminants in the vaccine can permanently integrate into human DNA’ (Mandavilli, 2024).

The coverage could be criticized for one-sidedness—the classical populist criticism would be that, in order for the reporting to be balanced, comments should be received from ‘both sides’. The newspaper does not do that under the implicit assumption that the scientific consensus does not require it: the point, and the substance of the coverage, is the anti-science stance of the official in question.

What is neither covered nor in fact mentioned, on the other hand, is the question of the role of public institutions. An implicit assumption is also that a surgeon general’s duty is to use available and recognized scientific knowledge to justify actions and policies rather than putting decisions in the hands of the public, which is vulnerable to misinformation. The surgeon general must therefore be seen as not only a public official with well-defined and specific duties, but in fact something along the lines of being an epistemic authority. Public health officials are sometimes given quite extraordinary powers to decide on measures necessary to react to imminent public health threats. In this case, however, the question really has to do with making a choice between forcing citizens to follow certain procedures or deciding not to do so. If the government does have the responsibility to enforce policies that maximally reduce the number of infections, it must go beyond what liberal aspirations require—and in fact, strictly speaking, allow, since it would be taken as a given that medical reasons trump all others. If its responsibility is, rather, to do what is necessary to secure the proper function of the health system, this demands a different course of action, i.e. instead of taking measures that minimize the number of infections, seeking to reduce them only to a certain extent. Of course, in certain situations this would require the same measures, but not in this particular case.

Both the newspaper coverage and the surgeon general’s explanations confront only the scientific aspect of the case, where the explanations refer to results that the paper says have been debunked. It is interesting and indeed of great importance that the surgeon general does not so much refer to the right of citizens to self-determination in explaining his decision. Rather his office expresses doubt about the scientific evidence

itself. His resistance to establishment wisdom is thus less about freedom, more about epistemic standards. Paradoxically, this ties him to the epistocratic side as well: he would not resist the policies if he believed in the science, but he doesn't. The paper simply carries the quick dismissal of (scientifically unfounded) skepticism which is then deemed equivalent to spreading disinformation, rather than questioning it as a policy that removes a protective cover from the public.

The coverage in this case reflects a pattern almost universal in mainstream reporting of cases where institutions seem to be giving in to what can be presented as the 'minority view' or condemned more seriously as disinformation spread by propagandists whose arguments against the scientific consensus can easily (or not so easily) be shown to be false. I am not arguing that this is necessarily wrong. However, the questioning that is missing is about the role of the state to protect individuals from dangers that they are unable to assess satisfactorily. One may conclude that the reason it is left out in the mainstream coverage is simply the fact that it does not occur to the journalist or editors as relevant. That also suggests that the liberal commitment to what we could call 'weak epistocracy', where, in matters that have to do with public health, welfare (and many other spheres of society), deference to expertise should be unquestioned. It is a perfectly valid position, however, to point out that individuals have themselves the means to make informed choices about vaccines—whereas the responsibility of the health system is to understand the consequences of their choices and explain that to them. In the Florida case covered by the *New York Times*, no serious risk to public health arises, and the risks in question are mainly to individuals, which further illustrates the epistocratic emphasis bordering on paternalism: there is a correct decision to be made which the media organizations consider to be obvious and above questioning.

CONCLUSION

Post-truth politics thrives in an environment of rapidly increasing availability of information from sources wildly different and diverse and when distrust of liberal democracy arises both from its actions and its failures to act: its actions when scientific knowledge not only accompanies policy but dictates it; its inability to address or explain the deviation of liberal rule from liberal aspirations. The post-truth condition emerges in

the refusal to accept these failures, first in opposition to liberal epistocracy, then in the populist leader's authoritative voice. Post-truth is, in one way, a misnomer, since opinions are based on beliefs and, whoever has a belief, well, believes it. In a post-truth condition, however, there is motivation to take sources and information seriously for reasons that may have little to do with common standards of belief or even logic. However, as the example of the Florida surgeon general illustrates, this does not amount to rejecting the epistocratic tendency itself. It is rather an opposition to a particular expert-based view. But the loss this incurs is still the lack of truth-orientedness in public discourse and, with it, the situation that one essential feature of democracy, free and open public discussion, seems pointless or even dangerous. The post-truth condition is not irrational. The motivation to take seriously information available unofficially that challenges established knowledge is reasonable even in cases where evidence is insufficient and the mere claim to the contrary should not really suffice to create serious doubts. Therefore, it is a mistake to blame it on recent theoretical fashions or call for increased verified information or explanation. Critical attitudes should be directed at liberal democracy itself.

It should be pointed out, however, that the post-truth condition does not mean that the concept of truth as such is in danger and that mankind might lose its grasp of objective truth altogether (see Hannon, 2023, pp. 42–43). It is also not an epistemic crisis. It is, rather a political crisis which affects representative democracy, first and foremost, since it precludes the basic agreement necessary for meaningful political agency (see also Enroth, 2023; Goldman, 2019). It politicizes everything. Of this we have many examples from public discussion in recent years. One is an incident in 2014 when a passenger jet with more than 300 people on board was shot down over Ukraine. It has been firmly established since 2017 that Russian anti-aircraft systems were used to shoot down the plane and Russian authorities were involved (Public Prosecution Service, 2023). Yet a denial of this from the Russian authorities, as well as bluffing maneuvers and falsified data have sufficed to maintain uncertainty about the issue. No amount of conclusive evidence will suffice to settle the issue: it is complex, it has technical aspects that need to be explained, but, first and foremost, settling the issue requires a removal of its factual side from the political realm, which is not realistic. Maybe history will finally get it right—or maybe not.

Given my understanding here of the crisis of democracy, the efforts to reform it by way of increased mini-public deliberation and by bolstering direct citizen participation in policy- and decision-making do not go to the root of the problem, since it has to do with the relations between policies and knowledge rather than the need for more epistemically robust methods to determine policy. In the end, the only way to save democracy is by restoring faith in open and free public discussion as a truth-oriented enterprise.

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Conclusion



Conclusions: ‘Mainstream’ Alarmism or ‘Critical’ Complacency? How to Approach Post-truth Populism

Maximilian Conrad  *and Saul Newman*

This volume has brought together ten chapters that address the question of post-truth populism as a new political paradigm from very different angles indeed. While it is almost impossible to summarize the sophisticated arguments made by many of the authors, it is nonetheless possible and hopefully also fruitful to try to draw out some common themes that may stake out the contours of a more profound debate and, potentially, also a new research agenda in this field. One way of drawing out such common themes may be to look at the ways in which the different contributions make sense of the extent to which the presumed new political paradigm constitutes a *challenge* or, indeed, a *threat* to liberal democracy. While it is always problematic to attempt to categorize contributions as diverse as the ones in this volume, it is nonetheless

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tempting to adopt two labels that are suggested—possibly a bit dismissively—in two theoretical contributions that describe a good part of the literature (and authors working) on the connection between populism and post-truth politics: ‘alarmist’ (see Venizelos, in this volume) and/or ‘mainstream’ (see Kalpokas, in this volume). By contrast, these contributions inscribe themselves into the camp of ‘more critical voices’ (Kalpokas, in this volume). And indeed, there is a sense of disagreement between the contributions in this volume regarding the severity of the challenge constituted by the interplay between populism and post-truth—or, more fundamentally, regarding the question whether such an interplay exists in the first place. As some contributions point out, the case can be made that such an interplay may be grossly overstated and that the juxtaposition of post-truth and populism could also be seen as a signifier in a hegemonic struggle for meaning. This contrast in the assessment of the situation creates an intriguing opening for framing not only the different contributions in this volume, but more broadly also the stakes of the debate on post-truth populism. It is indeed possible to read the diverse perspectives developed in this volume with an admittedly stylized opposition in mind—an opposition between what might be labeled ‘alarmist’ and/or ‘mainstream’ positions, on the one end, and ‘critical’ or complacent positions, on the other end. Importantly, however, these categories should be seen as end points on a continuum rather than as a binary distinction. Not only are the arguments presented within the different contributions quite diverse, but it is also perfectly conceivable that there are middle-ground positions adopting elements of both perspectives.

In Venizelos’ contribution, the term ‘alarmism’ is used somewhat dismissively to denote the way in which what he refers to as ‘mainstream’ research on post-truth politics and/or populism frames the stakes in the debate. Nevertheless, there is some truth to the observation that this body of scholarship is concerned with post-truth politics and, in particular, its link to populism predominantly because of its presumably detrimental effect on liberal democracy—or, to be more precise, for liberal democratic political culture and its emphasis on the central role of public life and deliberation, but also for the rights and values associated with liberal democracy. As a matter of fact, the motivation underlying the writing of this book is informed by the same ‘alarmist’ reading of post-truth populism, i.e., that the presumed interplay of post-truth politics and populism—which is seen as a potentially serious challenge to fundamental principles of liberal democracy—merits further analysis precisely

for this reason. Moreover, as some of the theoretical *and* empirical contributions explain, the link between particular forms of populism and post-truth politics is important to study not *simply* (but certainly *also*) out of a concern for the apparently changing status of the truth in political discourse (Newman, 2019, 2023) and the striking *motivational postfactualism* (MacMullen, 2020) that goes hand in hand with it. But maybe more importantly, this link also deserves further analysis because of the *il-* or *antiliberal* agendas of numerous populist forces. Against this backdrop, it should go without saying that the contention of this volume is by no means that *all* populist politics is post-truth (in the way we understand the term), or that *only* populist politicians can be accused of a post-truth style. This is a point that Jayson Harsin reminds us of in his contribution. If this were the case, then this book might quite possibly not be needed. What we are driven by, instead, is the ambition to understand better the link between populism and post-truth politics. This link has been pointed out by many, but still has not been studied sufficiently. Even upon the completion of this book, this endeavor is by no means concluded and this volume should thus be seen as an invitation to engage in more research and debate on the link between post-truth politics and populism.

A CRITIQUE OF 'MAINSTREAM' APPROACHES TO POST-TRUTH POPULISM

The volume includes three theoretical contributions that are particularly critical of what is construed as 'mainstream' approaches to the study of post-truth politics, the post-truth condition, and the link between post-truth politics and populism. Some of the arguments made in these contributions provide critical insights that can usefully be employed as correctives that challenge certain aspects that may (or may not) have been taken for granted in the broader literature on post-truth politics. To some extent, it may however be objected that certain parts of these arguments appear to be based on a somewhat stylized account of how post-truth politics is framed and addressed in the allegedly *less critical* mainstream literature. For instance, one of the most commonplace critiques of the literature on post-truth politics is that it is *allegedly* (and only implicitly) characterized by a nostalgia for some sense of a golden era of truth politics that must have preceded the age of post-truth politics, but that has never existed in reality. Kalpokas is unequivocal on this point in his contribution, but one might interject that no one would seriously claim

that there ever was a period in which politics was not characterized to an important degree by lies, deceit, propaganda, false information, etc. But this emphasis on an implied nostalgia for a golden age of truth politics also misses the point of most ‘mainstream’ post-truth research that is concerned with the *evidently* changing nature of the truth in political discourse—in particular as it is related to the resurgence of populism. As Peter Strandbrink points out in his contribution, the post-truth condition ‘*does not* denote that which is not true, but rather that *which does not concern itself* with truth and falsehood’. But this argument will be presented in more detail in the review of the ‘alarmist’ contributions below. Similarly, it should be clear by now that ‘mainstream’ post-truth research is hardly about the imposition of absolute truth claims along the lines of what Kalpokas brands as an effort to ‘make a singular truth great again’, thereby alluding, unmistakably, to Trump’s *Make America Great Again* slogan and/or movement.

As regards the presumed link between post-truth politics and populism, both Kalpokas and Venizelos make some (thought-)provoking gestures towards the ‘mainstream’ literature: for Kalpokas, this mainstream literature and its presumed insistence on the changing status of the truth is itself *post-truth* because of its alleged nostalgia for a condition that never existed. For Venizelos, on the other hand, the exploration of this link is also *post-truth*, predominantly because, he argues, it is based on an *anti*-populism that misunderstands populism by conflating it with right-wing extremism. This is arguably an important point that should be possible to leverage in the further development of research agendas on the link between post-truth politics and populism. In fact, most of the empirical research in this area tends to focus on populist forces on the right wing of the political spectrum, and conceptual precision regarding the object of this research is clearly of the utmost importance. However, researchers must clearly be careful *also* not to let populists off the hook too easily simply because of a possibly increasingly blurry line between right-wing populism and extremism. What makes current populist movements and parties so intriguing is, at least in some cases, the way in which such forces manage to build bridges between moderate and extremist camps. The German AfD and its gradual, but seemingly never-ending radicalization (Conrad, 2020), is a case in point that illustrates this particular dilemma.

Similar to Kalpokas and Venizelos, Jayson Harsin’s contribution also offers a highly critical take on the emerging ‘mainstream’ literature on

post-truth populism, arguing that post-truth politics is best understood as an '*anxious public mood* about a fragile public epistemology—about the difficulty of securing publicly accepted facts' (emphasis added). This anxious mood certainly plays a key role in public as well as academic debate on post-truth politics, considering that a concern for the future of democracy and the rights and values associated with liberal democracy has—implicitly or explicitly—prompted much of the research on post-truth politics in recent years. Nevertheless, arguing that post-truth politics is only *indirectly* about 'epistemic qualities of political discourse', that post-truth is predominantly a 'public mood about [a] *hyperbolic* discourse' (emphasis added), and that this discourse is hyperbolic 'because there is no sign that people are willing to retire the word truth from the dictionary' may come across as complacent. Indeed, debates on post-truth politics have strongly underlined that the truth is anything but untested. In fact, as several contributions in this volume correctly point out, a good part of what is at stake in the debate on post-truth politics is the power and authority to define the truth. The argument on the role of 'counterknowledge' for populist movements, made in the contribution by Lovec and Mahmutovic, is a good illustration of the contentiousness of the concept of the truth and, indeed, the claim that populists lay on the truth and their independent ability to assert the truth *in opposition to established authorities*. But it is precisely this contentiousness of truth—and the idea, advanced by post-truth populists, that alternative facts can be established by epistemic standards defined in opposition to conventional and allegedly *elitist* scientific methods—that illustrates why this 'discourse' is anything but hyperbolic. In fact, one might say that the emergence of the epistemic turn in populism studies (as mentioned in Michael Hameleers' contribution) highlights this point: post-truth politics is largely about the erosion of shared epistemic standards for the assessment of competing truth claims. This point is clearly expressed by some of the sophisticated accounts within the 'alarmist/mainstream' camp (see below). It is easy to agree with Harsin that post-truth is, at least in part, 'an anxious public mood about an approaching dystopia where publicly accepted facts have no hope of being established—because trust is constantly, even systematically undermined'. But it is the latter part of this description that normative and empirical researchers should devote their attention and energy to. For a nuanced discussion on this, we do indeed need to emphasize the Arendtian distinction between, e.g. mathematical, scientific, rational and factual truth, as discussed also in

a number of the more ‘mainstream’ contributions in this volume (e.g., García-Gutián; Conrad; Ólafsson).

AN ALARMIST APPROACH TO POST-TRUTH POPULISM?

Among those contributions that take the link between post-truth politics and populism as a serious threat to liberal democracy, Elena García-Gutián emphasizes—as does Maximilian Conrad in his contribution—that post-truth politics needs to be understood as part of a much broader development in political culture. Populism clearly plays a role in this transformation of political culture, which is an assessment that also other contributors share. On this point, García-Gutián makes a similar point as Peter Strandbrink does, highlighting the role that the post-truth populist *style of politics* plays in the erosion of democracy, but emphasizing also that this development should urge us ‘to reflect on the cultural changes taking place in our societies and how they are challenging our democratic systems’. By comparison, Strandbrink talks about *new turn populism* in this context, which bears certain similarities with the epistemic turn in populism studies (and thus with *epistemic populism*), but highlights that it is the ‘entirely new levels of *contempt* for assessable political talk’ that are characteristic of new turn populism, i.e., the ‘cognitive randomness’ of new turn populist politicians, ‘bypassing the core assumption that political talk needs to be *assessable* through reason, truth, rationality, or evidentiality’ (emphasis added). Strandbrink’s emphasis on these points is a good illustration also of the perspective shared by many mainstream authors with regard to the presumed novelty of the phenomenon of post-truth populism: even without any glorifying sense of nostalgia for a golden era of truth politics, we cannot get around the observation that this ‘post-epistemic style of politics in “normal” liberal democracy is indeed new’. Strandbrink’s contribution is a particularly welcome invitation to scholars of post-truth politics in that he also spells out four ‘kernel dispositions’ for political science and political theory to cultivate in relation to new turn populism, spelling out four possible orientations towards NTP: militant, indifferent, critical, and accommodating. It is difficult not to read this list of possible orientations as an indictment of overly complacent approaches. In a sense, Conrad’s contribution goes in the same direction by drawing attention to the role of populist actors in not only delegitimizing, but indeed also attempting to *silence* the voice of critical journalism in liberal

democracy. The gist of the argument—based, in Conrad's case, on interviews with German TV journalists—is decidedly alarmist, highlighting that such efforts to silence the voice of journalism should be seen as a step towards rather than as an expression of an already existing post-truth condition. Empirically, similar processes can be observed in the case of Janez Janša's use of 'fake news' frames to delegitimize mainstream journalism in Slovenia, but Lovec/Mahmutovic draw somewhat different conclusions. What these contributions share, therefore, is a view of post-truth politics or the post-truth condition that goes far beyond an anxious mood about the possibility of publicly accepted facts. For García-Gutián, the post-truth constellation is characterized by a 'growing social acceptance that different "truths" can *co-exist* in the social body' (emphasis added), but also by the observation that '(scientifically validated) facts no longer have any particular influence on the shaping of public opinions or on debates taking place within the public sphere'. This may turn out to be an existential threat to liberal democracy, as also highlighted by Strandbrink, due to the 'systematic erosion of the truths, which destroys the public realm, making democratic life impossible' (García-Gutián in this volume). Consequently, 'the danger comes when lies are embraced by the community'.

A MIDDLE-GROUND POSITION?

Beyond the seemingly entrenched opposition between mainstream and critical perspectives, there is clearly ground for sophisticated middle-ground positions. Jón Ólafsson presents one very interesting take on this, constructing two different narratives of the emergence of the post-truth condition. His argument is that both narratives are ultimately equally important and valid. For him, the post-truth condition is characterized by 'the commonly experienced situation where open and free discussion *cannot be expected* to produce (in the end) correct information' (emphasis added) due to a lack of 'common norms of inquiry which will move [inquirers] in the same direction, i.e., towards affirming what is correct rather than incorrect'. Against this backdrop, the post-truth condition has to be seen either as a reaction to liberalism's epistocratic tendencies (expert knowledge in the forefront of policy making)—or 'as an inherent part of the populist surge' and thus integral to populist politics. This argument is clearly highly instructive with regard to advancing the research agenda on post-truth populism: there is no need to disregard

or downplay the strikingly apparent link between populism and post-truth politics when *also* considering the idiosyncrasies of liberal democracy. This argument may also be able to serve as a bridge between positions that emphasize the role of populism in post-truth politics—and those that look to liberal democracy itself as a source of the problem. This could be the key lesson to be learned going forward, and an important step in taking both narratives seriously.

POST-TRUTH POPULISM: TOWARDS A NEW POLITICAL PARADIGM?

In bringing this volume to its conclusion, we need to consider the lessons learned from the various contributions. The overall aim of the volume was to explore the question to what extent and in what ways post-truth populism constitutes a new political paradigm. The motivation driving this project was a—possibly alarmist—concern for the future of liberal democracy in the context of the challenge of post-truth politics. In particular, our interest has been in the link between two phenomena that are, in important ways, distinct from one another, but between which there also appear to be striking overlaps. The contributions that make up this volume present very different perspectives about the extent to which post-truth politics, post-truth populism, or the post-truth condition present a challenge to liberal democracy—or if it presents a challenge at all, considering that some contributions question some of the basic premises upon which the academic *debate* (we consciously refrain from using the concept *discourse* here) on post-truth politics and populism has unfolded.

The diversity of views expressed in the different contributions should be considered an asset. Although it is, in some sense, important for academic debates to avoid getting stuck in conceptual issues before empirical engagement with a given topic can even begin to unfold, such conceptual discussions are fundamentally important for researchers' ability to formulate conceptually sound research questions, engage in meaningful empirical research and come up with rigorous assessments. The differences in perceptions and opinions reflected in the—admittedly fairly rough—distinction between 'alarmist/mainstream' and 'complacent/critical' perspectives in this volume have certainly contributed to this, and will hopefully also continue to inform lively academic exchange and the formulation of coherent research agendas on post-truth politics and populism. In terms of lessons learned, in particular as regards the

assessment of the situation, it is clearly important not to exaggerate the problem, but our position is also that it is even more important not to *downplay* the potential threat that post-truth populism poses to liberal democracy either. In order to be able to do that, theoretical and empirical research on the link between post-truth politics and populism clearly needs to adopt many of the key insights that the critical perspectives in this volume address. Maybe most importantly, research on post-truth populism needs to avoid any sort of misunderstanding regarding the extent to which the concept of post-truth suggests any sort of glorifying nostalgia about an era of truth politics that has never existed. Arguably, most work on post-truth politics is fairly clear on this, but this kind of acknowledgment is important for the sake of being able to move on to do actual research on the subject. Similarly, research on post-truth populism needs to avoid taking deeply challenging concepts such as truth and facts (and, indeed, the relationship between the two) for granted. Significant efforts have been made in recent years to address this, as is reflected by the fact that philosophical distinctions between different kinds of truths and truth claims are by now very commonly addressed in work on post-truth populism.

Still, we need to be clear that the challenges associated with the interplay between post-truth politics and, in particular, *right-wing* populism are all too real and cannot be downplayed or dismissed simply by labeling research in this area as 'mainstream', 'uncritical', or in some way less rigorous. In the face of the very real and conscious effort by populist politicians to incite hostilities against journalists, it is quite simply not enough to discredit research on post-truth politics as glorifying a past that has never existed, or to point out that even mainstream politicians have, at some point and in some context, resorted to vile efforts to delegitimize mainstream media. This cannot be dismissed as a 'feverish concern about public distrust of professional news media' (Harsin, in this volume). By the same token, post-truth populism isn't simply a 'signifier in the dominant discourse' or some kind of 'forced association between populism and post-truth' (Venizelos, in this volume). The phenomena described in the empirical contributions to this volume need to be seen as fundamental challenge to the rights and values associated with liberal democracy. Against this backdrop, it is essential for researchers to connect the dots between the resurgence of populism, the demise of commonly accepted epistemic standards, and the antiliberal agendas pursued by the

same political forces that agitate not simply against science and expertise, but indeed against anyone who happens to have a dissenting opinion.

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