

3.6

CONSPIRACY THEORY AND POPULISM

Eiríkur Bergmann and Michael Butter

Introduction

In the last two decades, populist movements and parties have been on the rise all over the world. Politicians who have been labelled as populists currently govern the world's four largest democracies: Brazil, Indonesia, the U.S.A. and India. In Europe, too, populism is no longer restricted to the margins of politics and society. Populists are governing in Hungary, Poland, Italy, Switzerland and Norway, sometimes alone, sometimes as part of coalitions. Even where they are not (yet) officially in power, they have grown stronger and have shaped political agendas, as the Brexit campaign or discussions about the refugee 'crisis' in Germany and other countries show. Conspiracy theories have played a major role in these debates. Populist leaders – from Trump to Maduro, and from Orbán to Le Pen – often use conspiracist rhetoric, and many of their followers are receptive to it.

However, the relationship between populism and conspiracy theory remains understudied. As Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser put it, 'Despite the fact that various scholars have pointed out the link between populism and conspiratorial thinking ..., there is a dearth of empirical research on this argument' (2017: 530). This article likewise cannot provide the much-needed comprehensive theory of the connections between conspiracy theories and populism, but it may help to pave the way for such an account. In the first part of the chapter, we first discuss the characteristics of populism and then the limited number of studies that address the relationship between the two phenomena. We provide a preliminary theorisation of our own that, however, requires further testing. In the second part of the article, we conduct two case studies – devoted to the anti-immigration discourse in Northern Europe and Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign – in order to demonstrate how conspiracy theories can merge with populist ideology and how populist leaders can employ them to achieve their goals.

Defining populism

The word *populism* stems from the Latin word *populus*, simply meaning *the people*. The ancient population of Rome was, for instance, referred to as *populus Romanus*. The term corresponds to *Volk* in German, or *Folk* in Scandinavian languages. Unsurprisingly, all scholars of populism – and the field has exponentially grown in the last two decades – therefore agree that the category

of the people is of central importance to populism. Apart from that, however, there is little agreement in populism research, with some scholars even questioning the usefulness of the concept as an umbrella for historically, regionally and politically diverse movements and parties. Defining who and what should be classified as populist is particularly challenging because the term carries – at least in popular usage – a derogatory meaning (Taguieff 1995). Populists are often accused of undue simplification and provocation, and therefore movements and parties do not embrace the label but rather reject it.

In recent years, populism has been conceptualised as a strategy that political leaders employ to establish a supposedly direct link to their followers (Weyland 2001; Barr 2009); as a political logic that considers society dominated by the antagonism between two groups that struggle for hegemony (Laclau 2005); as a specific discourse political leaders use to articulate their positions (de la Torre 2010; Hawkins 2010); as a style and thus as a specific performance of doing politics (Moffitt 2016); and even as ‘unpolitics’ because of its focus on popular sovereignty and disregard for all other aspects of democracy (Taggart 2019). The COST Action IS1308 has treated populism as a communication phenomenon and explored the interactions between political actors, the media and ordinary citizens (de Vreese *et al.* 2018). Most influentially, however, populism has been theorised as an ideology. According to this definition, populism is

a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.

(Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6 [italics in the original])

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser conceive of populism as ‘thin-centered’ because it is not a fully developed ideology and therefore always occurs in combination with a thick ideology such as nationalism, socialism or fascism.

Importantly, these different approaches to populism are not mutually exclusive. Specifically, the ‘discursive and stylistic turn in the study of populism’ (Brubaker 2019: 29) does not challenge but rather complements approaches that conceptualise populism as a thin ideology and therefore as a limited set of ideas. As Woods convincingly argues, the distinction between ideology and discursive style is one of form and content, and both are ‘integral to each other’ (2014: 15). Following Stanley (2008), Woods also argues that the different approaches tend to converge in the identification of four core elements: (1) the existence of the two groups of the people and the elite; (2) their antagonism; (3) the celebration of popular sovereignty; and (4) the moral glorification of the people and the critique of the elites (2014: 11).

Despite their different nuances across time and regions, then, populist politicians unite in a Manichean worldview, in which societies are seen as divided between the elite and the people. According to this binary viewpoint, the pure people are unaware of the malignant parasitic forces exploiting not only their naivety but also their inherited goodness. They need the populist leaders to alert them to what is really going on and to channel their resistance into meaningful action. The loaded dichotomy between the elites and the people makes populism a particularly moralistic take on politics (Müller 2016) for which processes of othering are of central importance (Wodak 2015). For Hawkins (2003), populism is, then, about nothing less than the struggle between good and evil.

Beyond the core elements of populism identified by Woods, there are a number of secondary features (Taggart 2019) that appear in many populist movements, especially in right-wing ones. To begin with, contemporary populists usually accept democracy and parliamentarianism – they are anti-elite but not anti-system – yet reject the idea of liberal democracy. Since they consider

the people one homogeneous group with a single will (the *volonté générale* mentioned above in the definition by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser), they cannot accept diverging opinions as legitimate. Rejecting diversity, individual rights and the separation of power, they favour an illiberal form of democracy. Accordingly, when in power, their goal is typically not to abolish democracy but rather to reshape it (Enyedi 2016; Seewann 2018).

Populist movements are usually organised around charismatic leader figures. They tend to be more leader-driven than based on clear party structures. One of their main appeals is positioning their leader as the saviour of the people, hence the leader is usually cast as ‘a man of action rather than words, who is not afraid to take difficult and quick decisions’ (Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 64). This leader always already intuitively knows what the people – the real people – want, and he articulates their concerns and fights for them. In fact, the leader is often seen to understand the true will of the people even more clearly than they might themselves (cf. Müller 2016: 34–5). Frederico Finchelstein consequently concludes that ‘populism replaces representation with the transfer of authority to the leader’ (2017: xvi).

The communication style of populist leaders is normally very specific. They tend to both dramatise and simplify the issues at stake in order to trigger an emotional response. They are deliberately provocative in order to draw attention and promote polarisation, for example, by manufacturing crises rhetorically (Moffitt 2015) or violating publicly accepted norms of political discourse. Such acts then usually trigger protest from the mainstream. In turn, the populists complain of ill treatment by the ‘politically correct’ mainstream, i.e. the interlinked established authority in politics and media. This dynamic can be structured into a four-step rhetorical formulation, by which populists come to dominate the political agenda (Wodak 2015). This strategy is well suited for the contemporary media environment where news channels are always on air and ever hungry for scandalous messages that promise a large audience (Wettstein *et al.* 2018). Moreover, populists are also very apt at using social media for their purposes. In fact, several scholars have argued that the new online platforms that have become so important to political and social communication over the past decade are particularly suited for populist communication (Groshek, Koc-Michalska 2017; Bobba, Roncarolo 2018). Not only does social media allow populists to speak directly to the ‘ordinary’ people without having their words twisted by what they consider corrupt bureaucrats or journalists serving the elite, social media – and Twitter even more than Facebook – also thrive on simplification and emotionality, exactly the aspects that set populists apart from other politicians (van Kessel, Castelein 2016).

However, as Ruth Wodak (2015) argues, right-wing populism is not only a form of rhetoric, it also contains specific and identifiable contents. Both style and substance are thus interlinked in populist politics. The fear that they instil is of a specific kind. It consists of several core aspects, one being the fear of losing jobs to immigrants and of migrants undermining the welfare state to the detriment of the unable and elderly amongst the native population. Furthermore, the rhetoric usually points to the increasing powerlessness of the nation-state in protecting the intransigent public. It warns against the erosion of values and the demise of traditions and the native culture. Frequently, it detects conspiracies at the bottom of these negative developments.

Populism and conspiracy theory

The existence of a connection between populism and conspiracy theory is already suggested by the fact that the rich bodies of scholarship on both phenomena often pose and discuss similar questions. Research has highlighted that both ‘populism’ and ‘conspiracy theory’ are problematic derogatory terms that are usually rejected by those thus described (Taguieff 1995; Knight 2000). Both are often seen as distorted and simplistic responses to pressing issues such

as globalisation (Calance 2015; Brubaker 2019). Both are considered to thrive particularly well on the Internet with its echo chambers, alternative and social media, and counter-publics (del Vicario *et al.* 2015; van Kessel, Castelein 2016). Both are tied to questions of gender identity, although this issue remains understudied in both fields (Christ 2014; Abi-Hassan 2017). Both are frequently described as a danger to democracy and seen as closely tied to extremism (Akkerman 2017; van Prooijen 2018). Finally, both are sometimes cast as the opposite of politics proper (Hofstadter 1964; Abts, Rummens 2007). Taggart's labelling of populism as 'unpolitics' (2019) even echoes one of the earliest scholarly condemnations of conspiracy theories: Bunzel's dismissal of them as 'antipolitics' (1967).

However, despite these parallels, the relationship between populism and conspiracy theory has hardly been systematically explored within the scholarship on populism or that on conspiracy theories. Bergmann's study (2018) is the only monograph written on the topic so far. Apart from his book, the few studies from both fields that engage with the relationship at all fall into three categories. First, there is a small body of articles that highlights one or more of the characteristics that populism and conspiracy theory share. Hauwaert (2012) stresses that both share a Manichean worldview that postulates a conflict between good and evil, the people and the elite; with populism stressing the innocence of the people and conspiracy theories stressing their lack of knowledge about the secret plot. The quantitative analyses of Castanho Silva *et al.* (2017) and Oliver and Rahn (2016) identify the distrust of elites as the most important common factor. Moffitt (2016) argues that both engage in othering and deny the complexity of political reality.

Second, other studies discuss, albeit never in much detail, the possible function of conspiracy theories for populist discourse. Taggart (2000) argues that conspiracy theories are a tool of mobilisation and that they allow populist leaders to explain the problems their movements are facing. Gadinger (2019) explores in some detail the role of conspiracy allegations for the German Pegida Movement. Thalmann (2019) stresses that populist leaders can use conspiracy theories to fashion themselves as anti-establishment figures because both populism and conspiracy theory are stigmatised by the mainstream and the elites. In similar fashion, Ylä-Anttila (2018) argues that, in countries like Finland where conspiracy theories are considered illegitimate knowledge, populists use them to cast doubt on experts and challenge their claims to authority.

Finally, there are some attempts to theorise more specifically the relationship between populism and conspiracy theory. Priester (2012) identifies conspiracy theories as one of six defining features of right-wing populism. Wodak (2015) shares this position, while Stoica (2017) and Vassiliou (2017) even argue that there can be no populism without conspiracy theories. From the perspective of conspiracy theory studies, the relationship has been most thoroughly theorised by Fenster, who argues that all contemporary conspiracy theories are populist, but that not all populist movements rely on conspiracy theories. Accordingly, he considers conspiracy theories 'a non-necessary element of populist ideology' (2008: 84). Recently, Taggart, approaching the topic from the perspective of populism studies, has come to a similar conclusion. He considers 'a tendency towards conspiracy theory' as one of the secondary features that occur in many but not all populist movements (2019: 84).

From our perspective, the theorisations by Fenster and Taggart are the most convincing ones, but they require an amendment. As Butter has recently argued, there is empirical evidence that suggests that conspiracy theories are widely spread in many populist movements, but that not all followers actually believe them (2018: 174–5). For example, a poll conducted during the Republican primaries in 2016 showed that supporters of Donald Trump, the populist candidate, displayed a much higher tendency towards conspiracism than the supporters of the two establishment candidates, but there was no conspiracy theory that more than 40 per cent of Trump

supporters believed in (Ehrenfreund 2016). This impression that conspiracy theorists usually constitute a significant minority within populist movements is also confirmed by the preliminary findings of an ethnographic study of conspiracy theories in the right-wing populist movements that have emerged in Germany in recent years (Hammel 2017).

Hence, rather than classifying a specific populist movement as conspiracist or not, it makes more sense to postulate that populist movements are obviously successful at integrating those who believe in conspiracy theories and those who do not. As Bobba and Roncarlo put it, 'The elites are generally accused of being incompetent and self-interested when not actually conspiring against the people and seeking to undermine democracy' (2018: 53). Conspiracy theories, then, offer a specific explanation as to why the elites act against the interests of the people. This explanation tends to co-exist within a populist movement or party with other explanations such as negligence or personal enrichment. In other words, conspiracy theories are a non-necessary element of populist discourse and ideology, and they are not necessarily believed by everybody in the populist movement or party in which they are circulating.

Anti-immigrant conspiracy theories in the Nordic countries

Like elsewhere in Europe, conspiratorial populism has been on the rise throughout the Nordic nations (Bergmann 2017). In Denmark, the discourse on immigration drastically changed in the 1970s and 1980s when it went from emphasising openness, equal treatment and protecting human rights towards requirements of adhering to fundamental values of the native society. Karen Wren (2001) maintains that, paradoxically, the former liberal values were used to portray especially Muslims and refugees as a threat to Danish national identity. The change started with the emergence of the Progress Party in the early 1970s. Its leader, Mogens Glistrup, once compared Muslim immigrants to a 'drop of arsenic in a glass of clear water' (qtd. in Wren 2001: 155).

The Norwegian Progress Party (Fr.P) was established around the same time. In the 1987 election campaign, its then leader, Carl I. Hagen, quoted a letter he claimed to have received from a Muslim called Mustafa, effectively describing a conspiracy of Muslim immigrants planning to occupy Norway. This was quite remarkable as, still, Muslims accounted for only a fraction of the population. Later, the letter proved to be his own fabrication. Interestingly, after revelations that the entire story was a lie, Hagen's party only found increasing support.

A more fundamental shift occurred in Denmark, with the rise of the Danish People's Party (D.F.) in the mid-1990s. The party promoted homogeneity and ethno-cultural cohesion. Initially, it was widely and harshly criticised for flirting with racism. That, however, drastically changed after the terrorist attacks in the U.S.A. on 11 September 2001. For many, the terrifying event served as a validation of the D.F.'s criticism of Islam (Widfeldt 2015). The D.F. was instrumental in portraying Denmark as being overrun by migrants. Their representative in the E.U. Parliament, Mogens Camre, for example, described Islam as an 'ideology of evil' and suggested that Muslims should be 'driven out of Western civilization' (qtd. in Klein 2013: 111). He stated that the West had been 'infiltrated by Muslims', and that 'they are waiting to become numerous enough to get rid of us' (qtd. in Sommer, Aagaard 2003: 258).

Migration became the most salient political issue in Denmark and many mainstream parties started towing a similar line. The D.F. was highly successful in exploiting people's fear of mainly Muslim migrants. Against a backdrop depicting a veiled woman, the party, for example, ran on the following slogan: 'Your Denmark? A multi-ethnic society with gang rapes, repression of women and gang crimes. Do you want that?' (qtd. in Klein 2013: 111).

The Nordic nationalist right was highly successful in positioning immigrants as a threat to the welfare state. This can be labelled welfare chauvinism. The Norwegian Fr.P, for example,

argued that the welfare system needed to be shielded from the infiltration of foreigners, who were sucking blood from it at the expense of native Norwegians, particularly the elderly, whom they vowed to protect (Jupskås 2015).

In Sweden, nationalist populists did not find significant support until the 2010 parliamentary election when the neo-racist Sweden Democrats (S.D.) passed the electoral threshold for the first time. Its leader, Jimmie Åkesson, positioned welfare and immigration as mutually exclusive and asked the electorate to choose between the two issues. This was, for example, illustrated in an S.D. advert in 2010: A native woman pensioner slowly moving with her wheeled walker is overtaken by a group of fast-moving Muslim women in burkas, who empty out the social security coffers before the Swedish woman finally arrives. Their slogan read: 'Pensions or immigration – the choice is yours' (qtd. in Klein 2013: 121).

The Nordic nationalist right was especially skilful in linking other political issues to immigration, such as welfare, economy and anti-elitism (Jupskås 2015). Immigration was also directly linked to gender issues. Often D.F. representatives argued that Islam was incompatible with the level of women's liberation in Denmark. On those grounds, the veiling of women in Islam, for example, became a central and symbolic issue.

While the Norwegian Fr.P refused to be associated with racism, their representatives positioned themselves as brave truth-tellers, defying the political correctness of the ruling class. In 2005, they, for example, published a poster depicting a juvenile of foreign descent pointing a gun at the viewer. The text stated that 'the perpetrator is of foreign origin'. When criticised for the xenophobic undertone, the party spokesmen said that it was simply necessary to 'call a spade a spade' (Jupskås 2015: 87).

Anders Hellstrom (2016) documents how the immigration issue gained salience in the Norwegian Fr.P's repertoire in the 1990s, when warning against the dangers of cultural heterogeneity. In that way, the immigration issue was transformed from an economic to also become a cultural issue. The anti-immigration rhetoric of the Fr.P gradually grew more distinctively anti-Muslim. Already in 1979, Carl I. Hagen described Islam as a 'misanthropic and extremely dangerous religion' (qtd. in Jupskås 2015: 84). In a report published by Fr.P parliamentarians in 2007, Muslim immigration was linked to terrorism, forced marriage and crime. Their rhetoric turned increasingly conspiratorial. The report, for instance, identified a need to fight against Sharia laws being implemented in Muslim areas in Norway.

Similarly, in their 1989 party programme, the Sweden Democrats promoted protecting Sweden as 'an ethnically and culturally homogeneous nation'. While surely moving to the mainstream, they still firmly and consistently flagged their anti-immigrant bias. This was, for example, well-illustrated in an open letter to the Finns Party in 2015, written by the leadership of the S.D.'s youth movement, warning their neighbour of repeating the same mistakes as had been made in Sweden. In the letter entitled 'Finland, you do not want the Swedish nightmare', they stated that, over the decades, Sweden had been 'destroyed' by immigration after 'undergoing an extreme transformation from a harmonious society to a shattered one'. They claimed that many Swedes totally opposed this system of 'mass immigration, extreme feminism, liberalism, political correctness and national self-denial' (qtd. in Bergmann 2017: 178).

A new master frame developed across many of the Nordics in which immigrants were presented as an economic burden and a cultural threat, rather than being biologically inferior. Widfeldt (2015) found that the D.F.'s anti-immigration rhetoric revolved around three main themes: First, that immigrants caused a threat to Danish culture and ethnic identity; second, that immigrants committed a disproportionate amount of crimes; and third, that they were a burden on the welfare state.

While avoiding being openly racist, the Danish People's Party clearly made a distinction between immigrants and ethnic Danes. This discursive distinction between *others* and *us* gradually became a shared understanding across the political spectrum (Boréus 2010). The identity-based rhetoric relied on a firm moral frame in which *others* were negatively represented as inferior to *us*. Jens Rydgren (2005) defined this as a neo-racist rhetoric, where national values were being framed as under threat by immigration. The D.F.'s 2009 manifesto stated that a multicultural society was one 'without inner context and cohesion' and 'burdened by lack of solidarity' and therefore 'prone to conflict' (qtd. in Widfeldt 2015: 141). The presence of ethnic minorities was, here, discursively problematised and presented as a threat to a fragile homogeneous Danish culture, which in Wren's description was 'perceived as a historically rooted set of traditions now under threat from globalization, the EU, and from "alien" cultures' (2001: 148).

The True Finns Party (P.S.) found electoral success in the 2011 election in Finland, first positioned against the Eurozone bailout. Their welfare chauvinism of first protecting native Finns but excluding others was also argued on ethno-nationalist grounds. On this platform, a more radical and outright xenophobic faction thrived within the party. Jussi Halla-aho, who became perhaps Finland's most forceful critic of immigration and multiculturalism, led the party's anti-immigrant faction. Later he became party leader. In a highly conspiratorial rhetoric, he, for example, referred to Islam as a 'totalitarian fascist ideology' and was, in 2008, accused of racial hatred, when for instance, writing this about immigration on his blog: 'Since rapes will increase in any case, the appropriate people should be raped: in other words, green-leftist do-gooders and their supporters' (qtd. in Bergmann 2017:86). He went on to write that the Prophet Muhammad was a paedophile and that Islam, as a religion, sanctified paedophilia.

In Sweden, the S.D. heavily criticised the lenient immigration policy of the mainstream parties, which they said had caused segregation, rootlessness, criminality, conflict and increased tension in society (Hellstrom 2016). Jimmie Åkesson (2009) implied a conspiracy in which the Social Democrats had effectively turned immigrant dominated areas into foreign-held territories, occupied by Muslims who were the country's greatest foreign threat and had even partially introduced Sharia laws on Swedish soil. One party representative, local council member, Martin Strid, went so far as indicating that Muslims were not fully human (Aftonbladet 2017).

Across the region, Nordic nationalist populist parties were able to place immigrants firmly on the political agenda. In the 2009 Norwegian parliamentary election debate, immigration was by far the most discussed issue by Fr.P candidates, mentioned twice as often as health care, the next most frequent topic of party members (Jupskås 2013). Party leader Siv Jensen warned against what she referred to as 'sneak Islamisation' of Norway, a term that was subsequently widely used in the political debate (qtd. in Jupskås 2015: 68). She maintained that demands of the Muslim community, such as halal meat being served in schools, the right to wear a hijab and of public celebration of Muslim holidays, were all examples of such 'sneak Islamisation'.

An interesting example of the conspiratorial nature of the rhetoric around Muslims in Norway is evident in the case of an alleged militant Pakistani milieu in Oslo. In 2005, the Fr.P spokesman on immigration, Per Sandberg, said that this secretive extremist Muslim network, which was 'fundamentalist, anti-democratic and potentially violent' had 30,000 members in Oslo (qtd. in Bangstad 2017: 241). Despite being utterly fabricated, this suspicion spread around Norway in many media reports whose authors did not check the claims.

In Denmark, the D.F. firmly kept up its anti-immigrant rhetoric. One example came in the wake of the Paris terrorist attack in late 2015, where Muslim jihadists, mainly from Belgium and France, killed 129 people. When responding to the terrible attack on television, D.F.'s foreign policy spokesman, Søren Espersen, said that Western military forces should now begin bombing civil targets in Syria, specifically also in areas where there were women and children (2015).

Many similar examples of promoting confrontation also exist in Finland. Olli Immonen, a well-known P.S. representative, posted on Facebook a photo of himself with members of the neo-Nazi extreme-right group, the Finnish Resistance Movement. Defending his actions, he wrote that he would give his life for the battle against multiculturalism. He said that these were the days ‘that will forever leave a mark on our nation’s future. I have strong belief in my fellow fighters. We will fight until the end for our homeland and one true Finnish nation. The victory will be ours’ (qtd in Bergmann 2017: 87).

The aforementioned notion of sneak Islamisation alludes to a hidden process already in place. This worldview has led some within populist parties in Nordic countries to promote an active and sometimes forceful resistance against this alleged alteration of Nordic societies. It can be argued that Anders Behring Breivik was at least partially responding to this kind of rhetoric with his horrible actions on 22 July 2011, when killing 77 people, mainly young members of the Norwegian Labour party. Breivik was a believer in the *Eurabia* conspiracy theory and saw himself as a soldier fighting against Muslim invasion. In his 1500 page-long rambling document (2011), he argued that Europe was being ruined by the influx of Muslim immigrants, and that the continent was culturally under siege by foreign infiltrators. He went on to accuse mainly feminists and the social democratic elite of having betrayed the European public into the hands of their external enemies, presumably, he argued, in order to implement their malignant ideology of multiculturalism. With his act, Breivik wanted to prevent a cultural suicide of Europe, underway and orchestrated by those he described as cultural Marxists.

Donald Trump’s conspiracist populism

Almost from the moment he announced his campaign on 16 June 2015, Donald Trump was labelled a populist and a conspiracy theorist. This is hardly surprising given that Trump harked on populist rhetoric that day to fashion himself as a man of action who, unlike regular politicians, would return the country to its former glory: ‘Well, you need somebody, because politicians are all talk, no action. Nothing’s gonna get done. They will not bring us – believe me – to the promised land. They will not’ (Trump 2015). He had also entered the realm of politics for the first time a few years earlier when he embraced the birther claim that Barack Obama was not born in the U.S.A., and therefore never should have been allowed to run for president.

However, Trump only turned into a populist on the campaign trail, and he used conspiracist rhetoric far more sparingly and strategically than is commonly assumed. In his announcement speech, Trump cast himself as an anti-establishment candidate, but not as a champion of the common people. In fact, the idea of the simple people suffering from the neglect or the malignance of the elites – an idea absolutely central to all definitions of populism – is strikingly absent from the speech, and it remained absent from his campaign for a considerable time. According to Friedman (2017), this only changed when Steve Bannon and Steven Miller gained more influence on the campaign during the summer of 2016. In his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in July, Friedman argues, Trump emerged for the first time as a full-blown populist, presenting himself as the protector of ‘the forgotten men and women of our country’ (Trump 2016a).

Trump reiterated this idea throughout the campaign against Hillary Clinton. His populist rhetoric culminated in his inaugural address in which he declared ‘today we are not merely transferring power from one Administration to another, or from one party to another – but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C. and giving it back to you, the American People’ (Trump 2017). Trump constructs here the established dichotomy between the political elite – represented by the metonymy ‘Washington, D.C.’ – and the people. At the same time, Trump

excludes a considerable part of the electorate – everybody who voted for Obama, in fact – from the group of the people. As Jan-Werner Müller has highlighted, this is characteristic of populist discourse (2016: 21).

While Trump's actions as president – for example, tax cuts from which the rich and large companies benefit disproportionately – are rarely populist, he has continued to appeal rhetorically to the people. Especially on Twitter, which Trump uses very strategically to present himself as their unwavering advocate (Butter 2019), he constantly reinforces 'the concept of a homogeneous people and a homeland threatened by the dangerous other' (Kreis 2017: 607). As it is quite typical of right-wing populism, this 'other' comprises two groups: The corrupt elite inside the country and undeserving outsiders, that is, Democrats and liberals in general, on the one hand, and visitors from certain Muslim countries and (undocumented) immigrants from Mexico, on the other. While Trump focused on the external threat throughout 2017, over the course of 2018 he increasingly targeted Democrats because of their support for the Mueller investigation, the upcoming midterm elections and their allegedly obstructive role in the controversial confirmation process of Justice Brett Kavanaugh.

The tweets Trump posted as the Senate and the public discussed the Kavanaugh case indicate that Trump has not shed any of his campaign populism. On 4 October 2018, for example, he wrote: 'The harsh and unfair treatment of Judge Brett Kavanaugh is having an incredible upward impact on voters. The PEOPLE get it far better than the politicians' (Trump 2018a). A day later, he claimed that the people protesting against Kavanaugh were not really part of the people: '[L]ook at all of the professionally made identical signs. Paid for by Soros and others. These are not signs made in the basement from love! #Troublemakers', he wrote (Trump 2018b), insinuating that there was no popular protest against Kavanaugh and that the Democrats had to pay demonstrators to pretend there was.

In this tweet, Trump also articulates a conspiracy theory, in this case the implicitly antisemitic allegation that billionaire philanthropist George Soros is financing the resistance to Trump to promote the dark plans of an international financial elite. However, he does not develop this conspiracy theory and instead restricts himself to a single remark. This is characteristic of how Trump has been using conspiracist rhetoric both during the campaign and his time in office. With one notable exception, he has restricted himself to short allegations or conspiracy rumours rather than spreading fully developed conspiracy theories, which claim to reveal an alleged plan in detail and provide evidence for it. Frequently, he has also emphasised that he was only reporting what others had told him and that he was in no position to evaluate the accuracy of what he was passing on.

For example, when Supreme Court Justice Anthony Scalia died in February 2016, Trump immediately participated in conspiracy rumours that held that Justice Scalia had been murdered to allow Obama to send a more liberal judge to the court. During a live interview, he told talk-radio host Michael Savage:

It's a horrible topic, but they say they found the pillow on his face, which is a pretty unusual place to find a pillow. I can't give you an answer ... I literally just heard it a little while ago. It's just starting to come out now, as you know, Michael.

(qtd. in McCarthy 2016)

Trump never picked up on these rumours again but dropped the issue and moved on to the next topic.

The strategy behind Trump's constant but careful deployment of conspiracy theories is to appeal both to those who believe in the conspiracist allegations and to those who do not. By

picking up and participating in the claims, Trump signals to those who believe in the conspiracy theories that he is one of them. By restricting himself to a few words or sentences and not providing any evidence or an outline of the alleged plan, he makes it easy for those who do not believe in the conspiracy theory to ignore his claims. Moreover, by often using the ‘safety net’ of hearsay, Trump ensures that he can always deny allegations that he is spreading conspiracy theories. This tactic was already evident in Trump’s interview with Alex Jones in December 2015. Simply appearing on the show of America’s conspiracy-theorist-in-chief was enough to send a strong message to conspiracy theorists; Trump did not need to openly embrace any conspiracy theory while on air. Thus, in order to appeal to those sceptical of conspiracy theories as well, Trump made sure Jones did not pin him down to any specific conspiracist claims.

Trump stuck to this strategy even after turning into a full-blown populist in the summer of 2016. He repeatedly contended that the election was ‘rigged’ but never elaborated on his claim (Trump 2016b). However, in mid-October when the race seemed definitely lost – he was still behind in the polls, the debates were over and the audiotape in which he discusses sexually assaulting women had been made public – Trump changed his approach. Most probably, he and his advisers understood that there was no way now for Trump to win over still undecided moderates. He could count on those supporters of the Republican Party who would always, albeit grudgingly, vote for the Republican nominee, and so they focused on mobilising those particularly receptive to his populist and conspiracist rhetoric. Accordingly, in a campaign speech in West Palm Beach, Florida, on 13 October – his first public appearance after the release of the tape – Trump merged populism and conspiracy theory by accusing Hillary Clinton of conspiring with the international financial elite against the American people.

Trump began the speech by constructing the familiar dichotomy between the people and the elite: ‘Our movement is about replacing a failed and corrupt – now, when I say “corrupt,” I’m talking about totally corrupt – political establishment, with a new government controlled by you, the American people’ (Trump 2016c). Immediately afterwards, Trump finally crossed the threshold from ‘mere’ populism to conspiracist populism by explicitly claiming that there is a secret plot against the people and that Hillary Clinton is at its core:

The Clinton machine is at the center of this power structure. We’ve seen this first hand in the Wikileaks documents, in which Hillary Clinton meets in secret with international banks to plot the destruction of U.S. sovereignty in order to enrich these global financial powers, her special interest friends and her donors.

(Trump 2016c)

He then took the next 30 minutes to elaborate on this claim, and to fashion himself – in prototypical conspiracist fashion – as a renegade who can not only provide insider information, but also, because of his special knowledge, is in a privileged position to foil the conspiracy. He also claimed that the audio tape had been fabricated by the conspirators to silence him:

In my former life, I was an insider as much as anybody else.... Now I’m being punished for leaving the special club and revealing to you the terrible things that are going on having to do with our country. Because I used to be part of the club, I’m the only one that can fix it.

(Trump 2016c)

As everybody knows, Trump’s strategy was successful and he narrowly won the election. Once this had been achieved, he immediately returned to his former mode of ‘simultaneously affirming

his belief in ... conspiracy theory and qualifying' it (Thalmann 2019: 199). For example, when asked about his earlier allegations of voter fraud in an A.B.C. interview a few days after the inauguration, he employed the same strategies that he had used throughout most of the campaign: 'You have a lot of stuff going on possibly. I say probably. But possibly' (A.B.C. 2017). It remains to be seen if and when Trump will become more explicitly conspiracist.

Conclusion

Populism and conspiracy theory are clearly connected (Bergmann 2018), but how or to what extent exactly has not yet been adequately theorised. Our contention – that conspiracy theories are a non-necessary element of populist discourses, often cynically articulated by a movement's leaders but genuinely believed by a larger or smaller number of ordinary members – raises more questions than it answers: Is it possible to predict in which situations conspiracy theories are important for a specific populist movement? Within such movements, who is particularly receptive to conspiracy theories? Are conspiracy theories more frequently found in right-wing populism than in the left-wing variant, as some scholars have suggested (Priester 2012; Wodak 2015), or are they as prominent on the left as on the right, as others have argued (Thalmann 2019; Uscinski 2019)? To answer these and a plethora of related questions more research and, importantly, a shift in focus is needed. Future projects should study the significance of conspiracy theories for specific populist movements with regard to both leaders and ordinary members. So far, most research – including our two case studies – discusses how populist leaders employ conspiracist rhetoric. However, it is necessary to study how conspiracy theories circulate among the ordinary members of such movements and parties in order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between populism and conspiracy theory.

References

- A.B.C. (2017) 'Transcript: ABC news anchor David Muir interviews President Trump', *ABC News*, 25 January. Available at: <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/transcript-abc-news-anchor-david-muir-interviews-president/story?id=45047602>. [Accessed 18 June 2019.]
- Abi-Hassan, S. (2017) 'Populism and gender', in C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. A. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo and P. Ostiguy (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Abts, K. and Rummens, S. (2007) 'Populism versus democracy', *Political Studies*, 55(2): 405–24.
- Aftonbladet (2017) 'Martin Strid lämnar SD efter muslimuttalande', *Aftonbladet*, 26 November. Available at: www.aftonbladet.se/senastenytt/ttnyheter/inrikes/a/L0eq1x/martin-strid-lamnar-sd-efter-muslimuttalande. [Accessed 18 June 2019.]
- Åkesson, J. (2009) 'Muslimerna är vårt största utländska hot', *Aftonbladet*, 19 October. Available at: www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/VRx8zd/akesson-muslimerna-ar-vart-storsta-utlandska-hot. [Accessed 18 June 2019.]
- Akkerman, T. (2017) 'Populist parties in power and their impact on liberal democracies in Western Europe', in R.C. Heinisch, C. Holtz-Bacha and O. Mazzoleni (eds.) *Political populism: a handbook*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, International studies on populism 3.
- Bangstad, S. (2017) 'Norwegian right-wing discourses: extremism post-Utøya', in D. Pratt and R. Wodlock (eds.) *Fear of Muslims: international perspectives on islamophobia*, Basel: Springer, Boundaries of religious freedom: regulating religion in diverse societies 3.
- Barr, R.R. (2009) 'Populists, outsiders and anti-establishment politics', *Party Politics*, 15(1): 29–48.
- Bergmann, E. (2017) *Nordic nationalism and right-wing populist politics: imperial relationships and national sentiments*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bergmann, E. (2018) *Conspiracy & populism: the politics of misinformation*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bobba, G. and Roncarolo, F. (2018) 'The likeability of populism on social media in the 2018 Italian general election', *Italian Political Science*, 13(1): 51–62.

- Boréus, K. (2010) 'Including or excluding immigrants? The impact of right-wing populism in Denmark and Sweden', in B. Bengtsson, P. Strömblad and A.H. Bay (eds.) *Diversity, inclusion and citizenship in Scandinavia*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars.
- Breivik, A. (2011) *2083–A European Declaration of Independence*, London. Available at: https://fas.org/programs/tap/_docs/2083_-_A_European_Declaration_of_Independence.pdf. [Accessed 18 June 2019.]
- Brubaker, R. (2019) 'Why Populism?', in G. Fitzj, J. Mackert and B.S. Turner (eds.) *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*, vol. 1, London/New York: Routledge, Routledge advances in sociology.
- Bunzel, J.H. (1967) *Anti-politics in America: reflections on the anti-political temper and its distortions of the democratic process*, New York: Knopf.
- Butter, M. (2018) »Nichts ist wie es scheint«: über Verschwörungstheorien, Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Butter, M. (2019) 'Professional amateur: Trump and Twitter', in I. Klaiber, O. Scheiding and J. Stievermann (eds.) *Simplicity, brevity, and their complications in American literature and culture*, Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier.
- Calance, M. (2015) 'Globalization and the conspiracy theory', *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 23: 677–81.
- Castanho Silva, B., Vegetti, F. and Littvay, L. (2017) 'The elite is up to something: exploring the relation between populism and belief in conspiracy theories', *Swiss Political Science Review*, 23(4): 423–43.
- Christ, B. (2014) "'What kind of man are you?'" The gendered foundations of U.S. conspiracism and of recent conspiracy theory scholarship', in M. Butter and M. Reinkowski (eds.) *Conspiracy theories in the United States and the Middle East: a comparative approach*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, *Linguae & Litterae* 29.
- De la Torre, C. (2010) *Populist Seduction in Latin America*, 2nd edn, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.
- De Vreese, C.H., Esser, F., Aalberg, T., Reinemann, C. and Stanyer, J. (2018) 'Populism as an expression of political communication content and style: a new perspective', *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(4): 423–38.
- Del Vicario, M., Bessi, A., Zollo, F., Petroni, F., Scala, A., Caldarelli, G., Stanley, H.E. and Quattrociocchi, W. (2015) 'Echo chambers in the age of misinformation', *Computers and Society*, 5(43): 1–6.
- Ehrenfreund, M. (2016) 'The outlandish conspiracy theories many of Donald Trump's supporters believe', *Washington Post*, 5 May. Available at: www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/05/05/the-outlandish-conspiracy-theories-many-of-donald-trumps-supporters-believe/?utm_term=.3696856boefc. [Accessed 18 June 2019.]
- Enyedi, Z. (2016) 'Paternalist populism and illiberal elitism in Central Europe', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 21(1): 9–25.
- Espersen, S. (2015) 'DF om krigen mod IS: Vi bliver nødt til at bombe civile no – også kvinder og børn', *TV 2*, 15 November. Available at: <http://nyheder.tv2.dk/2015-11-15-df-om-krigen-mod-is-vi-bliver-noedt-til-at-bombe-civile-nu-ogsaa-kvinder-og-boern>. [Accessed 18 June 2019.]
- Fenster, M. (2008) *Conspiracy theories: secrecy and power in American culture*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Finchelstein, F. (2017) *From fascism to populism in history*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Friedman, U. (2017) 'What is a populist?', *The Atlantic*, 27 February. Available at: www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/02/what-is-populist-trump/516525/. [Accessed 18 June 2019.]
- Gadinger, F. (2019) 'Lügenpresse, gesunder Volkskörper, tatkräftiger Macher: Erzählformen des Populismus', in M. Müller and J. Precht (eds.) *Narrative des Populismus: Erzählmuster und -strukturen populistischer Politik*, Berlin: Springer.
- Groshek, J. and Koc-Michalska, K. (2017) 'Helping populism win? Social media use, filter bubbles, and support for populist presidential candidates in the 2016 US election campaign', *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(9): 1389–407.
- Hammel, L.L. (2017) 'Verschwörungsglaube, Populismus und Protest', *Politikum*, 3: 32–41.
- Hauwaert, S.V. (2012) 'Shared dualisms: on populism and conspiracy theory', *Counterpoint*. Available at: counterpoint.uk.com/shared-dualisms-on-populism-and-conspiracy-theory/. [Accessed 18 June 2019.]
- Hawkins, K. (2003) 'Populism in Venezuela: the rise of Chavismo', *Third World Quarterly*, 24(6): 1137–60.
- Hawkins, K.A. (2010) *Venezuela's Chavismo and populism in comparative perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hawkins, K.A. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017) 'The ideational approach to populism', *Latin American Research Review*, 52(4): 513–28.
- Hellstrom, A. (2016) *Trust us: reproducing the nation and the Scandinavian nationalist populist parties*, Oxford: Berghahn Books.

- Hofstadter, R. (1964) *The paranoid style in American politics, and other essays*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jupskås, A.R. (2013) 'The Progress Party: a fairly integrated part of the Norwegian party system', in K. Grabow and F. Hartleb (eds.) *Exposing the demagogues: right-wing and national populist parties in Europe*, Berlin: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.
- Jupskås, A.R. (2015) *The persistence of populism: the Norwegian progress party 1973–2009*, Faculty of Social Sciences, no. 527, Oslo: University of Oslo.
- Klein, A. (2013) 'The end of solidarity? On the development of right-wing populist parties in Denmark and Sweden', in K. Garbow and F. Hartleb (eds.) *Exposing the demagogues: right-wing and national populist parties in Europe*, Berlin: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.
- Knight, P. (2000) *Conspiracy culture: from the Kennedy assassination to the X-Files*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Kreis, R. (2017) 'The "tweet politics" of President Trump', *Journal of Language and Politics*, 16(4): 607–18.
- Laclau, E. (2005) *On populist reason*, Brooklyn, NY: Verso.
- McCarthy, T. (2016) 'Trump sees "unusual" circumstances in Scalia's death amid conspiracy theories', *Guardian*, 16 February. Available at: www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/feb/16/donald-trump-antonin-scalia-death-conspiracy-theories. [Accessed 18 June 2019.]
- Moffitt, B. (2015) 'How to perform crisis: a model for understanding the key role of crisis in contemporary populism', *Government and Opposition*, 50(2): 189–217.
- Moffitt, B. (2016) *The global rise of populism: performance, political style, and representation*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017) *Populism: a very short introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Müller, J.-W. (2016) *What is populism?*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Oliver, E.J. and Rahn, W.M. (2016) 'Rise of the *Trumpenvolk*: populism in the 2016 election', *The ANNALS of the American academy of political and social science*, 667(1): 189–206.
- Priester, K. (2012) *Rechter und linker Populismus: Annäherung an ein Chamäleon*, Frankfurt/Main: Campus.
- Rydgren, J. (2005) 'Is extreme right-wing populism contagious? Explaining the emergence of a new party family', *European Journal of Political Research*, 44(3): 413–37.
- Seewann, G. (2018) 'Hungary: history as a legitimizing precedent – "illiberal democracy"', *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung*, 67(2): 239–49.
- Sommer, N. and Aagaard, S. (2003) *Succes: historier om Pia Kjærsgaard*, Copenhagen: Lindhardt & Ringhof.
- Stanley, B. (2008) 'The thin ideology of populism', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 13(1): 95–110.
- Stoica, M.S. (2017) 'Political myths of the populist discourse', *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 16(46): 63–76.
- Taggart, P. (2000) *Populism*, London: Open University Press.
- Taggart, P. (2019) 'Populism and "unpolitics"', in G. Fitzi, J. Mackert and B. S. Turner (eds.) *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*, vol. 1, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Taguieff, P. (1995) 'Political science confronts populism: from a conceptual mirage to a real problem', *Telos*, 103: 9–43.
- Thalmann, K. (2019) *The Stigmatization of conspiracy theories since the 1950s: "A Plot to Make Us Look Foolish"*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Trump, D. (2015) 'Remarks announcing candidacy for President in New York City', *The American Presidency Project*, 16 June. Available at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-announcing-candidacy-for-president-new-york-city. [Accessed 18 June 2019.]
- Trump, D. (2016a) 'Acceptance speech', *Republican National Convention*, 21 July. Available at: www.vox.com/2016/7/21/12253426/donald-trump-acceptance-speech-transcript-republican-nomination-transcript. [Accessed 18 June 2019.]
- Trump, D. (2016b) 'This election is being rigged', *Twitter*, 15 October. Available at: <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/787258211283918848>. [Accessed 18 June 2019.]
- Trump, D. (2016c) 'Remarks at the South Florida Fair Expo Center in West Palm Beach, Florida', *The American Presidency Project*, 13 October. Available at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-south-florida-fair-expo-center-west-palm-beach-florida. [Accessed 18 June 2019.]
- Trump, D. (2017) 'Inaugural address', *The American Presidency Project*, 20 January. Available at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/inaugural-address-14. [Accessed 18 June 2019.]
- Trump, D. (2018a) 'The harsh and unfair treatment', *Twitter*, 4 October. Available at: <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1047822816580722690>. [Accessed 18 June 2019.]

- Trump, D. (2018b) 'The very rude elevator screamers', *Twitter*, 5 October. Available at: <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1048196883464818688>. [Accessed 18 June 2019.]
- Uscinski, J.E. (2019). 'Down the rabbit hole we go!', in J.E. Uscinski (ed.) *Conspiracy theories and the people who believe them*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Kessel, S. and Castelein, R. (2016) 'Shifting the blame: populist politicians' use of Twitter as a tool of opposition', *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 12(2): 594–614.
- Van Prooijen, J.-W. (2018) 'Populism as political mentality underlying conspiracy theories', in B. Rutjens and M. Brandt (eds.) *Belief systems and the perception of reality*, Oxon, UK: Routledge, pp. 79–96.
- Vassiliou, P. (2017) 'Enemies of the people: Latin-American populism, political myth, and the psychodynamics of conspiracy thinking', *Επιστήμη και Κοινωνία: Επιθεώρηση Πολιτικής και Ηθικής Θεωρίας*, 35: 135–59.
- Wettstein, M., Esser, F., Schulz, A., Wirz, D.S. and Wirth, W. (2018) 'News media as gatekeepers, critics, and initiators of populist communication: how journalists in ten countries deal with the populist challenge', *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(4): 476–95.
- Weyland, K. (2001) 'Clarifying a contested concept: populism in the study of Latin American politics', *Comparative Politics*, 34(1): 1–22.
- Widfeldt, A. (2015) *Extreme right parties in Scandinavia*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Wodak, R. (2015) *The politics of fear: what right-wing populist discourses mean*, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Woods, D. (2014) 'The many faces of populism: diverse but not disparate', in Woods and B. Wejnert (eds.) *The many faces of populism: current perspectives*, Bingley: Emerald, Research in Political Sociology 22.
- Wren, K. (2001) 'Cultural racism: something rotten in the state of Denmark?', *Social and Cultural Geography*, 2(2): 141–62.
- Ylä-Anttila, T. (2018) 'Populist knowledge: "post-truth" repertoires of contesting epistemic authorities', *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 5(4): 356–88.