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# Populism and the Affective Politics of Humiliation Narratives<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract.

This article examines how communicative practices, emotion, and everyday experiences of insecurity interlink in processes of populist political mobilization. Combining insights from international security studies, political psychology, and populism research, it demonstrates how populist political agents from the right of the political spectrum have constructed a powerful security imaginary around the loss of past national greatness which creates affinities with the experiences of those who feel disempowered and ties existential anxieties to concerns with immigration, globalization, and integration. As we show, within the populist security imaginary, humiliation is the key discursive mechanism that helps turn abstract notions of enmity into politically consequential affective narratives of loss, betrayal, and oppression. Humiliation binds together an ostensibly conflicting sense of national greatness and victimhood to achieve an emotive response that enables a radical departure from established domestic and international policy norms and problematizes policy choices centred on collaboration, dialogue, and peaceful conflict resolution.

**Key words.** populism, security studies, narratives, affect, humiliation

On Election Day, the politicians stand trial before the people.... the American people will have a chance to issue a verdict on the politicians that have sacrificed their security, betrayed their prosperity, and sold out their country.

Donald Trump, 22 June 2016<sup>2</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Populist political agents from the right of the political spectrum tell visceral stories of insecurity – from countries overrun by criminal migrants to warnings of impending economic collapse and terminal national decline – that frame the fears and grievances of ‘the people’ as being systematically ignored and marginalized by a corrupt ‘establishment’. Much of the appeal of this antagonist logic of populism has been associated with the wedding of ‘antielite and antiestablishment discursive appeals to the political mobilization of the excluded and the alienated’ (Roberts 2015: 142). Populists address feelings of resentment and loss of status (Marchlewska *et al.* 2017) that are shared by their voters (Jardina 2019; Norris and Ingelhart 2019). That populist political agents would also use, as a core component of their security imaginary, a narrative that portrays the abandoned ‘true people’ as being humiliated is

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<sup>2</sup> Here only referenced with date and location, Trump’s speeches are accessible at the *American Presidency Project*, from where they were retrieved for this study:  
<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/people/president/donald-j-trump>

counterintuitive. Although populism is associated with preferences for strong, tough, masculine, and hierarchical leadership styles and psychological predispositions that display disdain for inferiority (Pettigrew 2017), this article shows that the affective politics of humiliation is a key feature of the populist security imaginary. Moving towards a ‘post-dualistic’ understanding of mobilizing affects (Leser and Spissinger 2020), it builds on the assumption that cognition and rational thinking are insufficient to understand political behaviour: populist security rhetoric has traction because of the emotion-inducing repertoires used to tell a story rather than through any measurable or objective ‘truth’ contained in it.

Situated broadly within research that treats populism as a ‘rhetorical style’ (Canovan 1981), a ‘flexible mode of persuasion’ (Kazin 1995), and a ‘populist discourse’ (Hawkins *et al.* 2012; 2019), our narrative inquiry into humiliation discourse adopts a vernacular security studies perspective that sits at the intersection of political psychology and populism research. While substantial conceptual differences exist between these distinct literatures, they share an overriding concern with the political significance of non-elite perspectives, vernacular rhetoric, and everyday experiences of insecurity and provide a useful entry point into understanding how the humiliation-centric rhetorical choices made by populist political agents are affective articulations of belonging and exclusion that tap into everyday insecurities. As we shall see, it is through a focus on the nexus between the security imaginary, vernacular blame attribution, and everyday emotions, that populist humiliation narratives emerge as affective devices that harness a cluster of ordinary emotional responses.

The role of emotions in the study of populist discourse has been recognized as an important area of narrative inquiry. Thus far, however, populism has predominantly been viewed as a domestic political issue (de la Torre 2015; Mény and Surel 2002; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Roberts 2006) with an emphasis on quantitative discourse analysis (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). Interaction between populism research and International Relations has been limited and focused predominantly on the linkages between populism and foreign policy (Chryssogelos 2017; Plagemann and Destradi 2018; Verbeek and Zaslove 2017).<sup>3</sup> While little cross-fertilization has taken place between populism research and adjacent fields in the study of security and international dynamics (Steele and Homolar 2019, Löfflmann 2019), we seek to make the case for expanding research into systematically identifying populist emotion appeals. Through a multi-disciplinary lens, we show how humiliation narratives provide the affective fuel that enables a radical departure from established domestic and international policy norms and problematizes policy choices centred on collaboration, dialogue, and peaceful conflict resolution.

By locating much of the ‘discursive force’ (Solomon 2017) and ‘mobilizing potential’ (Van Rythoven 2018) that underpins the populist security imaginary in the affective work humiliation does, the article complements the rapidly expanding scholarship in International Relations that explores how emotions are implicated in building, sustaining, limiting, and regulating communities (Koschut 2019; Hutchison 2016; Fierke 2013; Widmaier 2009), the emotional politics of conflict and violence (Åhäll and Gregory 2015; Crawford 2014; Wilcox 2015; Ross 2014), and the link between affect and discourse (Koschut *et al.* 2017; Bially Mattern 2011; Edkins 2003; Van Rythoven 2015). Rather than studying the representation, communication, and reception of emotions (Koschut 2017; Bleiker and Hutchison 2008), however, we explore how message components within populist security discourse carry a cluster of complex ambivalent emotions, both positive and negative, through their emphasis on humiliating experiences (Brader 2005). While the act of humiliation is an exercise of power aimed at controlling and disempowering those at the receiving end, the experience of

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<sup>3</sup> For recent exceptions see, e.g., Destradi and Plagemann 2019; Stengel *et al.* 2019.

humiliation is widely linked to emotions such as shame and dishonour that are entwined with the lowering of status and respect (Saurette 2006; Fattah and Fierke 2009). This article shows that a humiliation-centric discourse can empower populist political agents to claim experiences of trauma and loss for their audiences, thus fueling rather than quenching their sense of entitlement and status. In the affective universe that populist agents create, humiliation becomes a form of abreaction that reclaims dignity by defiantly celebrating failure. It serves as a narrative device not only to express previously held emotions and grievances but also to release them.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section substantiates the article's underlying premise that combining research on populist discourse, insecurity, and the everyday is conceptually productive, especially in the context of understanding processes of affective political mobilization. The second section discusses how populist humiliation narratives conjure images of a glorious past to demean the present, fostering a fantasy of national greatness and belonging that is linked to shared feelings of resentment, pride, and nostalgia. The third section focuses on the creation of a sense of shared victimhood through populist humiliation narratives and how these interlink with horizontal and vertical blame-attribution. The final section explores how humiliation acts as an identity driver that fosters the creation of both ingroup solidarity and conflictual behaviour towards a broad range of undeserving Others. As such, the article moves beyond a focus on understanding negative emotions primarily as 'phenomena to be managed' towards something that political agents actively draw on (Hutchison and Bleiker 2012: 156). The dyadic ability of humiliation narratives to affectively anchor populist messaging in feelings of pride and hope on the one hand, and anxiety and anger on the other underscores our main argument that, while emotions shape politics, politics also shapes and channels emotions.

## **POPULISM AS PERFORMANCE OF THE SECURITY VERNACULAR**

The study of international security increasingly engages with everyday actions and actors, both conceptually and empirically, which had long been considered as trivial, mundane, and irrelevant in much of the discipline. In particular, work on 'the unnoticed' (Hviid Jacobsen 2009: 2) has shifted attention away from states and powerful political agents in the construction of threats and security toward a multidimensional view of agency and the role of everyday actions and choices (Acuto 2014; Kessler and Guillaume 2012). Correspondingly, we find a growing concern with the political significance of 'ordinary people' in the social construction of threat and security (Stanley and Jackson 2016; Stevens and Vaughan-Williams 2016). As Jarvis and Lister (2013: 158) suggest, the significance of a focus on the everyday lies in its opposition to elite articulations that 'speak for, rather than to (or, perhaps better, with) "ordinary" people and the conditions of (in)security they experience, encounter or construct in everyday life'. However, despite this interest in vernacular insecurities and in how insecurity is felt and lived by non-elite communities (Bubandt 2005; Jarvis 2019), how populist political agents may hijack quotidian security constructions to mobilize support has received little attention within both mainstream and critical approaches to international security. Investigating this link between political mobilization and everyday insecurities is important to understand how the populist performance of the security vernacular valorizes ordinary people (Jansen 2011: 82) and relates otherwise abstract notions of enmity to people's everyday social encounters.

A series of public opinion survey studies has attested to the resonance of populist vernacular narratives of humiliation in Western societies, in particular among white working-class and

non-university educated voters, where they recorded widespread sentiments of anti-elite resentment, cultural anxiety, and concern over the loss of status and privilege (Akkerman *et al.* 2014; Hawkins *et al.* 2012; Jardina 2019; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018). For the United States, Hochschild's (2016) ethnographic study of the American right identified a set of interlocking 'deep stories' of victimhood and alienation tied to perceptions of marginalisation, with people feeling like 'strangers in their own land'. The French geographer Christophe Guilly (2019) similarly described a sense of displacement and disillusionment by a 'peripheral France', whose population of small towns and villages felt both economically threatened and culturally alienated by the forces of globalization and ignored by the French government, business, and media elite. For the United Kingdom, David Goodhart (2016) located a cultural division between cosmopolitan 'anywheres' and locally oriented 'somewheres' supporting Britain's exit from the European Union (Brexit). Leave voters in rural areas and the North of England felt marginalized by a London establishment perceived as out of touch with their attitudes and values. These observations are frequently reproduced on the political level, with Barack Obama, for example, explaining the strong performance of Donald Trump in the 2020 US presidential elections in terms of how the identity politics of the Republican Party have persistently reinforced a sense of victimhood among white men for electoral gain (Holpuch 2020).

While a detailed examination into the mechanisms of affective resonance lies beyond the scope of this article, an analytical focus on ontological security has provided a conceptual entry point into understanding how humiliation narratives target feelings of alienation, marginalization, and resentment to foster political support for populist electoral performances and policies (Steele and Homolar 2019: 215). As previous research has shown, populist discourses construct narratives of nostalgia (Browning 2019), historic continuity, and national belonging (Kinnvall 2019; Suzuki 2019), and promote a sense of crisis that may tilt the electoral scales in favor of 'outsider' populist candidates (Homolar and Scholz 2019). To shed light on the complex relationship between how security is understood and felt at the 'bottom' and how security encounters can be manipulated at the 'top' for political gain, we speak to such scholarship while also turning to insights from the broad disciplinary field of populism studies. Even within populism existing research, the concept of populism has been notoriously difficult to pin down. As Laclau (1977: 143) once observed, populism is notable for the absence of a precise definition, noting that 'We know intuitively to what we are referring when we call a movement or an ideology populist, but we have the greatest difficulty in translating the intuition into concepts.' The broad ideological, geographical, and historical spread of movements, parties, and individuals considered to fall under this category only adds to the contestation and fragmentation of the term (Taggart 2000; Laclau 2005; Canovan 1981).

Much of contemporary populism research has moved away from considering populism as a fixed, coherent, and consistent ideological belief system. Rather, populism is understood as both a political discourse and a 'thin-centred ideology' that represents politics and society as structured by a fundamental antagonistic relationship between 'the elite' and 'the people' (Canovan 1999; Mudde 2007; De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017). In populism studies today, we can identify three main conceptual approaches associated with this discursive and stylistic turn (Brubaker 2017: 360): (1) the ideational approach, which understands populism largely as a Manichean 'Us' vs. 'Them' discourse pitting an idealized notion of the 'true people' against 'corrupt elites' that betray them in the name of popular sovereignty (de la Torre 2015; Mudde 2007); (2) the strategic approach, which zooms in on the political tactic used by populist leaders and self-identified establishment 'outsiders' to claim power in the 'name of the people' (Weyland 2017); and (3) the socio-cultural approach, which treats populism as a transgressive political style that disrupts conventional notions of 'high politics' and elite norms of behavior

through displays of ‘bad manners’ and ‘colorful and undiplomatic language’ (Canovan 2005: 76; Ostiguy 2017; Moffitt 2016). The boundaries between these approaches are fluid, and they all share an emphasis on the role played by discursive tropes and styles.

In this article, we treat populism as an adaptable discursive mode that is characterized by the populist assertion to speak and act for ‘the people’, as well as the claim to protect ‘the people’ as ‘first among equals’ (Homolar and Scholz 2019). Our interest does not lie in exploring how ‘the people’ are constructed as idealized community – often on the basis of radical exclusion – and as the only legitimate carrier of popular sovereignty (Anderson 1983; Brubaker 2017: 362-4; Canovan 1999: 5; Laclau 2005: 153; Wodak 2015; Mény and Surel 2002). Rather, building upon literature that has widely discussed the importance of language as a constitutive aspect of popular mobilization (Laclau 2005; Jansen 2011; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017) and scholarship on the role of affect in security politics (Hall and Ross 2019; Lynngaard 2019; Pace and Bilgic 2019), we explore the emotional appeal of the populist security imaginary (Rico *et al.* 2017; Samela and von Scheve 2017; Skonieczny 2018). In researching the affective politics of humiliation narratives, we focus explicitly on the establishment of a polarized discursive wedge between an in-group and out-groups (van Dijk 1995: 248-249) through a vernacular and frequently adversarial narrative style. While the discursive representation of value hierarchies and populist provocations of resentment that are directed at the elitist ‘top’ matter in our investigation, the less widely explored downward focus of the populist mobilization of complex affective clusters surrounding humiliation takes centre-stage (cf. Busher *et al.* 2018). Populist political agents act as ‘identity entrepreneurs’ (Reicher and Hopkins 2001) who frame undeserving Others as a threat to the nation's survival to justify ‘tough’ and ‘unflinching’ policy responses, which derive significant persuasive power ‘from their ability to redefine their follower's self-understanding’ (Mols and Jetten 2014: 83).

Considering emotions as ‘affective energies’ (Ross, 2006: 212), the contribution of this article is primarily to expand our conceptual understanding of how populism works in practice.<sup>4</sup> With a view to encouraging further empirical research into systematically identifying populist emotion appeals, we use illustrative examples of populist discursive patterns, primarily at the macro-level of text, rather than engaging in an empirical inquiry to demonstrate our conceptual points about the mobilizing effects of humiliation narratives. As we demonstrate, populist discourses construct their security imaginary of socio-economic threat, political alienation, and cultural anxiety decidedly as a non-elitist articulation of ordinary fears and concerns of the ‘people’ (Beeman 2018; Freedon 2017; Malik 2018). Stories shape our feelings toward others and ourselves, toward what is right and wrong, and toward what happens, when, and why (Capps and Ochs 1995: 53). Emotions make narratives meaningful and, as we show in this article, the populist performance of the security vernacular is no exception.

## THE HUMILIATING FANTASY OF GREATNESS

‘The humiliation for our country never seems to end.’  
‘Let’s not let our great country be laughed at anymore.’

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note here that because the boundaries between them are both fuzzy and disputed, in this article we use emotion, feeling, and affect interchangeably while recognizing that they can be treated as distinct categories (Clément and Sangar 2018: 5; Hutchison 2016: 16; Crawford 2000: 125; Mercer 2014: 516). We understand under the umbrella terminology of emotions, the psychological phenomena that are experienced by individuals as ‘embodied mental processes’ (Hall and Ross 2015) while being intimately related to social-cultural contexts (Ross 2014; Ahmed 2004).

Populist discourses reinforce a sense of existential insecurity in the everyday. To a significant extent, this is rooted in a general perception of disempowerment that originates in the loss of cultural identity, economic security, and political relevance (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Steele and Homolar 2019; Norris and Ingelhart 2019). Yet populist political agents frame the present not simply as being in a state of crisis; they generally do so with reference to a past of national greatness that the ‘true’ people have been cheated out of in the here and now, fueling fears over relative deprivation particularly in those who already hold a social dominance orientation and authoritarian values (Pratto and Shih 2000; Pettigrew 2017; Golec de Zavala *et al.* 2017). In the populist security imaginary, the myths of ‘Past triumphs rise up to humiliate the present self’ (Koestenbaum 2011: 4).

Consider, for example, how Marine Le Pen, a top candidate in the 2017 French presidential election and leader of the National Front political party (now renamed as National Rally), described the international standing of the country in the summer of 2016. She characterized France as ‘an old and a great civilization’ in which the world had once seen ‘the symbol of the struggle against tyranny’ (Le Pen 2016). Today, Le Pen argued, ‘censors of greatness’, in an act of ‘self-hatred’, had actively stripped the country of this ‘national romance’, as she characterized France instead as a country defeated in war and ‘subjected to powers who defile its name’ (*ibid.*). While her supporters indeed displayed a strong tendency to see the country’s current state of affairs negatively, with nothing going well (Hillije 2018: 8), along with her campaign slogan *Au nom du peuple* (‘In the name of the people’), Le Pen promised to right this wrong and restore the country’s place in the world:

‘France will be great again in the future, of that I am certain. And I will do all in my power to make this future day come as quickly as possible. Long live the Francophone world, long live French culture, long live the Republic, and long live France!’ (Le Pen 2016).

The previous year, on the other side of the Atlantic, the TV personality and billionaire Donald Trump had publicly announced his candidacy for US President at Trump Tower in New York City on 22 June 2015, in front of what he falsely described as thousands of people, claiming that ‘There’s been no crowd like this’. He began his announcement speech with the observation that the United States of America was ‘in serious trouble’, and that while ‘we used to have victories’, the America of today no longer had them. Because the American Dream was ‘dead’, Trump argued, a ‘cheerleader’ was needed to root for the country, ‘somebody that literally will take this country and make it great again’. He ended with the promise that if he was elected to serve as 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, he would bring back the country ‘bigger and better and stronger than ever before’.

Both Le Pen and Trump echoed such affective appeals – of believing in the greatness of the country and restoring its rightful place and former glory – that had already featured prominently in the Brexit referendum campaign in the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. Conjuring the ‘vestiges of Empire’ (Dorling and Tomlinson 2019: 3), a past characterized by global reach, power, and influence when Britannia had ‘ruled the waves’, was a major narrative element in the Vote Leave campaign. Nigel Farage, then leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), for example, told his captive audience in Grimsby in May 2015 that his party had faith ‘in a Britain that re-establishes itself across the world’. In bright letters, the stage-background shouted the campaign’s central motto: ‘Believe in Britain’ – a slogan

resurrected by UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson (2020) in his attempt to rally support for his government's widely criticized approach to tackling the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite their significantly different contexts, Nigel Farage, Marine Le Pen, and Donald Trump's speeches all revolved around creating an image of their respective country's past as something that is not only to be celebrated but also to be restored in the present. Although the contours remained remarkably vague and temporarily undescribed, in each case the country's virtuous essence had been lost, and tragically so. The speeches thus exemplify narratives that stimulate two seemingly incompatible emotive responses – 'a deep sense of grievance and a high sense of superiority' (O'Toole 2018: 2-3) – a condition which Herbert Spencer (1876: 59) had explained long before the current resurgence of populist political agents in the West as:

'the contrast between his own worth as he estimates it and the treatment he has received... there is an idea of much withheld, and a feeling of implied superiority to those who withhold it.'

In populist humiliation discourse, the country of the present is described as a fundamentally weakened nation, systematically disadvantaged through 'bad deals' negotiated by the establishment and exploited by allies and enemies alike. Treasured pasts of national greatness are represented through romanticized images that reduce the present to a demeaning experience. Members of the target audience are constructed as an idealized community of shared origin and destiny, the 'pure people' (Mudde 2004: 543), who have been betrayed and humiliated because what is represented as their way of life and righteous place in the world has been lost. Glorious pasts rise up to serve as a benchmark to judge lived and felt experiences in the here and now and to provoke sentiments of unease over the fundamental state of being and feeling at 'home' in one's country (Kinnvall 2004).

At the same time, populist humiliation narratives are stories of relative deprivation that exacerbate a sense of collective privilege and victimization. They tend to discursively forge a link between highly stylized recollection of national heritage and what Volkan (1988) has defined as 'chosen traumas' – the selective remembrance of what is constructed as a persecutory event while ascribing to it an excessive amount of emotional and historic meaning. The historic references to the Second World War in the United Kingdom that are frequently evoked in debates over the future direction of British foreign and domestic policy serve to exemplify this. Brexit-supporting political agents have used this chosen trauma to frame resistance against the European Union as central to the restoration of British national sovereignty and fulfilment of the 'will of the people', and as a proud island nation's heroic uprising against external tyranny. As Foreign Minister, for example, Boris Johnson constructed an analogy between European integration as institutionalized in the EU with past violent attempts to establish a pan-European hegemony by a single nation: 'Napoleon, Hitler, various people tried this out, and it ends tragically. The EU is an attempt to do this by different methods' (Johnson quoted in Walker 2019). The Conservative MP and member of the staunchly anti-EU European Research Group (ERG) in the House of Commons, Mark Francois, went a step further and put Adolf Hitler on par with the president of the European Commission, referring to Jean-Claude Juncker as 'Herr Juncker in the bunker' (quoted in Evans 2019). Historical images of tyranny are here summoned to define both insecurity and defiance in the present.

In the United States, the Lost Cause of the Confederacy is a case in point. It is a revisionist narrative of the American Civil War that celebrates the antebellum South and sees the Confederate States merely as victims of Northern aggression, which gained renewed momentum as a traumatic moment in the country's history under President Trump. In line with the myth of the Lost Cause, those supporting secession from the Union are seen not as

traitors but righteous nationalists, while the role slavery played is trivialized (Nolan 2000: 17), reminiscing a 19<sup>th</sup> century fantasy of white male dominance that was painfully lost. This was exemplified in the Charlottesville *Unite the Right*-rally in the Virginian town in August 2017, which culminated in the death of a protester from the ‘other’ side after a white nationalist ploughed his car into a crowd of counter-protesters. Triggered by the removal of a Confederate Monument, participants associated with white supremacy and far-right movements engaged in chants of ‘our blood, our soil’ and ‘You will not replace us’. Rally participants’ claims to victimhood and suffering were built around the loss and forced forgetting of ‘their’ white past, making them ‘strangers in their own land’ (Hochschild 2016), a sentiment reinforced by President Trump’s reaction to the violence in Charlottesville on 16 August 2017:

‘this week, it is [taking down the statue of] Robert E. Lee. I noticed that Stonewall Jackson is coming down. I wonder, is it George Washington next week? And is it Thomas Jefferson the week after? You know, you really do have to ask yourself, where does it stop?’

Chosen traumas are powerful rhetorical tools because they foster identity building processes long after the represented traumatic event and spark ‘entitlement ideologies’ of restoration and revenge (Volkan and Fowler 2009: 214; see also Volkan 1988). Their emotive appeal is rooted in ‘eliciting culturally specific fears ... to construct a plausible, yet anxiety inducing, future’ (Van Rythoven 2015: 466). The collective revelling in failure rather than sweeping it under the carpet in populist humiliation narratives is thus linked to processes of reclaiming self-worth (Golec de Zavala *et al.* 2009; Golec de Zavala *et al.* 2017). The explicit tension that emerges between past and present, which is integral to populist humiliation narratives, serves as a political tool that ‘weaponizes the emotion of nostalgia’ (Stanley 2018: 19-20), and aggravates ‘postcolonial melancholia’ through assigning new political meaning to national myths and memories (Kinnvall 2018: 525). Here, emotive discursive anchoring here takes place through highly selective representations of the past in the present (Campbell 2020; Homolar and Rodriguez-Merino 2019; Solomon 2017).

A sentiment of loss at the individual level is not merely provoked by alluding to the perception of being part of a socio-economic underclass, as conventional wisdom about the success of Vote Leave or the ascendancy of Donald Trump and the dominant ‘left behind thesis’ has suggested. Rather, it is through their emphasis on a national glorious past that populist humiliation narratives act as affective ‘temporal orientation devices’, which give sense to the present social disorder by providing an emotive blueprint of what the ‘true’ people have been through and establishing the need to put an end to suffering, weakness, and loss (Berenskoetter 2014: 270; Levinger 2017: 123). Inferiority and superiority thus co-exist to foster shared mental images of pride and belonging, on the one hand, and to nurture feelings of loss and alienation, on the other.

## **WE, DEPLORABLES**

‘I’m with you – the American people. I am your voice.’  
Donald Trump, 21 July 2016

Through the ‘seductive rhythm of tragedy and triumph’ (reference blinded) humiliation narratives encourage a sense of group identity and in-group solidarity. The collective perception of humiliation provides a powerful psychological mechanism that functions as an affective ‘glue’ that binds together those who feel powerless, anxious, and betrayed (Ahmed 2004; Berbrier 2000). As Koestenbaum (2011: 12) puts it, ‘If you humiliate me, I enter a new

community, a fellowship – across history – of sufferers and outcasts’. Through the fantasy of humiliation, populists appeal to a sense of collective narcissism in audiences who perceive the privileged status of their in-group identity as being denied by hostile out-groups (Golec de Zavala *et al.* 2019).

Consider, for example, how Nigel Farage, then leader of the UK Independence Party, represented his followers as victims of elite contempt and placed himself among those humiliated. In his opening campaign speech for the 2015 UK general election, he explained that the establishment had shamefully treated its subjects as incapable of making mature choices through ‘building big government and nanny-state Britain, as if we’re not big enough’ (Farage 2015). But Farage claimed: ‘We will turn the other cheek, *we* will ignore their insults’ (*ibid.*, emphasis added), signaling that he himself is not only one of the dishonored but is also on their side and is acting on their behalf (Haslam *et al.* 2010).

During the 2016 US Presidential race, Republican candidate Donald Trump, articulated similar outrage when the campaign of Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton characterized the backers of her opponent as racist, xenophobic, and sexist. Trump supporters were subsumed by Clinton under the disgracing label of ‘the basket of deplorables’, thereby rejecting their claims to righteousness and Americanness as well as their ‘very status to have made such a claim at all’ (Torres and Bergner 2010: 199). In response, throughout much of his September campaign events, Trump put the exoneration of his followers centerstage. His speech on 12 September 2016 in Baltimore is a prime example. Here Trump declared that:

‘Our support comes from every part of America, and every walk of life... These were the people Hillary Clinton so viciously demonized.... that Hillary Clinton called deplorable, irredeemable and un-American. She called these patriotic men and women every vile name in the book, [dividing them] into baskets as though they were objects, not human beings.’

In this humiliation narrative, the Republican presidential candidate created a vivid image of his supporters as part of the common people, the ‘true’ people, who were unjustifiably and undeservedly demeaned by his opponent’s campaign. He asserted that Hillary Clinton was part of an arrogant liberal establishment that had nothing but scorn and disdain for ordinary American people. ‘She and her wealthy donors all had a good laugh’, explained Trump that day:

‘They were laughing at the very people who pave the roads she drives on, paint the buildings she speaks in, and keep the lights on in her auditorium.... she mocks and demeans hardworking Americans... She revealed herself to be a person who looks down on the proud citizens of our country as subjects for her to rule over.’

The vernacular rhetoric of a shared humiliation signifies empathy for the conditions of insecurity that ‘ordinary’ people experience in their everyday lives, and it thereby goes beyond populist political agents’ claims to look and sound like the people they claim to represent. At the same time, a narrative emphasis on humiliation, linked to the promise of returning those who have been victimized to their righteous status, also allows populist political agents to form a positive and affirmative emotive connection with their audiences. Identification is entwined with feelings of attachment (Mercer 2014: 517), and a sense of shared humiliation forges an affective bond between the ‘forgotten people’, *Les Oubliés*, and the populist who shares in their pain and sense of grievance. Populist political agents echo the humiliating experience of their audiences in their self-styled role as leader of the resistance: they give voice to the ‘underdog’ by supposedly ‘telling it as it is’.

The use of humiliation as an essential marker of identity is aimed at removing what is seen as a disturbance to the glorious collective self. Take, for instance, the 45<sup>th</sup> American President's tendency to amplify 'true' Americans' grievances amid the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests against structural racism, police brutality, and the public presence of Confederate symbols in the United States. Trump's populist humiliation performance included falsely claiming during a CBS News interview on 17 July 2020 not only that white people were disproportionately likely to die at the hands of law enforcement but also that the protesters engaged in treasonous behavior. In Autumn 2020, speaking on Constitution Day from the National Archives in Washington DC, he shifted the blame for protests against police violence and racial injustice onto 'decades of left-wing indoctrination in our schools'. Specifically, Trump derided the New York Times' Pulitzer Prize-winning *1619 Project*, which details US history from the first arrival of enslaved Africans on America's shores, alongside Critical Race Theory more broadly, as being part of 'a crusade against American history'. People on 'the Left', the President claimed, used the school curriculum to 'bully Americans into abandoning their values, their heritage and their very way of life'. He made the starkly divisive announcement that he was signing an executive order to establish a '1776 Commission' aimed at removing the 'ideological poison', 'toxic propaganda', and 'twisted web of lies' of 'radical' history education on systemic racism in America, which he claimed as this was dissolving 'the civic bonds that tie us together'. In its place he called for the establishment of a pro-American 'patriotic education' that 'celebrates the truth about our nation's great history'. In the same speech, in another nod to the myth of the Lost Cause, Trump promised to add a statue of Caesar Rodney, a slave owner who signed the Declaration of Independence, to the National Garden of American Heroes park that he proposed to create during a speech at Mount Rushmore on 4 July 2020. Trump stated:

'American parents are not going to accept indoctrination in our schools, cancel culture at work or the repression of traditional faith, culture and values in the public square... For many years now, the radicals have mistaken Americans' silence for weakness. They're wrong'.

The populist humiliation fantasy of suffering and loss of control over life and livelihood here becomes integral to and constitutive of identity for those who belong, acting as an affective device of mobilization. Regardless of what insults are thrown at them, it signals that the true people hold together, loyal to where they come from, sharing experiences of pride in the face of betrayal and adversity. As one rural voter in the United States declared, a sense of shared humiliation and perception of disdain for their way of life from urban liberals, Black Lives Matter activists, and Democrats was a powerful motivator to vote for Trump in 2020 despite misgivings over his handling of the Covid-19 pandemic: 'People felt slighted by them calling us racist hicks and talking about the backwards Midwest out in the sticks' (McGreal 2020). Through humiliation, collective victimhood becomes agentic (Sasley 2020; Jacoby 2014).

Research on ontological security in International Relations has already suggested that the drive for identity continuity leads to antagonistic foreign policies (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Subotić 2016; cf. Browning and Joenniemi 2017). As we explore below, populist humiliation narratives also foster conflictual behaviour, with the animus directed against a broad range of undeserving Others. Because humiliation takes place within a relationship where one party, who expects a higher status, perceives that they are lowered in status (Saurette 2005: 12), it leads to feelings of mourning the loss of status as well as rage and envy towards those who have blocked the 'true' people from regaining wholeness. It is important to note that a humiliating experience does not need to be linked to an actual loss of social or economic status to drive vertical blame attribution towards the nefarious elites and undeserving others who have put the 'true' and 'innocent' people in this position of loss and marginalization. Rather, it can work

as a powerful anticipated emotion, where the expectation of a potential future loss is brought forward to shape how people feel and act in the present (Barbalet and Demertzis, 2013; Miceli and Castelfranchi 2015; Neckel 1991). As Salmela and von Scheve (2017: 580, emphasis in original) put it, ‘*threats of precarization or déclasserment seem to be more important politically than actual déclasserment*’.

## TAKING BACK CONTROL

As the fear of ‘them’ grows, ‘we’ come to represent everything virtuous.

Stanley 2018: xvii

How did the gloom and doom of the present come to replace a nation’s former glory, turning the ‘true’ people into voiceless ‘baskets of deplorables’? The answer given in this affective populist tale of humiliation is surprisingly straightforward: nefarious elites – from the Washington ‘swamp’ to British judges, Brussels ‘Eurocrats’, and *Volksverräter* Angela Merkel – as well as undeserving Others such as immigrants and ‘traitors’ are the main culprits behind the loss and active destruction of national greatness, dignity, and freedom. These ‘enemies of the people’ have rendered the country both weak and vulnerable to tyranny from within and without. It is a simplistic narrative of betrayal, defeat, and surrender in which fulfilling the ‘will of the people’ becomes a heroic struggle to ‘take back control’.

The populist promise of a return to a better past creates an antagonistic tension between the humiliated in-group and the victimizing out-group (van Dijk 2006: 248-249), and draws a rhetorical frontier between ‘we, the people’ and their enemies at two distinct levels. Upwards, blame-attribution is directed against those in positions of power and privilege who have brought upon the weakness that the country and its true people experience in the present. This includes, domestically, the self-serving and detached ‘establishment’ and, internationally, the ‘bad’ countries, institutions, and regulations that have – enabled by their corrupt national allies – pushed the country into economic and reputational decline. In populist humiliation narratives, enemies from within pave the way for external enemies to thrive and diminish the country’s standing and freedom.

A case in point is the way in which Donald Trump consistently condemned foreign actors for what they do to us – for ‘killing us’, ‘beating us’, ‘laughing at us’, ‘taking our money’, ‘lending our money back to us’, and for ‘sending people to us’. In his 2016 address to accept the presidential nomination at the Republican National Convention on 21 July 2016, he underscored that ordinary Americans had ‘lived through one international humiliation after another. One after another’. A frequently used instance of international humiliation during the 2016 US presidential election was the 12 January 2016 US-Iran naval incident, in which Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps seized two US Navy ships after they had entered Iranian territorial waters. At a campaign rally in Ocala, Florida, on 12 October 2016 Trump explained to his captive audience that:

‘You see the way they captured our ten sailors ’cause they were a little bit in the wrong waters. And instead of saying nicely, “Hey, listen. You gotta be over there a little bit”, they *humiliated* the sailors, *humiliated* their families, and *humiliated* our country’ (emphasis added).

Yet much of the cultivation of a ‘stab in the back’ myth of national humiliation is directed against internal culprits. As Trump put it on 23 October 2016, during remarks aimed at his 2016 Democratic opponent, ‘The Clintons end up with the money, and America ends up with

the humiliation'. Public opinion polls of his voter base at the time found above average scores for both mistrust of the federal government and sentiments of anger (Oliver and Rahn 2016: 200). Rather than primarily target foreign adversaries and strategic rivals, during his single term as US president, in over one-hundred tweets and retweets, Trump continued to deride US domestic opponents and key institutions of American liberal democracy as dishonest, selfish, and distant enemies of the American people.

Following the Brexit referendum in the UK, the life-long Eurosceptic politician Nigel Farage also consistently invoked the rhetoric of establishment betrayal, accusing the mainstream Conservative and Labour parties of attempting to subvert the 'true' people's will and sabotaging Britain's exit from the tyranny of the European Union. He went as far as conjuring up the image of armed resistance against foreign enemies in war, declaring that if Brexit was not delivered 'then I will be forced to don khaki, pick up a rifle and head for the front lines' (quoted in Peck 2017). The statement, extensively criticized for inciting violence, took place in the broader context of widespread attempts to daunt those delaying the UK's departure from the European Union. On 4 November 2016, for example, *The Daily Mail* featured the frontpage headline 'Enemies of the People' underneath the pictures of three high court judges. Widely seen as a deliberate attempt to intimidate those seeking to uphold the rule of law, extremist Brexit supporters used the headline to call, across social media platforms, for beheading what they saw as treasonous judges. The display of outrage over 'out of touch' judges who 'declared war on democracy' followed the murder of the British Labour Party MP Jo Cox five months earlier, with the accused murderer provocatively replying 'death to traitors, Freedom to Britain' when asked to state his name in court.

In the UK, mobilizing individuals into active defenders of their rightful place in society through a humiliation-centric Brexit framing that relies upon depredations of elite others continued beyond the formal triggering of Article 50 to begin the process of exiting the European Union. For example, on 30 March 2019 two rallies took place a few hundred metres apart in Westminster to protest the UK's delayed exit from the European Union. The *Leave Means Leave* rally at Parliament Square and the far-right *Make Brexit Happen* event at Whitehall took place amidst chants of 'out means out' and shouts of 'treason' and 'traitors' directed at those seen as disavowing the will of the people. Rally attendees soon turned sentiments of humiliation and betrayal into anger, shifting vocal discontent over the abstract experience of narcissistic injury into a direct physical abreaction that targeted Members of Parliament and journalists in an expression of narcissistic rage.

In populist humiliation discourse, the exclusive community of the true people who share a common origin and destiny are not only separate from the nefarious elites 'above' but also from those unwanted Others 'below'. The second category of blame-attribution is rhetorically focused explicitly on those located outside positions of power, with a particular emphasis on the downward mobilization of anger towards Otherness. A key discursive focus is on newcomers to the country, who Trump framed as criminals, rapists, killers, snakes, and terrorists, while Boris Johnson has engaged in deriding jibes about people of colour. The populist emphasis on dehumanizing immigrants who take *our* jobs, *our* housing, and *our* health care while posing a security risk to *our* women and children has been widely discussed. That the devaluing framing of migrant Others gains traction may be linked less to prior-held outright xenophobia in target audiences that populist political agents speak to and give voice to. Rather, this should be understood as a reaction to a perception of self-devaluation that is both linked to and stoked by populist humiliation narratives, where undeserving Others are seen to receive preferential treatment to the true people (see e.g. Hillije 2018: 10).

Within the context of both the Brexit referendum in the UK and the Black Lives Matter protests in the US, a second rift between those who belong and those who do not has been opened widely in recent populist humiliation discourse. Focused on ‘good’ people and ‘bad’ people, this goes beyond the rhetoric that chastises immigrant Others. In the UK, those who voted to stay within the European Union are ridiculed as ‘Remoaners’, while in the US those who hold anti-racist positions are derided as criminals. Taking the knee at the singing of the national anthem as many, predominantly African-American players in the National Football League had adopted as a sign of silent protest was, for Trump, an insufferable affront against the honor of the nation. Speaking of the Black Lives Matter protestors as ‘Antifa’ at a Press Gaggle on 18 September 2020, Trump asserted that ‘these are thugs. These are bad people. These are people that hurt ... a lot of good people’. His supporters, in turn, patrolled streets in Southern US cities such as Louisville, Kentucky, as self-described ‘patriots’ – dressed in combat gear, armed with guns and rifles, and with American flags in hand.

Blame-shifting strategies of hate and racism are certainly not unique to populist rhetoric. Yet the above discussion serves to illustrate that populist humiliation discourse relies upon such messaging, directed in particular at white (male) audiences, to give sense to vague feelings of loss and marginalization and to show a way out, fueling feelings of empowerment that are directly linked to a desire for revenge and to inflict harm rather than a sense of defeatism, inertia, or passivity. Trump’s call, during the presidential debate on 29 September 2020, for the neo-fascist and white supremacist ‘Proud Boys’ to ‘stand back and stand ready’ was widely interpreted as thinly-veiled encouragement of violence by those identifying with a narrative of white victimhood. The desperate yearning to reestablish pride and honour through warding off humiliation is accompanied ‘by assaulting and injuring others and thus transferring one’s own shame and dishonor onto them’ (Gilligan 2017: 175). As Harkavy (2000: 350) put it:

“on the left side of this equation, so to speak, are humiliation, shame, defeat, and loss. On the other side of the equation are revenge and vengeance, plus retaliation, payback, “tit for tat” and, perhaps, revisionism and irredentism. These are no mere quibbles.”

The political significance of shared humiliation as a narrative device, then, is that inward feelings of shame, provoked through the demeaning experience, are directed outward, away from the individual and collective weakened self via blame-attribution (Hejdenberg and Andrews 2011: 1278). Indeed, when vulnerable, weak, despised, and helpless parts of the Self are projected upon the external, ideologically distorted member of the outgroup, this fosters both aggression and violence (Bohleber 2003). From a psychological perspective, such cruelty directed at members of the outgroup will not come as a surprise. Individuals who experience anger in the form of narcissistic rage after encountering humiliation tend to ‘show total lack of empathy towards the defender’ (Kohut 1972: 386). Not only does humiliation have a strong emotive pull, but collaboration, dialogue, and peaceful conflict resolution are difficult, if not impossible, courses of action for those experiencing a strong sense of humiliation combined with narcissistic injury.

## **CONCLUSION**

Conventional wisdom tells us that the rise in populism today is linked to a crisis of liberal democracy. While the language of populism is increasingly used as a weapon to discredit political opponents, in this article we explored how populist political agents rely upon humiliation-centric discursive frames to transpose abstract concerns about enmity and threat into everyday perceptions of insecurity. They do so by appealing to complex and ambiguous

emotions, both positive and negative, to create and channel individual and collective energies around social divisions.

Our narrative inquiry suggests that populist political agents from the right of the political spectrum are complicit in creating the very sense of existential crisis in the everyday that they promise to tackle. Populist political agents may act as challengers to 'business as usual' (Laclau 2005: 123). Yet it is their use of humiliation narratives that helps to widen the limits of possibility through an emotive shift away from 'rational' political action towards an emotive politics of outrage, which underwrites a radical departure from established policy norms and electoral preferences. As this article suggests, rather than identifying humiliation with a sense of weakness and passivity, fantasies of shared humiliation are a powerful narrative tool in the hands of populist identity entrepreneurs to manipulate public sentiments for political gain. Reversing the roles of humiliator and victim, they enable the forging of an affective bond of positive affirmation with their audiences through invoking a shared reality of pain and suffering, experienced at the hands of domestic and foreign 'enemies of the people', while translating this emotive repertoire into calls for systemic change and radical exclusion of unwanted Others.

Populist humiliation narratives construct a security imaginary around the perceived loss of past national greatness, domestically and internationally, which creates affinities with the experiences of those who feel disempowered, and which ties existential anxieties to concerns with immigration, globalization, and integration. They tap into everyday emotive resources linked to a sense of persecution and victimhood to make distant and abstract political positions 'feelable'. As this article has shown, populist humiliation discourse achieves this via three interdependent mechanisms that together give sense to what appears as conflicting narratives of greatness and victimhood: (1) creating a mythical past as glorious and victorious through the reinterpretation of selected traumas and triumphs; (2) establishing that this past has been lost and that this loss is a humiliating experience; and (3) generating a sense of shared humiliation as an action-inducing and identity-affirming abreaction that is directed toward a desire to inflict harm on others.

Within a humiliation-centric discourse sentiments of sameness and togetherness are intertwined with narcissistic injury, turning perceptions of loss and defeat into shared prejudice that is directed against those who are seen as not belonging to the 'true' people. Populist humiliation narratives create a simultaneous need for allyship and enmity. The humiliation-centric discursive construction of belonging and exclusion, superiority and inferiority, establishes an emotive connection between populist political agents and their audiences. Via humiliation, the populist security imaginary becomes relatable.

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