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The epistemics of populism and the politics of uncertainty

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The epistemics of populism and the politics of uncertainty

Richard Bronk * and Wade Jacoby**

Abstract

This paper discusses epistemic aspects of populism – especially its link with radical uncertainty and the tribal construction of facts – that have so far received relatively little attention. We argue that populism is less a backward-looking phenomenon feeding off existing grievances than a narrative-based reaction to an increasingly unsettled future. Many economic factors isolated as causes of populism – especially rapid technological innovation, deregulation, and the globalisation of networks – entail a high degree of indeterminacy in social systems; and the corresponding uncertainty facing voters is a catalyst for many of the pathologies of populism isolated in the literature. In particular, uncertainty undermines the credibility of experts, while the disorientation and anxiety it induces increase reliance on simple narratives to structure expectations. The paper explores the role of narrative entrepreneurs, the relationship between narratives and power, and the dynamics of *narrative coups* designed to create alternative facts and perform a new reality.

Keywords: Uncertainty, narrative coups, tribal construction of facts, distrust of experts, populist turn

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1. Introduction

There is a burgeoning literature on populism attempting to define its specific characteristics and its main drivers. This paper aims to complement this literature with a focus on several epistemic issues – in particular the relationship between populism and the incidence of economic uncertainty and the tribal construction of facts. In a nutshell, we isolate radical uncertainty about the future as a key antecedent for the populist turn and an important catalyst for many of its features. Our purpose is neither to discredit other accounts of populism nor to deny that populist voters may have legitimate grievances. But instead of focusing on backward-looking grievances, we stress the emotional and cognitive challenges all actors face in forming convincing expectations of the future at times of fundamental uncertainty. Our account sheds new light on how populist politicians leverage such voter confusion into durable support for themselves.

Our main thesis is that the economic indeterminacy implied by radical technological or policy innovation, deregulation, and the emergence of novel outcomes from complex interconnected global networks – together with correspondingly high levels of uncertainty, insecurity, and anxiety experienced by citizens – provides fertile conditions for populist politics to take hold in modern capitalist economies. Heightened uncertainty forces all economic and social actors to rely on a combination

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of imaginaries, narratives, and calculation to form expectations, shore up confidence, and make future-oriented decisions (Beckert and Bronk, 2018). Crucially, the indeterminacy of the future ensures that expectations cannot be firmly anchored in objective probability functions, while making it impossible to know whether current models of best practice will remain pertinent in future (Bronk and Jacoby, 2016). Moreover, since the narratives and imaginaries that structure expectations play an important role in influencing outcomes, the future belongs to those with the political, market, or rhetorical power to make their narratives and imaginaries count (Beckert, 2016).

Radical uncertainty and the openness of the indeterminate future to being shaped by novel imaginaries and convincing stories explain many features of modern economies: firms use public relations and advertising to establish the pre-eminence of their new era stories, while central banks manage market expectations with forward guidance (Holmes, 2014). We contend that the current prevalence of uncertainty also explains a renewed tendency for politics to resemble a battle of warring narratives – characterised by an arms race of rhetorical hyperbole and rival attempts to construct facts and envisage a future that will secure voter approval. Success may ultimately lie with leaders able to engineer what we call ‘narrative coups’ – the wholesale reshaping of both the guiding narratives of their electoral base and the framing normative or conceptual grids with which they interpret events and decide how to act. The indeterminacy of the future ensures that hard-fact constraints on these rhetorical coups are less binding than normally supposed, especially since experts are frequently discredited by failed attempts at accurate predictions. At the same time, the increasingly tribal construction of facts atomises the field of awareness, and dissolves the common reference points, of the electorate.

This discussion paper aims to complement existing literature on the main drivers of the recent populist turn by hypothesising that the prevalence of radical economic uncertainty may be a predictor of the incidence of populism – both its geographic distribution and the demographic profile of support for populist politicians. Our paper

also helps explain the peculiar dynamics of populist politics with reference to the concepts of narrative coups and the tribal construction of facts. In doing so, it touches on a number of empirical examples from Europe and the USA and provides some discourse analytics. It does not, though, examine any particular case studies in the round. Nor does it seek to define the boundary conditions for what counts as populism. Indeed, it argues that many of the features isolated in the paper (such as reliance on simple narratives and reassuring promissory stories in conditions of uncertainty) are widespread phenomena in modern political economies. It is only when these techniques are employed with cynical intent to subvert the course of politics and grab power on a nakedly partisan prospectus in the name of the 'real people' that these features earn the pejorative label of 'populist'.

2. The nature and causes of populism

As both the nature and causes of populism are the subject of a large literature, we only sketch those strands from which we draw inspiration in identifying populism as an exclusionary form of identity politics, characterised by simple narratives promising a return to a more certain age, combined with an arms race of rhetorical hyperbole and denigration of opponents and compromise.

2.1 *What is populism?*

Ever since Abraham Lincoln, it has been a commonplace to see democracy as 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'. The term 'populism' is widely used to refer to particular versions (or perversions) of this general principle. So, for example, Jan-Werner Müller (2016, 3) argues that populism is 'an exclusionary form of identity politics' where part of the population is considered as the 'real people' – a single, homogenous, and authentic body differentiated from the elite or other less worthy groups (including immigrants) excluded by virtue of their ethnicity, culture, or voting record. Nigel Farage famously referred to the Leave victory in the 2016 EU referendum in the UK as a 'victory for real people' – implying, as Müller (2016, 22)

puts it, that ‘the 48% of the British electorate who had opposed taking the UK out of the European Union’ were ‘somehow less than real’ or were not true citizens.

The populist leader – particularly in majoritarian democracies – is then the champion of the ‘will of the people’ (in this case expressed in a one-off referendum) against a variety of ‘enemies of the people’ – including judges, legislators, or the media – and battling the elite, shadowy groups of outsiders, or reviled ‘citizens of nowhere’.¹ To honour a majority verdict is not in itself, of course, to earn the soubriquet of ‘populist’ since it is part of the very essence of democracy; rather the populist is someone who rides roughshod over the checks and balances in the constitution that were designed to ensure deliberative action, protect due process, and safeguard the rights and concerns of minorities. Populists advocate what Edmund Burke, John Stuart Mill, and others label the ‘tyranny of the majority’.

We follow Müller in seeing populism as essentially an *approach* to politics and a *set of political techniques* employed to secure power in the name of ‘the people’ rather than as a set of particular policy responses to more or less legitimate social and economic grievances. Some of these techniques are, of course, used from time to time by leaders not generally seen as ‘populist’ overall. Our paper elaborates further aspects of the populist approach to politics and its related techniques. In particular, we point to the use of simple narratives to corral and motivate voters to act despite facing complex issues involving nuanced trade-offs between different goals and interests in conditions of radical uncertainty. Many of these simple messages seek to provide confidence and reassurance and constitute what Edward Sudgen (2019) calls ‘quest narratives’ promising a return to ‘a simpler, more glorious past’. Such nostalgic visions of returning to better and more certain times are seen in the Brexiteer slogan of ‘Take

¹ The Daily Mail referred to judges as ‘enemies of the people’ when the UK supreme court ruled that parliament should be allowed to vote on article 50; and Donald Trump has referred to sections of the media critical of his policies as ‘enemies of the people’. Theresa May was disparaging of the idea of being a ‘citizen of nowhere’ in her Tory party conference speech in 2016.

Back Control’ and in Donald Trump’s favourite cry of ‘Make America Great Again’. The tone of many of the messages used is also divisive and polarizing – ‘you are with us or against us’. As such, they represent a shift in the political metanarrative away from consensus and compromise to a winner-takes-all world of uncontested identities and decisive action.²

Our focus in section 3 on the uncertainty and disorientation endemic to late capitalist societies will help explain the particular appeal of these narratives. At this stage we note two other features of populism that contribute to the narrative coups analysed in section 4. The first is a tendency to engage in an arms race of rhetorical hyperbole where every opponent is a ‘traitor’ or ‘crooked’,³ the existing political system is a ‘swamp’, and every achievement by the leader is the ‘greatest’ ever. The second feature is the efforts – made, for example, in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary⁴ or in Trump’s discourse – to crush, or vilify as ‘fake’, any parts of civil society and the media that dare to challenge the leader’s narrative with inconvenient factual evidence. In an indeterminate world where the future is partly determined by whose narrative gets to structure voters’ expectations and beliefs, there is a strong tendency for leaders to use these techniques to ensure that it is their narrative that performs the future and their facts that influence voters.

² While this paper’s examples of populist rhetoric are mostly from the political right, populist tendencies also exist on the left. Christopher Clarke (2019) illustrates ‘left populism’ with his study of the Corbyn project in the UK Labour Party. Looking beyond the exclusionary rhetoric of the motto ‘for the many not the few’, Clarke argues that Corbyn supporters see themselves as bearers of moral truths in a fight not only against a subversive elite but also against the moderates and ‘left pluralists’ within the party’s own ranks who would appease the forces of neo-liberalism and admit the need for nuanced trade-offs. The divisiveness of the message is matched by a narrative of returning to a past golden age of real socialism.

³ See, for example, Trump’s continual reference to his election opponent as ‘Crooked Hillary’.

⁴ These efforts include the Orbán regime’s hounding the Central European University out of Budapest.

2.2 The main drivers of the populist turn

What are the main drivers of this populist turn? Each case is, of course, different and the sources of grievance various – from humiliation at the hands of victors in war (Germany in the 1930s) to loss of political agency as a result of external conditionality (Hungary in the 2000s) or euro-area austerity (Italy since 2011); and from widening income inequalities and the absence of median income growth (in the US and UK since the 1970s and especially since the financial crisis) to path-dependent cultural attitudes to rapidly encroaching trends of social liberalism (Poland in recent years). All these factors are likely to have played a part in destabilising the political status quo.

Many authors cite structural factors in certain Western democracies as the cause of increased populism – such as the growing failure of political parties to exercise an effective ‘gatekeeping’ operation to exclude demagogues from standing for office (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018) as a result of increased reliance on balloting (self-selecting and increasingly extreme) party memberships to determine party leadership.

Others blame two features of what Cas Mudde (2018) calls ‘undemocratic liberalism’ for the illiberal and populist turn: the first is the wholesale delegation of many political and economic decisions to independent technocracies (like central banks) or multinational entities (like the EU), thereby weakening national democratic control. This becomes more problematic at times of crisis when the agencies to which decisions are delegated have to make policy choices with strong distributional effects. Secondly, some blame the over-arching logic of neo-liberal economic policies for situating economies in an interdependent and global system of mobile capital and increasingly deregulated labour markets that has weakened the ability of elected governments to protect their own workers (Zielonka 2018). In economic policy terms, western countries are enslaved – the argument goes – by ‘the goddess TINA – There Is No Alternative’ (Bronk, 1998, 220).

Moving beyond structural factors, Jens Beckert (2019) argues that political authority depends on ‘promissory legitimacy’ – on the credibility of the promises about the

uncertain future made by leaders. In particular, neo-liberal economic policies have relied for their legitimacy on the promise – the imaginary – of greater prosperity and liberty for everyone in the wake of the liberalisation and deregulation of markets. This imaginary has been ‘crushed in the eyes of many by the financial crisis and years of median-wage stagnation’ (Bronk and Beckert, 2019, 13). But despite governments becoming less able in a globalised and interdependent world to deliver on their promises, the political response has been a noticeable inflation of ‘empty promises’ (Runciman, 2018, 214) during elections – a dynamic that breeds a corrosive cynicism. Populists, too, triumph at the ballot box by promising ‘sunlit meadows beyond’,⁵ but, *pace* Beckert, any failure on their part to deliver may simply strengthen their position since they are pre-armed with narratives of betrayal by the deep state, ‘enemies of the people’, or assorted ‘doomsters’.

Another explanation for the populist turn stresses the loss of dignity and recognition suffered by casualties of the changeover from a Fordist system of production based in old industrial heartlands to the new knowledge economy, which brings agglomeration benefits to the large cities and university towns that attract highly skilled labour from around the world. Torben Iversen and David Soskice (2019) argue that ‘the old middle class’⁶ in rust-belt areas formerly derived status as well as a larger share of income from ‘the strong interdependencies across skill groups, neighbourhoods, and regions’ that were a feature of Fordist production (219). The move to the new knowledge economy ‘embodies the logic of agglomeration and increasing returns’ – with strong complementarities between highly educated and globally mobile workers and firms located in cities – and it disrupts the previous social contract with the ‘old middle class’. In countries with poor skills training across the board, income inequality rises; but the old middle class are not content with cash handouts paid for by tax revenues

⁵ From Boris Johnson in a speech launching his case against membership of the EU in 2016. Johnson also regularly referred before the 2019 UK election to those who question his approach as ‘doomsters’.

⁶ In English terminology, read ‘the traditional working class’ for ‘the old middle class’ in Iversen and Soskice’s US terminology.

generated in the successful cities. Instead, their perspective is often that the poor are 'lazy or "undeserving", while the rich are gaming the system'; they 'want the government to work for *them* and to restore their sense of place and pride' (Iversen and Soskice, 2019, 222, 227). They also tend to resent immigrants as much for replacing them as essential contributors to the economy as for any real or perceived impact on their wages.

Iversen and Soskice's analysis not only helps explain a susceptibility to populist narratives among certain sections of the population; it also goes some way to explaining the distribution of populist sentiments they measure – highest in those demographics and nations with poor general access to high quality education and intra- and intergenerational mobility, and lower among educated city-dwellers and in coordinated market economies (like Germany and Scandinavia) with excellent vocational training and pre-primary education. But it is here that we have a complementary explanation that relates to the incidence of radical uncertainty and the relative ability of different groups to cope with that uncertainty. The prevalence of – and attitude to – uncertainty, and the degree to which facts are tribally constructed, help determine both the emotional and economic susceptibility of voters to populist narratives and the effectiveness of populist techniques in the hands of politicians.

3. Uncertainty and the epistemics of populism

Liberal policy errors, the decline of promissory legitimacy, and the differential capacity of groups to benefit from the new knowledge economy discussed in section 2 go a long way to explain why conditions have become more conducive to populism in recent years – with wide variations across different groups. We turn now to the epistemics of populism – how knowledge problems and belief dynamics shape options for both populists and their opponents. In particular, we focus on how indeterminacy improves the traction of populist narratives, why these narratives often prove bulletproof in the face of contrary evidence, and how populists encourage the tribal construction of facts to secure power.

3.1 *Economic indeterminacy and the power of populist narratives*

We follow Beckert and Bronk (2018) in arguing that capitalist economies are characterized by relentless innovation and novelty and hence exhibit an indeterminacy that cannot be reduced to the sort of measurable ‘risk’ amenable to the calculation of objective probabilities.⁷ Innovations in product design, technological processes, and – just as importantly – in economic policy and regulatory governance break the predictable links between the past and the future. This ensures that the future cannot be a statistical shadow of the past. Furthermore, complex and innovative economic systems – exhibiting strong global interdependencies and increasing returns to agglomeration and first-mover advantage – are characterised by the continual emergence of novelty and second-order contingent reactions to that novelty.

In such situations, people face a lack of knowledge, which David Dequech (2001, 920) calls ‘fundamental uncertainty.’ Contrary to the assumptions of rational expectations theory, no-one in these conditions is able to calculate the optimal course of action or internalise the correct model of the economy. ‘To put it simply, when the world is uncertain, you cannot know what the best model *will* be, and the past may not be a good guide to the future’ (Bronk, 2019).

The incalculability and indeterminacy of the future and the corresponding uncertainty facing political and economic actors is to some degree a feature generated within *any* capitalist system subject to the dynamic that Joseph Schumpeter (1943 [1976]) refers to as ‘creative destruction’. But, crucially, the degree of disruption, indeterminacy and uncertainty is dependent on several factors:

⁷ See Knight (1921) for the famous distinction between radical ‘uncertainty’ and measurable ‘risk’.

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- first, the mix between *radical* and *incremental* innovation in products and processes (since incremental innovation entails lower degrees of indeterminacy and ‘semantic uncertainty’⁸ than does radical innovation);
- secondly, the intensity of deregulation and policy reform designed to remove institutional constraints that previously channelled ‘the sources of contingency’ (Offe, 1998, 682);
- and thirdly, the extent of integration into globally interdependent networks, which undermine the efficiency of national ‘planning’ (Boyer, 2018).

In other words, the degree of uncertainty is correlated with factors often seen as drivers of the populist turn – the move to a new knowledge economy (characterised by radical innovation especially in information technology) and policies of rapid deregulation and market globalisation. Peter Hall and David Soskice (2001) demonstrate that coordinated market economies (CMEs) rely on incremental as opposed to radical innovation strategies and high company-specific skills and hence display lower levels of income inequality and greater resistance to the sort of labour-market deregulation that would damage investment in vocational training. These institutional features entail that those citizens who most benefit face lower degrees of personal uncertainty and economic insecurity. This may help account for the lower percentage of the population susceptible to populist attitudes in CMEs (according to data in Iversen and Soskice, 2019) than in the US, whose successful sectors engage in more radical innovation.⁹

Zygmunt Bauman writes about the psychological and social effects of living ‘in an Age of Uncertainty’, where change is no longer ‘a *temporary irritant*’ but the result of a compulsive obsession with modernization and continual deregulation (2007; 2012, viii, xi). He memorably dubs as ‘liquid modernity’ the ‘growing conviction that change is

⁸ ‘Semantic uncertainty’ refers here to uncertainty about the meaning of words and analogies used to discuss novel products or processes – see Lane and Maxfield (2005).

⁹ Paradoxically, however, Germany has advocated supply-side and austerity policies that have helped drive populism elsewhere in the Eurozone – see Blyth (2013); Jacoby (2020).

the only permanence, and uncertainty *the only* certainty' (2012, viii). Focusing on a growing divorce between power and national politics in an era of globalisation, he describes the feelings of insecurity, vulnerability, and debilitating fear that become 'self-perpetuating' (2007, 9). It is these emotions that help explain the susceptibility of voters to reassuring narratives. As David Tuckett (2011, xvii) argues, narratives are one of the main devices that people use to 'give meaning' to their actions and 'create the commitment to act'. In particular, citizens use narratives to overcome the anxiety they experience when facing incalculable uncertainty, to 'manage anticipations of gain and loss', and to 'support action emotionally' (Tuckett, 2018, 74).

In any context where people are unable to calculate the right course of action or rely on objective probability functions (because of the ontological indeterminacy implied by innovation and novelty), they have no choice but to rely on a mixture of imaginaries, shared narratives, and calculative technologies to form expectations and generate the confidence to act (Beckert and Bronk, 2018). They must imagine a future that cannot yet be known, but they do so with the help of a varied cocktail of shared stories, heuristics, and calculative devices (used as tools to diagnose emerging patterns).

Crucially, since the future is yet to be created by how people imagine and *will* it to be, outcomes depend – at least in part – on which novel imaginaries and contingent narratives prove most influential. As Beckert and Bronk (2018, 7) write: 'Since expectations are not anchored in some pre-existing future reality, but rather have an important role in creating the future, they are the legitimate object of political challenge, debate, and choice.' Narratives are politically important not only for their ability to settle the expectations of the anxious but also as an instrument of power in shaping the future.

Different demographic groups experience the uncertainty arising from the globalised knowledge economy in different ways. This variation may help explain who is most susceptible to populist narratives promising a return to past glorious certainties that

will privilege a country's authentic citizens. Beckert and Bronk (2019, 13f) argue that 'one of the inherent promises of capitalist systems is that the uncertainty implied by Schumpeter's "creative destruction" – or Ulrich Beck's "whirlpool of change" (Beck, 1992) – is merely the unwelcome flipside of a cherished freedom to choose among newly imagined options and transcend the shackles of the past.' But those currently in a position to exploit this freedom are predominantly highly educated, young, and resident in large or university cities. Meanwhile, the costs of associated rapid social dislocation tend to fall most heavily on the old Fordist middle classes and those with few educational resources. It is also generally accepted that the elderly are more loss averse than the young and more uncomfortable with rampant innovation and associated rapid changes in social and cultural norms. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the two most reliable indicators of a propensity to vote for Brexit and the populist narrative of 'take back control' in the 2016 referendum were old age and a lack of tertiary education.¹⁰ The uncertainty implied by the new global economy was much less threatening to Millennials. In this respect at least, the young and educated were happy with the status quo of British membership of the EU.

Ironically, of course, narratives that promise radical change as well as greater hope and control for those who are disadvantaged by the status quo and anxious about the future will – if influential – be disruptive and bring further uncertainty to the system. This was arguably the fate of the Brexiteer message of 'take back control': far from reducing uncertainty and increasing agency for the disadvantaged as it promised, its success in 'performing' the future considerably increased economic and political uncertainty. The vote to take back control hurtled the country at least temporarily out of control.

¹⁰ For the age demographics of the Brexit vote in 2016, see : <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2016/06/27/how-britain-voted>. Over 65s were twice as likely to vote for Brexit as under 25s, and those with a degree more than twice as likely to vote to remain in the EU. Big cities overwhelmingly backed 'remain', while small towns, former industrial areas, and rural counties voted 'leave'.

3.2 *Distrust of experts and the loss of hard-fact constraints*

A surprising feature of the recent populist turn in the UK and US is the growing distrust of experts and the apparent imperviousness of populist narratives to fact-checking websites and media. Several factors are at play here.

The first and perhaps most important is that the credibility of experts has been damaged by the misuse of economic models to make forecasts of unwarranted precision at times of great uncertainty. Economists have increasingly allowed their specialist expertise to be expressed in the form of forecasts of the unknowable future. The future is not entirely uncertain, of course: some aspects of social reality are predictable thanks to systematic regularities in behaviour and stable constraints. But large parts of the economy and politics are inherently *indeterminate* thanks to continual innovation, novelty, increasing returns, and threshold effects. In these areas, the aim of predicting the future with deterministic models and probability forecasts based on historical data is a fools' errand. The refusal of the economics profession to take uncertainty (as distinct from measurable 'risk') seriously has left them exposed in the court of public opinion (Blyth, 2002).

Not all the fault here lies with economists. Those who employ them like the illusion of control that any pretence to know the future implies; and they often want to justify their decisions and avoid blame for mistakes by delegating judgment to black box models promising to solve the equations of life (Power, 2007). But the net effect of the continual failure of high-profile forecasts to predict the future with any precision has been a serious loss of credibility for the experts who produce them. As a result, large sections of the public have understandably started to undervalue other aspects of their expertise – such as their knowledge of causal mechanisms or sensitive threshold effects. This is damaging to public debate because the inability to forecast accurately uncertain futures emphatically does not imply that experts have no clue about the future. Indeed, their analytical tools and models are highly useful in helping us spot emerging patterns. Experts – particularly those willing to use a variety of models – remain a key asset for learning how to navigate the unknown future.

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The indeterminacy of complex and innovative modern economies characterised by frequent novelties and non-linear reactions self-evidently makes it impossible to ground political narratives in uncontested facts about the future. We genuinely cannot know *ex ante* what the future will look like. By reducing the constraints normally imposed by an audit of facts on the set of plausible narratives, the indeterminacy of the future also leaves narrative entrepreneurs free to invent future scenarios (such as the United Kingdom prospering more outside the EU's Single Market than within) without facing the possibility of firm refutation. Furthermore, populists tend to represent sceptical questioning about the feasibility of their imaginaries as the product of 'project fear' or 'fake news'. Indeed, feeding off legitimate doubt about misleadingly precise predictions or risk assessments of the unknowable future, populists instill a dangerous cynicism about *all* facts and theoretical models presented by experts. This matters since, however uncertain the future, there remain hard constraints and established causal mechanisms that are relevant to judging the likelihood of different outcomes.¹¹

Another factor limiting the influence of expert analysis is that the public frequently mistakes correlation for causation in a form of understandable mental association. So, for example, increases in immigration, improved minority rights, and the ethnic diversity of the workforce may be loosely correlated with rising income inequality and depressed median wages for the old middle classes in the US over the last fifty years, and this correlation may consciously or unconsciously trump most expert analysis suggesting that other factors (such as global capital movements, technological change, and reduced union power) are a larger determinant. Likewise, it is true that the period of UK membership of the EU correlates with the decline in manufacturing in the North

¹¹ An example of a well-established causal mechanism that casts legitimate doubt on the imaginary of the UK gaining from replacing Single Market membership with close trading links with the US and Asia is captured by the gravity model of trade: trade is done most easily, cheaply, and profitably with countries in close proximity.

of the country. It is plausible that this association plays its part in making voters susceptible to anti-EU narratives.

The confusion of correlation with causation is part of larger problem identified by Hannah Arendt (2006, 239): she argues that very often ‘factual truth is no more self-evident than opinion’, while opinion-holders ‘find it relatively easy to discredit factual truth as just another opinion.’ This is because reality is often counter-intuitive and highly inconvenient leaving us inclined to believe alternative ‘facts’ that suit our normative priors or emotional dispositions. As Arendt (247) puts it:

Since the liar is free to fashion his “facts” to fit the profit and pleasure, or even the mere expectations, of his audience, the chances are that he will be more persuasive than the truth-teller. Indeed, he will usually have plausibility on his side; his exposition will sound more logical, as it were, since the element of unexpectedness – one of the outstanding characteristics of all events – has mercifully disappeared.

Expert analysis is often ranged against the apparent common sense and emotionally appealing nature of populist narratives.

3.3 Power and the tribal construction of facts

It is a central tenet of post-Kantian thought that the world we see and the evidence we use are partly constructed by the conceptual grids our minds supply (Bronk, 2009). We never have unmediated access to brute reality but rely on theories, narratives, metaphors, and concepts to structure our vision and analysis. The data we use is framed and selected by the contingent models and stories we consciously or unconsciously internalise. As M. H. Abrams (1953, 31) noted – and as the etymology of the word ‘facts’ (derived from the Latin *facta*) implies – facts are ‘things made as much as things found, and made in part by the analogies through which we look at the world as through a lens.’ In other words, ‘facts are not some objective touchstone for assessing the truth-value’ of different narratives and theories; instead they are part-

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creations of particular stories and theories (Bronk and Jacoby, 2016, 12). This emphatically does not mean that we cannot reason about and debate the relative merits of different constructions of evidence as useful encapsulations of the aspects of reality that matter to us. But, in a post-Kantian and post-modern world, all facts are provisional constructions and partial interpretations of reality.

Many thinkers from Thomas Kuhn (1996) – with his theory of incommensurable paradigms – to David Bohm have worried about the implications for science and policy of researchers being locked within disciplinary silos and a variety of discrete and contingent linguistic or narrative frames that break our ‘field of awareness into disjoint parts’ (Bohm, 1996, 76). But it is the French post-modernist social theorists who have best articulated the analogous implications for politics. Michel Foucault, in particular, analysed the relationship between knowledge and power: in his vision, power depends on the ‘production of truth’, and knowledge is partly the product of contingent power relations. As he puts it: power ‘produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth’ (Foucault, 1977, 194; quoted in McHoul and Grace, 1993, 64).

The disquieting implications for politics are twofold: first, politics becomes a battle of warring narratives in which the very categories and conceptual frameworks with which we interpret evidence are hotly contested. Purveyors of official ‘facts’ are seen as embedded in existing power structures that determine the analytical frames used; and insurgent power belongs to those who can craft a newly compelling narrative or interpretive frame and hence create the evidential base on which their political platform may depend. The essence of power becomes to control the conceptual and normative frameworks by which the leader’s supporters interpret the world and decide how to vote.

Secondly, as we lose nationally coherent narrative or cultural frames and widely accepted systems of accredited expertise, partisan politics generates fragmented notions of truth and an increasingly tribal construction of facts. Lilliana Mason (2018)

demonstrates, for example, how US political parties are increasingly ‘sorted’ by racial and religious identity in ways that minimize cross-cutting cleavages. As a result, partisan identities are far more powerful incubators of anger than in the past. Even when members of different camps are close in policy terms, they are extremely angry at one another – hence her title: *Uncivil Agreement*. This anger helps explain why partisans respond readily to the message of ‘winning’ and are more likely to reject notions of trade-offs or win-win propositions.

Moreover, the longer partisans stay in their own echo chambers, the more they occupy different mental worlds and are no longer able to see the same things as their co-citizens in other camps. Cutting-edge neuroscience research confirms that people’s perceptions are structured by concepts: the particular concepts they use shape what they see, and any conceptual structures regularly used harden over time (Feldman Barrett, 2018). Analogously, we suggest that as political belief-structures drift apart – partly through the party and media polarization noted above – citizens are increasingly unable to see the same things or enter the same emotional states. Those in different cognitive tribes are less and less able to agree on the basic facts in a particular situation, and the overarching narratives in relation to race, crime, and economics diverge according to party allegiances.

4. The politics of uncertainty

The epistemics of populism outlined in section 3 – in particular the impossibility of predicting the indeterminate future in innovative and interconnected economies, the emotional and cognitive disorientation this implies, and the increasingly tribal construction of facts – also enable us to sharpen the discussion about the nature of populist politics and the efficacy of particular populist techniques.

4.1 Indeterminacy, complexity, and the blame game

A key feature of populist discourse is to blame negative outcomes on outsiders – whether the supposedly self-serving elite, foreigners, or particular ethnic groups

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within society – who (in the terms of the discourse) are excluded from the ‘real people’. Blame does, of course, legitimately attach to certain actors from time to time. But it is a feature of complex systems and innovative economies that it is often hard scientifically to ascribe blame specifically to individuals. Complex networks of interdependent firms, institutions, and citizens reacting in often creative and contingent ways to each other’s innovative moves are frequently characterised by snowballing effects as certain financial or environmental thresholds are crossed; and contagious epidemics of panic or euphoria often sweep through whole political and economic systems. This means that – just as the consequences of any individual’s action are usually *ex ante* indeterminate and unpredictable because they depend on the creative and contingent reactions of others and non-linear threshold effects – so, too, it is frequently impossible retrospectively to define who precisely is to blame. Bad outcomes (like the financial crash and the recession that followed) are emergent properties of a whole system and seldom the creation of one small group, still less an individual.

Mary Douglas (1992) argued that modern societies, no less than primitive tribes, are characterised by a human tendency to ascribe blame to certain individuals or groups – especially an outside enemy – for misfortunes that would otherwise be inexplicable and even more emotionally threatening. Disasters, she argued ‘are generally turned to political account: someone already unpopular is going to be blamed for it’ (Ibid., 5). She saw communities as organized by various schemas of explanation and blaming as one route to establishing ‘community consensus’ (Ibid., 8). As she puts it:

Blaming is a way of manning the gates and at the same time of arming the guard. News that is going to be accepted as true information has to be wearing a badge of loyalty to the particular political regime which the person supports; the rest is suspect, deliberately censored or unconsciously ignored (Douglas, 1992, 19).

Douglas also argued that, in the politicized search for scapegoats to blame for misfortune, anyone ‘who insists that there is a high degree of uncertainty is taken to

be opting out of accountability' (Ibid.,30). In practice, of course, it is the very indeterminacy of economic systems, the unfathomable contingency of events, and the difficulty of establishing blame forensically in complex systems that gives populists the freedom to ascribe blame to whichever opponent or group suits their tribe-reinforcing aims. This is often accomplished through the stirring up of conspiracy theories which constitute a core 'logic of populism' (Runciman, 2018, 65).

Importantly, the populist blame game does not work only on those with pre-existing populist attitudes. Busby, Gubler and Hawkins (2019) have investigated populist rhetoric in an online experimental setting. They found that asking U.S. respondents *who* (rather than *what*) was responsible for national difficulties primed populist responses and increased the inclination to vote for populist candidates. When problems are framed in what they call 'dispositional' terms that attribute political failures to individuals, respondents are more likely to have a populist response than when such problems are framed as 'situational.' Busby et al show that this tendency is in fact *strongest* for those respondents with the *weakest* underlying populist attitudes, suggesting the populist blame game can be effective in expanding populist vote shares.

4.2 The promise of certainty and appeal to common sense

We argue that populists exploit uncertainty by crafting simple messages and narratives that respond to the fear, anxiety, and anger that uncertainty induces in their followers. These messages may help voters make sense of otherwise disorienting events, or they may play on fears and anxieties to stir up anger. At the same time, the openness of the indeterminate future – the flipside of uncertainty – frees populists to promote imaginaries of a rosy future under their leadership or dystopias that would flow from 'elite' rule. Both types of imaginary can motivate their base without the possibility of incontrovertible and immediate refutation by sceptics.

Yet if uncertainty is the oil lubricating the populist machine, it does not feature as a major trope in populist discourse. Rather, populist narratives are normally designed

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as an *antidote* to uncertainty: they *promise* certain outcomes based on allegedly incontrovertible logic or ‘common sense’. They present a single over-arching theme, propose a single mission around which their followers can rally, and promote a unified identity for true believers. Populists rarely admit that the future – under their tutelage – would still be uncertain; nor do they allow for nuanced analysis of risks. So, for example, the Johnson-Cummings UK election campaign motto in 2019 of ‘Getting Brexit Done’ and ending ‘the dither and delay’ promised voters a route out of uncertainty that would end the need for further agonising over the decision of whether or not to leave the EU and finally allow the UK to ‘achieve its full potential’.

Similar promises of a purportedly certain course of action are a common populist trope. For example, linguistic analysis reveals a substantial rise in use of the term ‘vow’ in English-language media between 2015 and 2018. From a fairly steady frequency of 30-40 occurrences per million words between 2010-2015, usage of the term surged to nearly 60 per million by 2018.¹² A different linguistic measure – collocates – tracks the frequency with which the media uses certain other words in close conjunction with ‘vow.’ From 2010-19, ‘Trump’ is the second most frequent collocate, with nearly 7000, easily beating ‘wedding’ (#5) and ‘marriage’ (#10).¹³ Populist Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte had nearly 1600 collocates with ‘vow.’ During the same period, the more conventional-sounding Hillary Clinton had only 328 collates with ‘vow’ despite a longer period in executive-level politics as Secretary of State and then presidential candidate. Populists are more frequently credited in the media with making firm commitments. This perception mirrors usage from their verbatim campaign speeches: as candidates in 2015-16, Trump was roughly eight times as likely as Clinton to use the

¹² The source for data in this and the next paragraph – except in relation to the ECB – is the NOW corpus, which contains 9.8 billion words from the global English-speaking press.

¹³ The pattern is similar from June 2015 when Trump announced his candidacy. Over both periods, ‘Trump’ is the second most frequent collocate for ‘vow’ (both times trailing only ‘continue’).

terms 'promise' and 'deliver.' Clinton, meanwhile, was eighteen times more likely than Trump to use 'goal' and 'intend'.

Populists also avoid acknowledging uncertainty. Whereas a different corpus of 7.8 million words spoken by European Central Bank officials in public speeches since 1997 reveals 3,379 instances of the word 'uncertainty', Nigel Farage's entire career in the European Parliament appears to have generated just a single use of the word (in a speech after the 9/11 terror attacks). Ironically, this is the exact number of times – one – that an ECB official has used the term 'vow' in the relevant corpus. Analysis of over a half a million words from Trump's campaign speeches reveals not a single use of 'uncertain' or its derivatives. While central bank discourse readily recognises (by name) endemic uncertainty, populist discourse appears to ignore or even deny it.

Populist politicians are also well aware of the understandable tendency among voters to confuse correlation with causation, and they often exploit this with messaging that links their opponents' policies with the misfortunes plaguing their own base. Trump, for example, has often implied that increased immigration is to blame for the sharp rise in American deaths from opioids. Moreover, some populists can even help invert correlations in the public mind. For example, Di Carlo, Schulte-Cloos, and Saudelli (2018) show that Italian populist Matteo Salvini's relentless focus on migration has helped generate a widespread perception of migrant-driven crime in Italy – at a time when both overall crime and crime committed by migrants has steadily declined. In a different study, the Instituto Cattaneo (2018, 3) found that Italian respondents overestimated migrant presence in their country by a larger margin than anywhere else in Europe (the average *estimate* was 26% when the *actual* immigrant share was 9%).

At the same time, populists specialise in narratives that seek to counter the nuanced arguments of experts with direct appeals (via homely analogies) to the sound common sense of the ordinary person.¹⁴ So, for example, the Leave campaign in 2016 inoculated

14 Non-populists also use homely analogies, of course. For example, Angela Merkel's 'Schwabian housewife' is a stand-in justification for fiscal austerity.

voters to official warnings that Brexit would cost the economy billions as a result of lower GDP growth, with a focus on how useful saving the UK's net EU budget contribution of £10 billion pounds would be when invested in the NHS. This message was reiterated ad nauseam and accompanied by rhetoric about the lack of patriotism shown by those determined to run down the potential of 'the fifth largest economy in the world.'

4.3 The attack on experts, the media, and independent verification of facts

Populist rhetoric has also exacerbated the erosion of expert credibility. As we have seen, experts – especially economists – have often failed either to predict recent crises or to admit the limits of their profession's ability to forecast with precision the unknowable future. But this weakening of credibility has been complemented by two other trends that have further damaged the ability of expert knowledge to rein in the more fantastic elements of populist discourse. The first was predicted by Douglas (1992, 33), who noted that when science is used to arbitrate in political disputes about policy issues (or to determine blame) it risks losing 'its independent status'. Scientists using their models and forecasts to support or oppose a particular party agenda or policy platform are often accused of partisanship. This perception of bias is then magnified by the second trend – the tendency for populist campaigns directly to attack or belittle experts. There has been no more blatant case of this than Michael Gove's pronouncement in 2016 that British people 'have had enough of experts', who he accused of often coming from 'distant' and 'elitist' organisations whose members had done very well out of the EU.¹⁵

In some cases, populist politicians seek to avoid media scrutiny, intimidate the media, or dissuade them from engaging in critical coverage by retweeting online trolling of journalists or threatening to close down hostile elements of the media or review their

¹⁵ Michael Gove, Sky News, 3 June 2016. A recording of the key passage is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sz1_LHtfuCI

public licenses. In other cases, as seen almost daily with Trump's press briefings and tweets, populist leaders engage in pre-emptive strikes against the very outlets that are criticising the veracity of the populists' own statements by dubbing the media in turn as 'fake news'. The aim here is not in most cases to defend the truthfulness of the original statements but rather to feed a broader metanarrative that everyone is lying. In the swirl of claims and counter-claims, the public becomes understandably cynical about all claims to the truth. As Arendt (2008, 252) noted in her discussion of twentieth-century programmes of brainwashing, the danger here is not so much that voters will believe many of the lies they are told, but that they lose their 'bearings in the real world'.

When this point is reached, populists – already freed by the indeterminacy and unpredictability of the future from having their imaginaries constrained by uncontested facts about the future – are free to use any 'facts' they please to suit their argument, while relying on emotional appeal and rhetorical exaggeration.

Populists also appear exempt from the need for consistency. Michael Barber and Jeremy Pope (2019) show that candidate Trump had made both 'liberal' and 'conservative' statements on several issues, but such position-switching cost him little. Strong Republican or Trump-approving respondents were most likely to 'behave like party loyalists by accepting the Trump cue – in either a liberal or conservative direction' (Ibid., 38). Partisanship often moved respondents against their self-professed ideology.

4.4 Performativity and an arms race of rhetorical hyperbole

If populists are often free to invent 'facts', their appeal also rests on the assumption that their rhetorical vows can usher in a new reality to suit their followers.

Because the future is indeterminate and open, its shape can be heavily influenced by the contingent narratives guiding thought and behaviour. In a loose sense of the word, political narratives (and the imaginaries they articulate) are 'performative': from time

to time, they may succeed – if internalised by sufficient people – in structuring the future in their own image.¹⁶ Much more often, dominant narratives influence outcomes in ways that cannot be fully predicted but are still significant. By contrast, in the case of influential dystopias, the stories told may be ‘counter-performative’ (MacKenzie, 2006) – that is, they ensure that action is taken to avoid the imagined future. The performative and counter-performative impact of narratives makes them a vital tool in business, environmental campaigning, central banking, and everyday politics. As Runciman (2018, 83) notes, for example, the ‘disaster’ narrative developed by Rachel Carson in her famous book, *Silent Spring*, was enormously influential in spurring concrete action to ban DDT and safeguard fragile ecosystems in the 1960s.

Few would tar Carson – any more than modern central bankers using forward guidance to cajole investors’ expectations and behaviour – with the label of label of being ‘populist’. So, what differentiates their use of narratives from that, say, exemplified by Trump’s famously dystopian inaugural address in 2017? In one sense, the use of the term ‘populist’ is a normative judgment on the extent to which the rhetoric employed is designed to focus power on the speaker for their own partisan political ends rather than to further the public good. But this is hardly an entirely objective boundary condition for a definition of ‘populism’, since populist leaders will almost certainly define the public good as in line with their vision of the interests of the people they represent. A better answer returns to the idea that populist rhetoric is designed to appeal to – and further the interests of – the ‘good’ people at the expense of a ‘bad’ elite (for examples, see Müller, 2016; Mudde, 2018; Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2017).

Another way of determining whether a use of narrative is populist may be to focus on the degree of rhetorical hyperbole employed. Because narratives coordinate and influence behaviour, those competing for power or market dominance increasingly

¹⁶ This is analogous to the ‘performative’ role of financial and economic models in constituting the very logic of structured finance markets as analysed by Donald MacKenzie (2006).

engage in an arms race of rhetorical hyperbole: they compete to laud their own achievement in the most lavish language, while denigrating their opponents in extreme language as ‘traitors’, ‘crooks’, or ‘madmen’. The net effect, of course, is akin to a crowd where some people stand on tiptoe to get a better view and nobody sees any better. The battle for attention and effect is not easily won, but no player can afford to retreat to quiet civility if they want to be heard. In turn, this lends plausibility to the populist argument that all politics is an ugly business, with populists no worse than the rest.

4.5 Narrative coups

An extreme tool used by populist leaders in the past was to mount a military coup in the name of protecting the people. But, as Runciman (2018, 40) points out, ‘metaphorical coups’ are much more common nowadays. These include ‘executive aggrandisement’ (40) where leaders gradually subvert democratic institutions to consolidate power. In this paper, we add to the list of effective types of metaphorical coup with the concept of a ‘narrative coup’ – involving the *epistemic* rather than *institutional* takeover of a country or political party. A narrative coup takes place when a charismatic populist leader or campaign succeeds in capturing, reorienting, and subverting the sub-conscious conceptual grids and normative frames with which voters interpret events and construct the evidence needed to make decisions. Through an often ruthless and lengthy campaign of eliminating or crowding out competing discourses, such coups – when successful – insidiously alter the world views of a significant segment of the population to such an extent that they become incompatible and incommensurable with other world views. In this way, narrative coups eliminate the possibility of consensus and entrench a deep polarization of outlook. They enable leaders to induce a deep sense of anger and unease in their voting base and engineer grievances where none previously existed, as well as exploiting or exaggerating existing grievances to boost voter support.

The techniques employed in such narrative coups are not purely or even largely at the level of national-campaign rhetoric.¹⁷ Rather, populist parties and leaders orchestrate, encourage, or turn a blind eye to widespread and decentralized campaigns of misinformation.¹⁸ They also engage increasingly in the microtargeting (via social media) of a cocktail of different messages aimed at groups that are judged from web-data analytics and demographic data to be particularly susceptible to the image, idea, or language chosen. The result can be that the followers of a given leader or party are themselves divided in outlook and belief-set but all subject to a degree of cognitive manipulation.

5. Conclusion and remedies

This paper has examined the importance of the indeterminacy of modern capitalist economies – and the corresponding personal uncertainty, anxiety, and disorientation facing voters – in explaining their susceptibility to simple populist narratives that promise a return to better and more certain times. It has also examined how uncertainty and the tribal construction of facts help increase the efficacy of populist political techniques. Finally, the paper uses these ideas to help understand the geographic and demographic distribution of populist sentiments.

Using institutional checks to limit populist power may work in some settings, but populists have often proven willing and able to undo such safeguards and undermine

¹⁷ Trump's technique is unusual in depending largely on a personal mission to occupy a large section of the national new cycle on most days through a sustained campaign of often eye-catching tweets.

¹⁸ Emmanuel Macron was the victim in 2017 of a now classic piece of misinformation when misleadingly spliced images from two different occasions appeared to suggest that he washed his hands after shaking hands with some factory workers. In fact, he wiped his hands having handled an eel when meeting fishermen on an earlier occasion. For details, see: <https://observers.france24.com/en/20170427-debunked-macron-didn-immediately-wash-hands-after-meeting-workers>

their country's constitution for their own ends. Countering the populist turn will therefore require a range of efforts beyond institutional checks.

The themes raised here suggest that nations wanting to avoid or reverse the populist turn seen over the last fifteen years need to concentrate on five broad areas.

- First, they need to find ways either to limit uncertainty by reducing deregulation, innovation, or global integration or to ameliorate it through a combination of social insurance and increased investment in the sort of tertiary education and occupational skills that equip citizens to face uncertain futures with confidence.
- Part of limiting uncertainty is to avoid the sort of revolutionary policy change that leads to unforeseen consequences and makes voters more susceptible to populist narratives by increasing the indeterminacy of a socio-economic system. For this reason, we would support Karl Popper's call for 'piecemeal' social engineering that allows for a cautious experimental approach to policy reform and 'continuous readjustments' (Popper, 1945 [1962], 163). Piecemeal reform need not be conservative (Unger, 1987).
- The third priority is to bolster the role of politically neutral and science-based state- and civil-society organisations in gathering and disseminating information in order to provide some common frames of reference through which citizens can structure their policy debates (Lewis, 2018).
- Another imperative is to find non-exclusionary narratives of hope and reassurance framed in non-inflammatory language that can nevertheless inspire confidence, assuage anxieties, and engage the emotions of citizens in the project of building a more inclusive society. In conditions of uncertainty, emotions play too important a role in decision-making to be ignored by non-populist leaders.

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- Finally, political institutions, and cultures need to remember Plato's injunction that dialogue is a better route to the truth than rhetoric.

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