# Love, Fear, Anger:
# The Emotional Arc of Populist Rhetoric

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## Abstract

Why, at the present historical moment, are divisive nationalist narratives more powerful than inclusive ones seeking to advance transnational integration? This essay examines four case studies of "nationalist storytelling": the rhetoric of Nigel Farage's United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) during the Leave campaign leading up to the Brexit referendum of June 2016 in the United Kingdom, the 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump in the United States, the 2017 campaign of Geert Wilders' Freedom Party in the Netherlands, and the 2017 campaign of Marine Le Pen's National Front in France. In each of these countries, populist leaders have deployed rhetoric that traces a three-stage emotional arc, emphasizing love for the homeland, fear of the foreigner, and righteous anger against corrupt elites who have endangered the nation's well-being. The powerful emotional response aroused by this rhetoric has been a key factor in these movements' recent electoral success.

## Key Words

## Recommended Citation

## Introduction

According to *Washington Post* columnist Barton Swaim, one of the keys to Donald Trump's political success is his mastery of the conventions of "love language." Unlike Barack Obama, whose speeches during the eight years of his presidency often displayed the "detached academic" tone of "an art historian discoursing on the complexities of pre-Raphaelite symbolism," Trump "is always telling large groups he loves them. 'Win, lose or draw,' Trump said to a gathering just before the Iowa caucuses, 'I love you folks all. I love you all'" (Swaim, 2017).

The twin political earthquakes of 2016 on both sides of the Atlantic—Brexit and the election of President Donald Trump—have further undermined the already tottering architecture of global and regional governing institutions.  In a 2013 essay, Stewart Patrick observed that "demand for effective global governance continues to outstrip supply, and the gap is growing. Absent dramatic crises, multilateral institutions have been painfully slow and lumbering in their response (Patrick, 2013). As Thomas Weiss points out:

> Paradoxically, during most of the twentieth century when states actually could address or attenuate pressing problems, the idea of overarching authority and even world government at least remained on the fringes of acceptable analyses. Now, when states visibly cannot tackle an ever-growing number of life-threatening menaces, such authority is unimaginable; and world government is so beyond the pale that a proponent would be placed in an asylum. In fact, many observers look askance at and even deride the idea of more muscular intergovernmental organizations. (Weiss, 2014; see also Plesch & Weiss, 2015)

This essay seeks to illuminate the causes of Weiss's paradox. The contemporary world is confronting civilizational challenges of unprecedented complexity, which can only be addressed through creative and committed international cooperation. Yet, 25 years after the end of the Cold War, governments and political movements around the globe are retreating into threadbare, exclusionary ethnic and nationalist narratives forged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Why is this so? Why, at the present historical moment, are these divisive nationalist narratives more powerful than inclusive ones seeking to advance transnational integration?

This essay focuses on a single dimension of this complex problem, analyzing how the rhetorical structure of populist rhetoric contributes to its emotional appeal. We will examine four case studies of "nationalist storytelling": the rhetoric of Nigel Farage's United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) during the Leave campaign leading up to the June 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, the 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump in the United States, the 2017 campaign of Geert Wilders' Freedom Party in the Netherlands, and the 2017 campaign of Marine Le Pen's National Front in France. Although these four

movements have had mixed success in seizing the reins of national power, each of them has successfully moved its agenda from the fringes to the mainstream of national political discourse.

The sources discussed here include representative campaign speeches and advertisements, along with a few documents from pivotal political moments such as Trump's acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention and his inaugural address. The penultimate section of the essay moves from Trump's campaign to the first year of his presidency, analyzing his ambivalent statements about white supremacism following the riots in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017.

The paper focuses on case studies of right-wing populism in North America and Western Europe: it excludes Central and Eastern European populist movements including those in Germany and Hungary, as well as cases of left-wing European populism such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, along with movements in the global south such as those in the Philippines and Venezuela. But collectively, these four cases have had profound implications for the recent political evolution of the United States (US) and the European Union (EU). The hypotheses that are developed here about the emotional arc of populist rhetoric can be tested against other contemporary cases and sources.

As many scholars have pointed out, populism and nationalism are both "notoriously difficult to conceptualize" (Jansen, 2011, p. 76). A considerable overlap exists between the two phenomena: Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) assert that "populism can be merged completely with nationalism, when the distinction between the people and the elite is both moral and ethnic" (p. 14). In this essay, we will use the term populism to refer to the distinctive subspecies of nationalism that predominates in contemporary Western Europe and North America: it is principally defensive in character, focusing not on ambitions for territorial conquest but on the imperative to protect the integrity of the nation against external and internal threats.

Some have described populism as a "Manichean" ideology (Mudde, 2004, p. 544) or an "anti-politics" that "pits the people (and 'the will of the people') against those who claim to represent them" (Stoker & Hay, 2017, p. 7). For Margaret Canovan (1999), populism reflects the tension between a "redemptive" vision of democracy as the "rule by the people" and the "pragmatic" practices of compromise and institutionalized deal-making. For Cas Mudde (2010), right-wing populism comprises a set of ideas and attitudes such as "nativism" and "authoritarianism" that represent a "radical interpretation of mainstream values" (p. 1167, 1173-78). Others, such as Kenneth Minogue (1969) have remarked on the "intellectual emptiness of populist movements," arguing that populism does not "have an ideology in any serious sense, merely a rhetoric" (p. 208-209).

Our conceptual starting point in this essay is that populism must be understood both as a "discourse" (Laclau, 2005) and as a "mode of

political *practice*" (Jansen, 2011, p. 75). For Ernesto Laclau (2005), populism "'simplifies' the political space, replacing a complex set of differences and determinations by a stark dichotomy" between two antagonistic camps—the "people" and the powerful elites (Ibid., p. 18). Notably, the "people" is depicted as "something less than the totality of the members of the community: it is a partial component which nevertheless aspires to be conceived of as the only legitimate authority" (Ibid., p. 81). The existence of "antagonistic frontiers within the social and the appeal to new subjects of social change" (Ibid., p. 154) is integral to populism—and indeed, all political movements. The opposite of politics is "administration," in which "the community conceived as a totality, and the will representing that totality, become indistinguishable from each other . . . and the traces of social division disappear" (Laclau, 2015, p. 163).

A central feature of populist discourse, according to Laclau, is the "empty signifier," a concept or claim "that loses its own specificity as it stands in for the other specific demands to which it is seen as equivalent" (Beasley-Murray, 2006, p. 363-64). Empty signifiers—such as Argentinian populists' demands for the return of Perón or Donald Trump's promises to "make America great again"—serve to "unify a multiplicity of heterogeneous demands in equivalential chains" (Laclau, 2005, p. 154), thus preserving the cohesion of a political movement whose adherents may have divergent and conflicting material interests.

In other words, populism has no intrinsic ideological content; indeed it "embraces a range of diverse and often contradictory political beliefs." As Jon Beasley-Murray (2006) observes, "The distinctiveness of populism is that it gathers together disparate ideological positions or political demands, and stresses their equivalence in terms of a shared antagonism to a given instance of political power or authority" (p. 363).

As Robert Jansen (2011) observes, however, focusing solely on the discursive dimensions of populism is "overly simplistic" because it cannot be assumed that "ideas and subjectivities translate unproblematically into political action" (p. 80). Jansen proposes to move from analyzing "populism as a *thing*" to "populist mobilization as a *political project*." He defines such a project as one that "mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people" (Ibid., p. 82).

Arguing that "populist politics is about *leaders mobilizing supporters*" (Ibid., p. 85), Jansen emphasizes that the ideological content of populism is less important than its practices of political mobilization. Yet he has surprisingly little to say about the practical strategies by which populist leaders mobilize their followers. "[P]opulist rhetoric represents an attempt to forge a solidary 'people' through its rhetorical invocation" (Ibid., p. 84), he writes, and "the popular mobilization instantiates the populist rhetoric in a popular political project" (Ibid., p. 85). What factors determine whether the attempt to forge a "solidary people" succeeds or

fails? How does popular mobilization "instantiate" populist rhetoric and make a given political project popular?

This essay aims to illuminate the connection between discursive practices and populist political mobilization, exploring how certain distinctive rhetorical forms can motivate collective political action. In recent years, a growing number of social scientists have emphasized the role of emotions in human decision-making, acknowledging that "cognitive agreement alone does not result in action"; and that instead, "The 'strength' of an identity, even a cognitively vague one, comes from its emotional side" (Goodwin et al., 2001, p. 6, 9; see also Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008, p. 266).

Following what Ty Solomon (2016) has called the "affective turn" in international relations theory, we will explore how populist narratives inspire collective fantasies expressing the desire for "fullness" (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008, p. 261; see also Solomon, 2014; Eberle, 2017; Polletta, 2009). These narratives often take the form of "mythic histories" that utilize a three-part plot including descriptions of "a glorious past, a degraded present, and a utopian future" (Levinger, 2013, p. 123). By articulating "highly stylized and exaggerated visions of the nation's past, present, and future conditions," such mythic histories create "emotional tension that can be used to mobilize the participants in the movement to avenge the nation's suffering" (Ibid; see also Levinger & Lytle, 2001).

We will begin with an examination of the fundamental plot line of these nationalist narratives, focusing on similarities and distinctions among the British, American, Dutch, and French cases, and then proceed to examine the implications of these narratives for the mobilization of populist movements. In each of these countries, populist leaders have deployed rhetoric that traces a three-stage emotional arc, emphasizing **love** *of the insider,* **fear** *of the outsider,* and **anger** *against corrupt elites* who have betrayed the interests of the nation.

The rhetoric of love reinforces emotional bonds among the members of the national in-group; the rhetoric of fear and anger demarcates clear boundaries between the authentic national community and its enemies, both external and internal. The powerful emotional response aroused by this rhetoric has been a key factor in these movements' recent electoral success. Yet populist narratives also reinforce rigid identities that, ironically, are poorly adapted to managing and responding to the volatile social conditions in which these narratives thrive.

## Love

A February 2017 television ad for the Dutch Freedom Party displayed images of a traditional windmill and children skating on a frozen canal as Geert Wilders solemnly intoned:

> The Netherlands: A magnificent country!
> The land of our ancestors,

A land that generations have turned from swamps into a miracle.
The only country that we have
It is our only homeland: the Netherlands.
A flag that stands for freedom;
It is the symbol of our independence.
It's a flag that says: We are the masters of our own future!
(Wilders, 2017)

For Wilders, freedom is a core value "that is precisely what makes our country great." On trial for hate speech in November 2016, he declared:

Our ancestors fought for freedom and democracy. They suffered, many gave their lives. We owe our freedoms and the rule of law to these heroes. . . . From the freedom fighters for our independence in the Golden Age to the resistance heroes in World War II. I ask you: Stand in their tradition. Stand for freedom of expression. (Wilders, 2016)

Across the channel, Brexit proponents hailed the advent of the United Kingdom's "independence day." Speaking in the seaside town of Grimsby, England in 2015, UKIP Leader Nigel Farage declared that "Grimsby used to be great," before its fishing industry was destroyed by the ham-fisted regulations of the European Union. "Believe in Britain," read the backdrop on the stage. "Please do not misunderstand me," said Farage. "I am not against Europe or the European nations or the European people. Far from it—it's a great place to go on holiday" (Farage, 2015).

Farage was hardly the only proponent of Brexit to assert that love of Britain was compatible with commitment to cosmopolitan values. "I am a child of Europe," declared London mayor Boris Johnson in a May 2016 opinion piece. "I find it offensive and insulting, irrelevant and positively cretinous to be told—sometimes by people who can barely speak a foreign language—that I belong to a group of small-minded xenophobes; because the truth is it is Brexit that is now the great project of European liberalism" (Johnson, 2016). Michael Gove, the British Secretary of State for Justice, echoed Johnson's sentiments:

The United Kingdom has played a distinguished global role in the past as an upholder and defender of liberal democratic values— all the while doing so as an independent democratic nation state. . . . Our ability to present a united front across the West in defense of liberalism and democracy is currently vitiated and undermined by the operation of the EU and its institutions. (Raab & Gove, 2016)

Like the proponents of Brexit in the UK, Marine Le Pen has emphasized the connection between nationalism and universal freedom. Le Pen (2016; 2017) cites Descartes, Voltaire, Balzac, Proust, the French revolutionaries; she waxes eloquent over the antiquated village centers of provincial France, "the little habits of everyday life, the pleasant

rituals . . . , the families that animate the streets of our towns" (Le Pen, 2017).

France, Le Pen declares, is "an old and a great civilization":

> There was a time . . . when all the elites spoke French . . . A time when France was the beacon of liberty. A time when all the oppressed of the world saw in France the symbol of the struggle against tyranny. A time when France abolished slavery, before all other nations. A time when it was declared in French . . . , "All men are born and remain free and equal in rights." France was the civilization of liberty and reason. (Le Pen, 2016)

Le Pen decries the "censors of greatness" who dismiss this legacy as a "retrospective illusion," who see only France "defeated in war, France subjected to powers who defile its name" (Ibid.). These critics are victims of "self-hatred" in whose hands the "national romance" has "become a nightmare." In the coming election, France has an opportunity to "rediscover that which has made us powerful, and to stop complaining of our pretended decadence":

> 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! (Ibid.)

Of the political figures under consideration in this essay, Marine Le Pen is the most eloquent historian; Donald Trump is the least. The most jarring aspect of Trump's rhetoric is his omission of references to historical national glories. His speeches begin in pain, skipping over any detailed description of the "great" American past to which he promises to return his people. In his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention of July 2016, he opened by promising to "lead our country back to safety, prosperity, and peace," then jumped straight into a litany of horrors:

> Our Convention occurs at a moment of crisis for our nation. The attacks on our police, and the terrorism in our cities, threaten our very way of life. Any politician who does not grasp this danger is not fit to lead our country. Americans watching this address tonight have seen the recent images of violence in our streets and the chaos in our communities. (Trump, 2016)

Trump's sensibility is ahistorical: he professes to love the suffering citizens of blue-collar America, but provides only the vaguest sketch of the better times that came before:

> I have visited the laid-off factory workers, and the communities crushed by our horrible and unfair trade deals. . . . I have embraced crying mothers who have lost their children because our politicians put their personal agendas before the national

good. . . . America is a nation of believers, dreamers, and strivers that is being led by a group of censors, critics, and cynics. . . . History is watching us now. It's waiting to see if we will rise to the occasion, and if we will show the whole world that America is still free and independent and strong. (Ibid.)

His opponent, observes Trump, asks her supporters to recite a three-word "loyalty pledge" that reads "I'm with her." Trump has a different pledge, which emphasizes his fierce devotion to his followers:

My pledge reads: "I'M WITH YOU – THE AMERICAN PEOPLE."
I am your voice.
So to every parent who dreams for their child, and every child who dreams for their future, I say these words to you tonight: I'm With You, and I will fight for you, and I will win for you. (Ibid.)

## Fear

In an April 2016 UKIP television ad, Nigel Farage does not mince words. Speaking from the floor of the European Parliament, he declares:

There is a real and genuine threat. When ISIS say they want to flood our continent with half a million Islamic extremists they mean it. . . . I fear we face a direct threat to our civilization if we allow large numbers of people from that war-torn region into Europe. (UKIP, 2016)

As Farage speaks, headlines from *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mail* flash across the screen: "NATO commander: ISIS 'spreading like cancer' among refugees"; "Europol boss warns huge numbers of terrorists have slipped back into European capitals" (Ibid.).

For Wilders' Freedom Party in the Netherlands, the threat is not only terrorists but also economic migrants: "The floodgates are wide open! Our borders have been completely abolished! . . . By the end of this century, the population in Africa will quadruple from one to four billion. Many of them will of course come here." On the TV screen, a crowd of migrants walks along a North African shore, stray dogs frolicking in their midst. A map shows seven animated red arrows traversing the Mediterranean Sea from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, up through Spain, France, and Italy, and converging on the Netherlands (Wilders, 2017).

At a March 2017 election rally for the National Front, Marine Le Pen sounds a clarion call:

Let us look things in the face: the hell of certain suburbs, under the grip of drug traffickers and Islamists and often both; the explosion of burglaries in the countryside . . . ; the continual robberies targeting the same shop two, five, ten times . . . ; not to mention, of course, terrorist attacks. In a country where the insecurity of everyday life is clashing with the barbarity of

Islamic terrorism, it is urgent to reestablish order! (Le Pen, 2017)

For Donald Trump (2015), "The U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems." In his Presidential campaign announcement of June 2015, he voiced all of the grievances that would empower his drive to the presidency: Mexico sends "rapists" to America, the Chinese and Japanese "kill us" in trade deals, "Islamic terrorism is eating up large portions of the Middle East," and "ISIS has the oil" (Trump, 2015). In his inaugural address of January 2017, he lamented the "American carnage" of "mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation" (Trump, 2017a).

According to many commentators, xenophobia represents the beating heart of the populist message. The Venezuelan economist Andrés Miguel Rondón (2017) argues that "modern populism in the vein of Trump and Chávez" offers a simple answer to those asking about the reasons for their suffering: "I suffer because of *them*."

But fear of foreigners alone is not enough to propel a sustainable political movement. Rather, this fear must be embedded within a stable and coherent *narrative* about the national community. Such narratives include "mythic histories," with a vividly defined past, present, and future; with heroes and villains; with clarity of national purpose and destiny (Levinger & Lytle, 2001; Levinger, 2013).

Populist movements that lack such grand narratives are likely to have limited electoral success. Geert Wilders' Freedom Party, whose rhetoric focused mainly on fear of marauding Moroccans, won only 13.1% of the popular vote in the March 2017 Dutch election (Economist, 2017). Le Pen, who praised the majestic sweep of French civilization and concluded her rallies with the Marseillaise, garnered 21.3% in the French presidential election of April 2017, and 34.2% in the run-off against Emmanuel Macron the following month (Financial Times, 2017).

Narrative coherence does not require that the details of the stories remain the same. For Donald Trump, the Chinese might be our enemies one month and our allies the next; Russia might move from ally to enemy; the Wall may become metaphorical rather than literal. But despite these dizzying changes, the overarching plotline does not waver: America was great in the past, it now faces grave threats, and under Trump's leadership it will vanquish these threats and achieve greatness once again.

**Anger**

Donald Trump's America is the dystopian world of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008). Like the novel's heroine Katniss Everdeen, daughter of the downtrodden coal-mining community of District Twelve, Trump burns

with anger at the corrupt elites of the Capital who exploit others for their own frivolous delights. In his Inaugural Address, he declared:

> For too long, a small group in our nation's capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered, but the jobs left, and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself but not the citizens of our country. . . . And while they celebrated in our nation's capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land. (Trump, 2017a)

A common theme of populist rhetoric is resentment against self-serving elites who have betrayed the interests of the nation. This feeling can take several forms. It may involve resentment at the loss of *control* over the national destiny. For Le Pen, unaccountable EU bureaucrats have unleashed a flood of immigrants on France, and "nothing will stop the system that wants always more immigration, the European Commission going so far as to threaten a fine of 250,000 Euros for each migrant refused" (Le Pen, 2017).

For Farage, speaking at Grimsby in 2015, the adoption of the EU Common Fisheries policy meant that "we are now allowed to catch less than 20% of the fish that swim in British waters, the other 80% we've given away to the rest of Europe," with devastating effects on the town's economic well-being (Farage, 2015). Farage laments the rise of "a political class that has become so politically correct that it is so bound up in our membership in the European Union that it doesn't actually believe that we should put the interests of this country and the people of this country first, and I say, 'Shame on them'" (Ibid.).

There is also resentment over the loss of *livelihoods*. According to Farage:

> The beneficiaries [of EU membership] have been the rich, the beneficiaries have been the big businesses, the beneficiaries have been the big landowners, and we're told on the television that this is a good thing because the Gross Domestic Product of our country has risen. Well, what is the point of the GDP rising if living conditions for ordinary families have gone down? Something must be done. (Ibid.)

Finally, there is resentment over the loss of *integrity* of the national culture. Mexicans have flooded the United States; Muslims have overwhelmed France and the Netherlands. As Geert Wilders proclaimed in defending himself against the charge of hate speech at his November 2016 trial:

> If we can no longer honestly address problems in the Netherlands, if we are no longer allowed to use the word "alien," if we, Dutch, are suddenly racists because we want Black Pete to remain black, if we only go unpunished if we want more

Moroccans or else are dragged before a criminal court, if we sell out our hard-won freedom of expression, if we use the courts to silence an opposition politician, who threatens to become Prime Minister, then this beautiful country will be doomed. That is unacceptable, because we are Dutch and this is our country. (Wilders, 2016)

The juxtaposition of the three rhetorical building blocks of love, fear, and righteous anger serves as a powerful tool for political mobilization. In effect, the nation is being besieged from without and betrayed from within. Something must be done, and the people's champion—whether Farage, Wilders, Le Pen, or Trump—is the one to do it.

## The Triumph of Antagonism over Administration

Laclau (2015) notes the existence of two dominant modes of governance in the modern world: politics and administration. In administration, the communal will is conceived as the will of the totality and "the traces of social division disappear" (Ibid., p. 163). In politics—whose most pointed form is populism—the "people" is viewed as a partial component of the community "which nevertheless aspires to be conceived of as the only legitimate authority" (2005, p. 81). Thus, the existence of "antagonistic frontiers within the social" (Ibid., p. 154) is an integral feature of populism, and of political life in general.

The recent rise of populism in many regions of the world must be understood, first and foremost, as a backlash against administration. In part, this phenomenon reflects the profound socioeconomic and cultural disruptions that have wracked the globe in recent years. As the U.S. National Intelligence Council (2017) has observed, "the period of the greatest globalization of the world economy," from 1988 to 2008, "brought relatively little gain to the top third of the world's households apart from the very wealthiest" (p. 13).

The stagnation of working-class and middle-class income across much of the industrialized world has undermined perceptions of social equity and fairness, lending credence to the sense of antagonism between the interests of the people and the elites. Over the past decade, the traumatic effects of the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, the dissension within the European Union over the fiscal calamities in Southern Europe, and the massive immigration flows from the Middle East and North Africa have further eroded public faith in the ability of regional and global administrative institutions to maintain security and prosperity.

Yet, it is essential to recognize that the ways in which individuals have experienced these disruptive global events have been shaped by the shared narratives through which events have been interpreted. As economic and political crises have proliferated in recent years, national and international administrators have largely abdicated their role as

public storytellers. The exponents of antagonism, by contrast, have enthusiastically jumped into the narrative fray.

As the case studies discussed above have illustrated, populist rhetoric begins with an act of boundary drawing, which divides the true members of the nation from both internal and external foes. Such rhetoric strengthens the sense of identity within the national community, making boundaries around the community salient and actionable.

The internal foes, as Jansen (2011) writes, are the "anti-popular elite" who exist in an "antagonistic vertical relationship" (p. 84) with the unified and virtuous people. The insistence on the immorality of the elite "is instrumental to the rhetorical project of elevating the moral worth of—and collapsing competing distinctions within the category of—'the people'" (p. 84). The elites include unaccountable EU bureaucrats, "politically correct" politicians who don't believe that "we should put the interests of this country and the people of this country first" (Farage, 2015) and cultural scolds who denounce Dutch traditions and always "want more Moroccans" (Wilders, 2016).

The external foes are legion: all four of the orators discussed in this essay use lavish and extravagant prose to describe the threats to the nation from outsiders. According to Trump, America is besieged by Mexican rapists, by Muslim terrorists, by cop-killing criminals. For Wilders (2017), "our borders have been completely abolished" and "the floodgates are wide open"—a terrifying prospect for a country in which one-quarter of the land is below sea level. Farage also uses the flood metaphor to warn of "half a million Islamic extremists" dispatched by ISIS to wreak havoc throughout Europe (UKIP, 2016).

Le Pen (2017) denounces the unholy alliance of drug traffickers, terrorists, and common criminals who have shaken the foundations of French society and culture. For all four orators, it is more important to paint a vivid picture than a factually accurate one. For example, Trump (2016) warns of "violence in our streets" and "chaos in our communities" at a time when levels of violent crime in American cities are low by historical standards. Populist narratives frame socioeconomic and cultural grievances in the starkest terms, fanning the flames of what Catarina Kinnvall (2004) calls the "existential anxiety" provoked by rapid globalization (p. 747).

But the fear of foreign enemies and anger against domestic elites are not in themselves sufficient to empower populist movements. In Jansen's words, populist rhetoric also "posits the natural social unity and inherent virtuousness of the 'people'" (2011, p. 84). All of the four case studies discussed in this paper support this point, along with Laclau's contention that the form of populist discourse is more important than its specific ideological content. Trump's promise to "make America great again," Farage's and Wilders' pledges to restore their nations' freedom and independence, and Le Pen's laments about France's lost glory can be seen as "empty signifiers" that "downplay differences and emphasize

similarities" (Jansen, 2017, p. 84) within the national community, thus giving coherence to an eclectic and ambiguous political program.

One hypothesis posited in this essay, which requires more systematic exploration, is that the success of a populist movement depends on the skillfulness of its leaders in manipulating the language of love. We have suggested that Geert Wilders' poor showing at the polls in March 2017 resulted in part from his over-reliance on the rhetoric of fear, and his failure to depict a compelling vision of a harmonious Dutch national community. Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen, by contrast, have both vigorously addressed the sources of national greatness. Le Pen has oriented her rhetoric toward celebrating France's glorious past, whereas Trump focuses principally on America's utopian future. Further case studies would be useful in order to test this hypothesis. For example, it would be interesting to compare Le Pen's use of "love language" to that of her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who never successfully broke through to mainstream political success in France.

## The Greatest of These is Love

Much of the scholarly literature on populism analyzes the beliefs and discourses that undergird populist movements. This essay focuses on the emotions associated with these beliefs and discourses, and on how words can move people to action by triggering powerful emotional responses. Social movement theory often discounts the catalytic role of shared emotions in mobilizing collective action. As Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001) observe, social scientists frequently "portray humans as rational and instrumental, traits which are oddly assumed to preclude any emotions. . . . Somehow, academic observers have managed to ignore the swirl of passions all around them in political life" (p. 1).

To borrow the psychoanalytic terminology of Jacques Lacan, populist narratives tap into primal fantasies offering "the imaginary promise of recapturing our lost/impossible enjoyment" (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008, p. 261). As illustrated above, such narratives combine dark fantasies of "chaos in our communities" with bright ones promising the restoration of communal harmony and happiness. This section of the paper examines one further case study, focusing on President Trump's responses to the violence in Charlottesville, Virginia that occurred during the August 2017 protests against the planned removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. This case will help illuminate how populist leaders can utilize expressions of love, fear, and anger in order to mobilize support and to recast the cultural identities of their followers.

Trump's initial response to the violence in Charlottesville, which had resulted in three deaths and more than 30 injuries, was widely panned by Democratic and Republican leaders alike. Rather than clearly blaming the Neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klan, and other white supremacist organizations that had provoked the violence, Trump (2017b) drew an equivalency between

these groups and the counter-protestors, saying: "We condemn in the strongest possible terms the egregious display of hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides."

Two days later, he responded to the criticism of his initial remarks with a prepared statement declaring that "racism is evil" and denouncing "the KKK, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other hate groups that are repugnant to everything we hold dear as Americans" (Trump, 2017c). Yet, in an August 15 press conference at Trump Tower in New York, three days after the violence, as well as at a rally in Arizona the following week, Trump reversed course once again, declaring that there had been "a lot of bad people" on both sides in Charlottesville (Trump, 2017d) and that there were "plenty of anarchists" in "helmets and black masks" who protested against his own rallies, "and they've got clubs and they've got everything" (Time Magazine, 2017).

The President's equivocations about who was to blame for the Charlottesville violence provoked not only bipartisan outrage, but also bafflement over his meandering stream-of-consciousness approach to these statements. The news network CNBC called his Trump Tower news conference "jaw-dropping" (Trump, 2017d); *Time Magazine* (2017) dismissed the Phoenix rally as a 77-minute "rant." What was almost entirely absent from mainstream news coverage of Trump's speeches on this topic, however, was any discussion of the President's expressions of love for America and its people.

Trump's initial statement condemning "violence on many sides" devoted only about 70 words (four sentences) to denouncing "hatred and division," whereas he spent more than 180 words (nearly a third of the 574-word speech) praising the "sacred bonds of loyalty between this nation and its citizens" (Trump, 2017b). Part of his statement focused on specific praiseworthy institutions such as "state and local police," whom he termed "incredible people," and "federal authorities" who were providing "tremendous support to the governor." But the bulk of his love language was broader and more philosophical in tone:

> We have to come together as Americans with love for our nation and true affection—really, I say this so strongly, true affection for each other. . .  Above all else, we must remember this truth: No matter our color, creed, religion or political party, we are all Americans first. We love our country. We love our god. We love our flag. We're proud of our country. We're proud of who we are. (Ibid.)

In the 600-word prepared statement of August 14 (2017c), Trump's rhetoric struck a balance between denunciations of hatred and expressions of love. He spent about 160 words decrying "those who spread violence in the name of bigotry" and the deaths that they had caused, while he devoted about 240 words to mourning the victims and praising the American spirit:

> We will spare no resource in fighting so that every American child can grow up free from violence and fear. We will defend and protect the sacred rights of all Americans, and we will work together so that every citizen in this blessed land is free to follow their dreams in their hearts, and to express the love and joy in their souls. (Ibid.)

While the themes of fear and anger were largely absent from Trump's first two statements on Charlottesville, they returned with a vengeance during his August 15 press conference and his August 23 rally. His appeals to fear focused on the dangers posed by immigrant gangs and the anarchist "alt left":

> What about the alt left that came charging at, as you say, at the alt right? Do they have any assemblage of guilt? What about the fact that they came charging with clubs in their hands swinging clubs? . . . You had a group on the other side that came charging in without a permit and they were very, very violent. (Trump, 2017d)

His expressions of anger focused principally on "obstructionist Democrats" who are "putting all of America's safety at risk" (Time Magazine, 2017) by opposing the building of a border wall, and on the distortions and lies promulgated by the media elite: "If you want to discover the source of the division in our country, look no further than the fake news and the crooked media" (Ibid.).

Yet even in the 77-minute Arizona rally "rant," love was one of the dominant themes. Trump devoted about 1,500 words (more than one-sixth of the 8,600-word speech) to expressing love for "hard-working American patriots," "brave American soldiers," the patriotic former Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio, a crusader against illegal immigration who Trump claimed had been unjustly convicted of criminal contempt for "doing his job," and "all the people of our country" (Ibid.). His paeans to American greatness consumed most of the opening 600 words and the concluding 400 words of the speech. In the middle of the speech, Trump spent another roughly 1,400 words expressing his anger at his opponents, including the "truly dishonest" and "sick" journalists who were "fomenting division" and "trying to take away our history and heritage" (Ibid.).

Strikingly, the theme of fear was less fully developed in the Arizona speech, consuming about 1,000 words—though Trump's rhetoric on this subject was vivid. He warned of "radical Islamic terrorists," of "drug dealers and the criminals who prey on our people," of "gang violence on our streets" caused by "animals" from MS-13 who "cut [people] up into little pieces," and of "other countries" that "close our factories, steal our jobs, and drain our wealth" (Ibid.).

As Goodwin et al. (2001) point out, "The construction of friends and foes . . . is crucial to politics. What could be more emotional? Negative

emotions must be aroused against enemies, positive ones toward potential allies" (p. 23-24). Even the most disordered of Trump's speeches display a rhetorical structure that serves to reshape collective identities by performing two simultaneous tasks: first, to sharpen and narrow the boundaries surrounding the American community; and second, to celebrate the harmony and joy prevailing within "our beloved nation" (Time Magazine, 2017).

## Conclusion

Narratives about the need to protect an imperiled national community offer a compelling formula for stabilizing identities threatened by ever-accelerating technological, socioeconomic, and cultural change. Yet, by reinforcing perceptions that the nation confronts overwhelming threats, such narratives tend to lock in place rigid and defensive patterns of political behavior, blocking the ability to find creative and adaptive approaches to addressing new challenges.

Proponents of robust international cooperation, who seek to counter the seductive fear-based rhetoric of contemporary populism, confront serious narrative challenges. By definition, international cooperation involves transcending boundaries and intergroup antagonisms rather than reinforcing them. But, as Laclau (2015) observes, antagonism is an essential component of all political struggle. In a sense, internationalism is intrinsically "administrative" rather than "political" in nature because it "erases social differences" instead of accentuating them (p. 163).

Yet it is also important to recognize that fear has its limits as a tool for political mobilization. Xenophobic rhetoric is inherently divisive, which means that it provokes powerful opposition. In light of the global turmoil of our current era, the relative *weakness* of populist movements is perhaps more surprising than their strength. In the most recent national elections, 87% of Dutch voters rejected Wilders' Freedom Party, 66% of the French electorate voted against Le Pen, and 54% of American voters opted for a candidate other than Donald Trump (CNN, 2017).

Although the Leave campaign won a narrow majority in the Brexit referendum, it probably owed its success as much to the cosmopolitan reassurances of figures like Boris Johnson and Michael Gove as to the firebrand immigrant-bashing of Nigel Farage. Nor did the triumph of the Leave campaign portend enduring electoral success for the UKIP, whose percentage of the national vote plummeted from 12.6% in 2015 to 1.8% in the June 2017 British parliamentary elections (The Guardian, 2017).

The central argument of this paper is that successful politics and governance, whether populist or internationalist, relies on telling coherent stories that resonate emotionally with their audiences. But advocates of internationalism should go light on the fear and heavy on the love.

One of the most creative political orators in the contemporary world, who is seeking to strengthen the emotional appeal of transnational institutions, is French President Emmanuel Macron. In France during the days leading up to the April 2017 election, Macron made a pilgrimage to the village in the Pyrenees where he had spent childhood vacations with his grandmother, "whom I loved so much" (Rubin, 2017). This journey was intended to reinforce his connection to a "*terroir*"—a sense of place in geography and history—with which French voters could identify.

At a rally in Pau that evening, Macron declared: "It was she and my grandfather who for years and years led me to live in Bagnères-de-Bigorre, to walk there, to run there, to learn how to bicycle, to ski, to be rooted in our country" (Ibid.). As Kinnvall (2004) observes, such rhetoric about one's ancestral homeland can appeal to those who are unsettled by the disruptive forces of globalization: "The very category of 'home' as a bearer of security can be found in its ability to link together a material environment with a deeply emotional set of meanings relating to permanence and continuity" (p. 747).

During the 2016 election campaign, Hillary Clinton also sought to convey her love for America and its people. In her eloquent acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in July, she proclaimed:

> Our Founders embraced the enduring truth that we are stronger together. America is once again at a moment of reckoning. Powerful forces are threatening to pull us apart. Bonds of trust and respect are fraying. And just as with our founders, there are no guarantees. It truly is up to us. We have to decide whether we all will work together so we all can rise together. Our country's motto is *e pluribus unum*: out of many, we are one. Will we stay true to that motto? (Clinton, 2017)

But, as Trump had astutely noted in his own Convention acceptance speech, Clinton undercut her message of "Stronger Together" by adopting the slogan "I'm with her"—rather than "I'm with you." Throughout the campaign, Trump hammered away at the message that both Hillary and Bill Clinton were self-serving and corrupt—that they cared more about their personal wealth and political power than about the well-being of the American people.

In politics, substance and symbols are intertwined, and reasoned arguments win votes only when they resonate emotionally with their audiences. The challenge for proponents of international institution building is to find stories that engage their critics on the emotional as well as the rational terrain. Such narratives need not rely on the exploitative power of fear, but they do need to reinforce the coherence of the larger human community, strengthening its members' sense of shared history, rituals, and destiny. Although better storytelling alone will not enable internationalists to carry their cause, it is an essential place to start.

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