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Leadership in a post-truth era: A new narrative disorder?

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Abstract

This essay, and the special issue it introduces, seeks to explore leadership in a post-truth age, focusing in particular on the types of narratives and counter-narratives that characterize it and at times dominate it. We first examine the factors that are often held responsible for the rise of post-truth in politics, including the rise of relativist and postmodernist ideas, dishonest leaders and bullshit artists, the digital revolution and social media, the 2008 economic crisis and collapse of public trust. We develop the idea that different historical periods are characterized by specific narrative ecologies which, by analogy to natural ecologies, can be viewed as spaces where different types of narrative and counter-narrative emerge, interact, compete, adapt, develop and die. We single out some of the dominant narrative types that characterize post-truth narrative ecologies and highlight the ability of language to 'do things with words' that support both the production of 'fake news' and a type of narcissistic leadership that thrive in these narrative ecologies. We then examine more widely leadership in post-truth politics focusing on the resurgence of populist and demagogical types along with the narratives that have made these types highly effective in our times. These include nostalgic narratives idealizing a fictional past and conspiracy theories aimed at arousing fears about a dangerous future.

Keywords: post-truth, narratives, counter-narratives, populism, narrative ecologies, nostalgia, conspiracy theories

The word 'post-truth' has become one of the most frequently used but least well defined memes of our time. There is little agreement on whether post-truth is something completely new or something that has always been with us. In the last few years, we have witnessed the emergence of political leaders and political campaigns that secured unexpected and resounding victories by relying on half-truths, lies, innuendoes and empty verbiage. These victories have given rise to the idea that we live in a post-truth era where truth does not have ultimate authority. What is more, it is argued that the boundaries between truth and lies, honesty and dishonesty, fiction and nonfiction have become blurred (Ball, 2017; d'Ancona, 2017; Davis, 2017; Keyes, 2016).

The term post-truth was formally recognized and further popularized when the Oxford English Dictionary announced it as their word of the year in 2016, defining it as 'circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'. However, this brief definition raises more questions than answers. Was there ever a time when appeal to emotion was less significant than objective facts? People have always invented myths and stories to bring meaning into their lives, and so too have leaders who use narratives and rhetoric to stir the emotions of their audiences. So can post-truth be seen as an entirely new phenomenon?

Several commentators argue that even though certain features of post-truth were prefigured in earlier eras, a combination of different factors has shaped a new set of circumstances in our times which justify its designation as a post-truth era. Others are more skeptical, arguing that various elites, through the press and mass media, have always shaped public agendas by editing down, channeling, selecting or even censoring the stories that reach the public. As a journalist, Matt Taibbi puts it in his interview with Noam Chomsky: 'It is like the parable of Kafka's gatekeeper, guarding a door to the truth that was built just for you' (Taibbi, 2018). Often performed in tacit collusion with powerful think tanks, lobbies or even the elected representatives, such strategies have been deployed to manufacture dissent about issues that are comparatively unimportant in order to prevent real dissent about issues that matter. The Brexit Referendum in the UK, for instance, may be seen not as a terrain for competition among alternative untruths, but as a vehicle for misplacing legitimate anxieties about rising inequalities and reduced opportunities into a meaningless slogan

of taking 'back control'. The slogan of taking back control became a proxy for regaining a sovereignty that was never forfeited in the first place. This raises the question of our own role as academic knowledge producers and of our distinct contribution to such debates.

As organizational scholars, we believe that a great deal is at stake, depending on our understanding of post-truth and the types of leadership it may spawn - for example, populist, irrational, inflammatory, confrontational, scapegoating and with scant respect for facts or the opinions of scientists and experts. If we lose all faith in facts and their appraisal, issues like climate change, migration, war and poverty are reduced to arenas of mere opinion (with everyone entitled to their own set of 'alternative facts'). The consequences may be far-reaching. Besides the debate on the novelty of post-truth, it is important to understand whether, why and how people respond to post-truth politics, distortions and other forms of misinformation and what, if anything, can be done about it.

The purpose of this special issue is to explore critically leadership in a post-truth age, focusing in particular on the types of narratives and counter-narratives that characterize it and at times dominate it. This introduction starts by examining the combination of factors that are often held responsible for the rise of post-truth in politics. We single out five broad categories of causes that feature consistently in commentaries on post-truth: epistemological changes (postmodernism), dishonest leaders and bullshit artists, digital revolution and information technology, economic crisis and collapse of public trust and, finally, human psychology. We then develop the idea that different historical periods are characterized by specific narrative ecologies which, by analogy to natural ecologies, can be viewed as spaces where different types of narrative and counter-narrative emerge, interact, compete, adapt, develop and die. We single out some of the dominant narrative types that characterize post-truth politics and highlight the ability of language to 'do things with words' that support both the production of 'fake news' and a type of narcissistic leadership that thrive in these narrative ecologies. We then examine more widely leadership in post-truth politics focusing on the resurgence of populist and demagogical types along with the narratives that have made these types highly effective in our times.

Post-truth: How did it come about?

Numerous factors have been linked to the rise of post-truth as a defining cultural and political phenomenon of our times. Many writers have traced the emergence of post-truth to the rise of relativism and postmodernism in the late 20th century (Gardner, 2011; D'Ancona, 2017) and the epistemological challenges they set for faith in absolute truths (including 'scientific ones') and objective facts. We are now more likely to hold contradictory views about the world and adopt relativistic opinions, in part due to increased contact with people from different cultures who hold vastly different views from our own. Postmodernism in academia has unveiled the role of power in sustaining different 'regimes of truth', often in discreet and invisible ways. But Mair (2017), and others, have argued that the spread of postmodernist ideas in the general publics has shaken people's faith in objective facts and created a setting in which terms such as 'alternative facts' are legitimated. Postmodernism is held accountable for normalizing relativist views where lies can be excused as "alternative points of view" or "legitimate opinions", because "it's all relative" and "everyone has their own truth" (Pomerantsev, 2016). Postmodernist thinking gave voice to marginalized and powerless groups in society who were able to claim, with justification, that their experiences had been drowned by the established mainstream. However, when deployed or highjacked by powerful elites postmodernist thinking has enabled them to challenge or dismiss inconvenient facts and theories, whether these concern climate change, migration or economic development.

Furthermore, postmodern narratives can be exploited in another way by appropriating the rightful struggles of historically marginalized constituencies (e.g. women, people of colour, LGBT) to subtly undermine them while speaking in their name. In the political arena, this is manifested in the much derided identity politics. The backlash against the redressing of injustices, however modest, is associated with the neoliberal global elite project. This gives rise to illiberal populist forces across the Western world but more specifically in the USA and Eastern Europe (European Parliament, 2018). The concept of 'gender ideology' has become a metaphor and kind of social glue for expressing insecurity and unfairness produced by the current socioeconomic order (Grzebalska et al. 2017). Gender retrenchment is thus secured,

paradoxically, through the wide dissemination of discourses of female freedom and by pretensions of equality (McRobbie, 2009: 55 cited in Fotaki & Harding, 2017: 24), which is then often reversed and undone within popular culture. Graff (2016: 268) concludes that 'The right-wing offensive against "gender" is no longer viewed as a polemic against gender studies, or indeed as a misunderstanding, but a new strategy on the right that transcends many divisions and contributes to the rise of illiberal populism.'

Second, several commentators have pointed to what they see as qualitatively new levels of dishonesty and deceit on the part of political leaders. Some political leaders have always attempted to cover up the facts and manipulate their audiences. Today, leaders like Donald Trump in the US and Nigel Farage in the UK raise this to new depths. They aggressively denounce some facts as fake, claim that there are 'alternative facts' (Mair, 2017), attribute various nefarious conspiracies to 'establishment elites' and dismiss genuine conspiracies as mere conspiracy theories. The success of post-truth politics is thus attributed to the rise of a 'bullshit culture' (Ball, 2017; Davis, 2017) that normalizes empty verbiage as a legitimate language trope in different settings, from business to political campaigns, dismissing any genuine difference between pundits' claims and expert or 'scientific' assessments (Davis, 2017; Spicer, 2018). This argument is built on the work of Harry Frankfurt (2009) who claimed that bullshit is not necessarily created by mindless slobs, but can be the product of sophisticated craftsmen or bullshit artists. Such bullshitting can be calculated and carefully crafted - at times aided by advanced and demanding techniques of market research, public opinion polling, or psychological testing - but it is delivered in a way that gives the opposite impression. This allows the post-truth leaders or bullshit artists to resist calls for serious and austere discipline in distinguishing between facts and opinion (Frankfurt, 2009: 23).

From this perspective, post-truth bullshitters hide the skill behind their work by demonstrating a laxity in their words, which deceive us about their enterprise. In doing so, bullshit artists seek to get away from the scrutiny that one experiences when one confronts lying. Frankfurt does not directly explain the reasons behind the appeal of bullshit or the rise of post-truth leaders who use it routinely. Nonetheless, one reason for the appeal of bullshit artists, such as Donald Trump, is that they seem to have earned a different perception of sincerity–at least among their supporters. Rather

than being known as leaders whose credibility rests on telling the truth and providing accurate representations of the world, they convince their followers that they are responding to their lived experiences and are offering honest solutions to their problems. As such, they establish their legitimacy by presenting themselves as 'strongmen' who have the courage to speak their mind against invisible forces of censorship and suppression. Such, in their day, was also part of the appeal of fascist leaders such as Mussolini and Hitler. The blatant transgressions of bullshit artists from factual truth does not seem to harm their popularity which rests on the effectiveness of their storytelling. They have a gift of turning questions of facts into an argument (Ball, 2017) by invoking compelling narratives that play into their audiences' fears and insecurities. As storytellers, bullshit artists make full use of the unique privilege of 'poetic license' that enables them to maintain an allegiance to the truthfulness of their story, even when it is blatantly at odds with factual evidence, scientific opinion or literal truth (Gabriel, 2004).

Third, many writers attribute the breakdown of consensus about the truth to dramatic transformations in the structure and economy of information (Ball, 2017; d'Ancona, 2017; Mair, 2017), driven by new communication technologies (Gardner, 2011). The development of digital communication tools and media has led to a dramatic expansion of available information conducive to an 'information overload' for the public (Knight & Tsoukas, 2018). The ease of publication and broadcast through digital channels has greatly increased our exposure to different sources of information and constant circulation of claims and counterclaims in the air. The digital revolution challenges the authority of traditional sources of information, such as mainstream media outlets, governmental offices and scientific research. Research shows that social media is quickly taking over mainstream media as the main source of news (Gottfried & Shearer, 2017), which could restrict people to a slant on the news shared in their own social circle or 'social network bubble. The abundances of information has also led to the creation of a culture around the web which intensifies the popularity of brief, vivid, and memorable messages, as opposed to more complex and nuanced arguments (Gardner, 2011). Not only do we produce and consume these short messages, but we also contribute to their propagation by 'liking' them and recirculating them in social media. But the sheer amount of information means that many people do not have the time or interest to check their accuracy or provenance. While the content of some of these texts can be valuable, others are rumors, lies,

unfounded conspiracy theories or simply gibberish. This may help explain the paradox that 'the world seems to be getting less rational in an age of unprecedented information and tools for sharing it' (Pinker, 2018: 380).

There can be few more appalling examples than the continuing phenomenon of Holocaust denial. Hayes (2017: 331) describes the Holocaust as 'quite simply, one of the most amply documented events in world history.' But the digital revolution has led to the creation of echo-chambers in which stories can go viral- and become 'de-facto' facts by virtue of their widely shared status before anyone can verify or reject their factuality (Gardner, 2011; Maier, 2017). Holocaust deniers were among the earliest adopters of online platforms to spread their message. They argue, for example, that all evidence pointing to extermination camps is faked, that the gas chambers were built after the war for propaganda purposes, and that our understanding of the Holocaust is itself a Jewish conspiracy. A conspiracy theory is used to deny the existence of a real conspiracy with genocidal intent. Its purveyors are impervious to evidence, and rely instead on opinions based on the emotion of hatred. While there is continuing marginalization of irrationality within the discipline of organization studies and institutional theory (Vince, 2018) especially regarding the association of irrationality and affect (Fotaki et al., 2017), it would be erroneous to disregard the political dimensions driving such on line campaigns which are often connected to white supremacy organizations targeting civil rights won by women and race-equality movements (Daniels, 2009).

Changes in the economy of information have also facilitated the dramatic, targeted and purposeful spread of fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but lacks accuracy and credibility (Lazer et al. 2018). In particular, the digital revolution propelled by new advertising opportunities has changed the landscape of information production and propagation (Ball, 2017). This has led to the emergence of myriad of fake news websites which mimic official news outlets, but spread false stories often driven by political agendas or financial interest. It has also shaped the business model of traditional media outlets by making click baits one of their major revenue streams. This widespread proliferation of disinformation has made it even more difficult for the public to tell the truth from untruth and information from disinformation.

Fourth, many commentators have seen the rise in post-truth politics coincides with the resurgence of populist sentiments in many countries throughout the globe. These commentators argue that this is a symptom of the growing discontent among the masses with the status quo (e.g. Coughlin, 2017) and the collapse of public trust in the political establishment and its dominant institutions. This collapse was partly caused by chronic economic decline and growing inequality in Europe and the US which undermined citizens' faith in the neoliberal consensus and its economic and political institutions. The economic inequality is often maintained because those who have accumulated wealth are allowed to exercise significantly more influence in the political process than those without such resources (Fotaki & Prasad, 2015), thus eroding trust in public institutions and hollowing out democracy. For instance, campaign financing and lobbying in the American system demonstrates the corrupting influence of money in politics, which lead to regulatory failure (Lessig, 2011). Such phenomena were greatly exacerbated by the 2008 global financial crisis which left large sections of the population economically devastated and socially insecure. For many commentators this collapse of trust is the critical key to the rise of post-truth politics. While politicians have long been an object of suspicion in the public eye, the level of trust in public institutions has reached a new low in recent times (d'Ancona, 2017). Findings from several studies show that as consequence the public trust in politicians, experts and the media has significantly declined in recent years (e.g. Mounk, 2018; Ball, 2017; Davis, 2017).

Fifth, some commentators have viewed the success of post-truth politics as being ultimately due to the psychological needs of audience or followers (Mair, 2018; Lazer et al., 2018; Jaser, 2016). They argue that irrespective of technological, economical, epistemological and social changes which may have facilitated post-truth politics, it is human psychology which makes post-truth narratives appealing and enables people to discard scientific and other evidence when set against powerful emotional needs. This follows a long line of argument going back to Gustave Le Bon and Sigmund Freud stating that the masses "have never thirsted after truth. They demand illusions, and cannot do without them. They constantly give what is unreal precedence over what is real; they are almost as strongly influenced by what is untrue as by what is true. They have an evident tendency not to distinguish between the two" (Freud, 1921c/1985: 117). What may be distinct about our times is not the precedence

of the unreal over the real, but the fragmentation of the unreal from the large-scale religious and political narratives of the past to various small-scale narratives which rage against each other and may temporarily gain prominence or popularity. The breakdown of consensus about a single all-encompassing truth now lends credence to various psychological biases through which people confirm what they already believe rather than what challenges their views (confirmation bias) or enable them to ignore information that would disadvantage them (Mair, 2018; Lazer et al., 2018). People prefer information and sources of information that confirm their pre-existing attitudes (selective exposure) and are inclined to accept information that pleases them (desirability bias). Some studies also have discussed the impact of 'backfire effect' which can shield people when faced with information contradicting their beliefs (Ball, 2017, 182-184).

We now inhabit a society in which the social media have suddenly and dramatically become spaces where different narratives with their plots, characters, ambiguities and ramifications meet, spaces where distinctions between information, theory and story become easily blurred. This creates a fecund ground for the rise of post-truth as a legitimate parallel reality even when it comprises non-existent or entirely fabricated facts and events, such as president Trump's claim about sunny weather or the size of the crowds during his inauguration (see Chan in Time, 2017). Post-truth may thus be seen not as the Oxford English Dictionary claims as 'circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' but rather as a space in which public opinion itself dissolves into a variety of narratives, voices, sounds and noises competing for attention. This is the space that we seek to describe in the next section of this essay as a particular type of 'narrative ecology', a narrative ecology rife with elements like endless warnings of crisis and imminent catastrophe, images of ecological and social devastation allied to rampant consumerism and glamour, celebrity chatter and theatrics, conspiracy theories and an all-encompassing nostalgia for a golden past that is invariably seen as superior to an anxious present and a terrifying future.

In concluding this section, we recognize that lies, disinformation and smears have a long history in politics and business but regard the concept of post-truth as offering some important possibilities for interrogating political and public narratives deployed by leaders in our times. Post-truth can be viewed as the result of an

amalgam of different factors, some age-old and some very new, which are coalescing at this particular juncture in time. Its emergence may be the result of many pre-conditions and enablers, some of which are engrained in human psychology and group dynamics, others are more specific the economic, social and political realities of our times which have paved the way for the rise of certain type of leaders. Taking advantage of currently available digital platforms, these leaders have been successful in disseminating different types of narratives, messages and ideas that have dislocated the notion of truth from the pedestal it has occupied in times past.

Narrative ecologies for post truth times

The concept of narrative ecology has been used to describe spaces where, by analogy to natural ecologies, different types and populations of narrative emerge, interact, fight, compete, adapt, develop and die (Gabriel, 2016). These narratives include stories, myths, 'theories', assumptions, archetypes, plot lines, characters, images, icons, symbols and other narrative elements along with the emotions and affects embedded in them. Narratives also include counter-narratives, in other words narratives that establish themselves in opposition to those that they cast as hegemonic or master narratives. Narratives and counter-narratives confront each other but also depend on each other for sustenance and virility, like different populations of species inhabiting the same eco-system. Like elements of natural eco-systems, narratives and counter-narratives are not constrained or limited by formal borders, national, cultural or organizational and can cross from one domain to another.

As with natural eco-systems, different narrative eco-systems may display greater or lesser fragility, may contain greater or lesser diversity and may entail greater or lesser competition and conflict. Some narrative ecologies, like those of authoritarian systems and regimes, may be dominated by a single dominant narrative resembling a narrative monoculture which drives away other narratives as though they were undesirable parasites. Opponents become 'traitors' or 'enemies of the people', to be demonised rather than argued with. By contrast, narrative cultures in pluralist societies may accommodate a plurality of narratives with a wide range of characters and plot turns, occasionally taking notice of each other but rarely seeking to extinguish rival constructs. They may then be said to resemble narrative temperate zones where many species and populations find ways of existing and even thriving

side by side. There are certain organizations, like those similar to the Weberian ideal-type or organizations in the grip of extreme shock and trauma, where very few narratives may be observed at first sight. These can be said to resemble narrative deserts where seasoned eyes can discern various narratives in diverse guises and shapes.

Different historical periods, different social and cultural settings, different organizations can all be viewed as having distinct narrative ecologies in which contrasting narrative types appear, mutate, merge, cross-fertilize and interweave themselves with other narratives. These emerge from the material conditions of existence of different human groups but do not passively reflect these conditions. Some narrative types, like myths, can persist over centuries and millennia crossing many cultural and geographical boundaries while others may be found in very specific ecologies where conditions are suitable for them. Narratives from one narrative space can and do colonize other narrative spaces, they grow, they shrink and they sometimes die (for an example, see Foroughi & Al-Amoudi, 2019).

Like other historical periods, post-truth is characterized by certain narrative types that dominate its cultural spaces. Most of these types have undoubtedly prospered on the back of social media and the technologies that favour their multiplication and proliferation. Indeed, the term 'going viral' dating back to the mid-1990s captures accurately one of the key qualities of post-truth ecologies. Thus, the digital revolution has spawned new genres of narrative and micro-narrative (like the twit, the 'share', the comment, the 'like', the 'friend', the 'follower' etc.) and redefined some of the older ones (like 'the unfolding story', the 'fake news', the 'scandal', the 'crisis', the 'row', the 'voice'). Like other historical periods, post-truth is also characterized by some dominant narrative patterns and tropes, including its own myths, stories, images, slogans and buzz-words, which surface and often dominate public discourses. One of the characteristics of these patterns is their relatively short life-spans. In the days when the printed word was dominant, it was sometimes said that "yesterday's news is today's chip paper". In today's digital world, the vast majority of yesterday's narratives vanish into the digital ethersphere, all the same leaving traces that may be resuscitated and even prosper at some point in the future. A few narratives or micro-narratives however, may go viral dominating for a period the ecosystem only to disappear after possibly having spawned other narratives or counter-narratives. Several authors have noted the exponential growth of 'bullshit'

(Spicer, 2017; Davis, 2017; Ball, 2017; Frankfurt, 2005) in our time, bullshit being not just meaningless words but an unending stream of empty verbiage, hype, buzzwords, half-truths, platitudes, banalities, clichés, and outright lies which neither speaker nor audience expect or demand that they should be representing reality in some accurate way. The growth of bullshit in our times, aided and abetted by the digital revolution, makes the narrative ecologies of post-truth akin to jungles where numerous species and types grow without plan or design and desperately compete for the light of publicity. In narrative jungles, particular narratives may grow in breadth and popularity suddenly ("going viral") and then disappear just as suddenly, swallowed up by other narratives or by their own counter-narratives.

A defining feature of post-truth politics is the resurgence of populism as a political phenomenon, accounting for the rise of diverse parties like the Five Star Movement in Italy, Podemos in Spain and the Sweden Democrats despite the last having well-established links to the former Nazi party in Sweden. Even more importantly, populism has been the driving force behind the unexpected triumphs of Donald Trump in the 2016 US Presidential election and of the Brexit camp in the UK's referendum on membership of the European Union. The complexities and ambiguities of populism are currently widely discussed among political theorists (e.g.Mudde, 2014; Aslanidis, 2016; Brubaker, 2017; Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2016; Pappas, 2014; Rosenthal, 2018; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014; Stavrakakis, 2014; Stavrakakis et al., 2017), but "most scholars use populism as a set of ideas focused on an opposition between the people (good) and the elite (bad)"(Mudde, 2018).

In his influential book, *On populist reason*, Laclau (2005) argued that populism is founded on a fundamental antagonism between the people (or the 'nation' or the 'silent majority') as the underdog which is oppressed by dominant elite (or oligarchy). This is often building on the existing economic inequality and/or unequal access to and a lack of representation in the political process. Different groups perceive their voices are not heard and their identities are marginalized. Two recent examples are the 'left-behind' populations in the wake of liberalized trade and global flows of goods, people and capital in the de-industrialized North of the UK and the Rust Belt of the US, voting in large numbers for Brexit and the President Trump respectively.

Populism draws on these real issues to construct a narrative of the people, oppressed and exploited, but rising up against the corrupt elites. In most contemporary variants of populism, the fundamental antagonism between the people and the elites extends to an antagonism between the natives set against various aliens, such as migrants and refugees, who are 'othered' as parasitical and undesirable (Gabriel, 2008; Stokes and Gabriel, 2010). Such sentiments may arise from the displacement of anxieties resulting from decreasing opportunities for meaningful employment and a residual welfare state (Fotaki, 2019). They are then readily exploited by unscrupulous leaders to get elected with few intentions to solve these problems. What is key is the framing of debate by political leaders and their friendly media. McHugh-Dillon (2015) describes this relationship to explain the receiving populations' attitudes towards refugees as bi-directional: while political narratives are heavily influenced by what politicians think the public feels about these issues, they also establish a backdrop against which public attitudes are formed. The language and virulent oratory that populist leaders often deploy in such instances- see, for example, David Cameron's infamous reference to the swarms of people describing Syrian refugees of which the UK accepted just a handful of minors- may therefore contribute to radicalizing public attitudes (Fotaki, 2019).

Drawing an inspiration from the notion language's performativity (Austin, 1962), Judith Butler (1990) has stressed the power of discourse to create the very realities it is meant to represent. According to Butler, we become subjects through performing social norms that circulating discourses convey since we do not exist outside these. This means that we are constituting, embedding and re-enacting 'a truth' (Fotaki & Harding, 2017: 47) of the discourse through 'performativity, which is not an act, nor a performance, but constantly repeated ''acts'' that reiterate norms' (Butler, 1993:12). Butler uses the example of gender heteronormativity to explain how people become affectively attached to the dominant discourses because these provide them with a socially viable identity. While this often involves a subjection to a stark and often painful exercise of power (Kenny, 2010), we do so as we crave social recognition. Hence, we seek recognition through discourse and affective attachment to norms even if these misrepresent us (as is for instance the case of adopting heteronormative identities by gay people), which compels us to enact them so we can exist socially. In other words, performativity describes a set of processes

that produce ontological effects, working to bring certain kinds of realities into being, and leading to certain kinds of socially-binding consequences (Butler 2010: 147).

This is important to develop an understanding of how post-truth works: by producing social norms and discourses that individuals or various groups affectively attach themselves to for obtaining viable social identities, even if these may be ultimately injurious to themselves. The adoption of an identity of the indignant and exploited people who give power to populist leaders that recognize their existence is bound to end in disappointment. But it could also have truly catastrophic consequences. The relatively recent European history should serves as warning for people who delegate power to populist leaders and yet these lessons seem to be forgotten perhaps because most of us no longer have a personal connection to these events (Stein, 2016). Indeed, narcissistic leaders around the world, including Jair Bolsonaro, Rodrigo Duterte, Boris Johnson, or Donald Trump to name but few, were all voted to the highest offices not despite but because of their narcissism. A culture of narcissism is a culture of echoes, where our 'voices' are just sounds merely reverberating off each other (Gabriel, 2014). And though leaders' role in framing toxic discourses is important, leaders express and enable group's inner desires acting as the 'spinner of their dreams' (Gabriel, 1999). Leadership and followership are bound by deep unconscious links (Burns, 1987) that cannot easily be separated. Narcissism and narcissistic leadership therefore is popular because it can be flexibly used and abused, responding to any projection, wish and desire with the metaphor of Narcissus capturing anything we like or dislike about ourselves and our culture (Gabriel, 2014). A narcissistic denial of reality deflects the citizens' attention from a much needed social critique (Fotaki, 2014). Understanding how narcissism underpins policy making, and how it becomes increasingly prevalent in socially destructive ways of managing employees and manipulating the public, is therefore a necessary first step towards re-engaging with the political process (Fotaki, 2014).

Populist counter-narratives

In our times, populism, in its different guises, has emerged as a powerful counter-narrative to what it casts as the dominant narratives of the elites, such as globalization, multiculturalism, and so forth. In contrast to the open frontiers of neo-liberal order, populist narratives seek to defend frontiers, physical, political and

economic and reclaim control over movements of people, goods and cultures. Populism has been a major influence on the narrative ecologies of post-truth politics, something reflected in the articles published in this special issue. The axiomatic dualism between 'us' and 'them', the irredeemable war between forces of good and those of darkness have become core elements of leaders' narratives in our times. Insults, allegations, exaggerations and untruths of every kind become legitimate ways of bolstering the interests of 'the people' against the elites and the outsiders. This populist counter-narrative depends for its sustenance and vigour on having a dominant narrative to attack, a narrative ostensibly defended by the elites and their patsies, journalists, academics and pundits of every sort. A crucial aspect of the populist counter-narrative is that it claims to represent not just a silent majority, an entity invoked by Richard Nixon as ostensibly supporting his Vietnam policy (and rediscovered by Trump) but of a *silenced* majority, one that has been systematically ignored, gagged and rendered voiceless. Free speech has emerged as a core element of the populist narrative, regularly deployed as a justification for making various allegations and claims, including patently untruthful ones. Any attempt to silence opinion, for example as hate speech or as instigating violence, is seen as an infringement of the right to free speech which, at least in the US, is constitutionally protected.

The extreme polarization into good and bad, friends and foes, that characterize post-truth narrative ecologies has tended to favour several types of narrative that rely on idealization, vilification and the simplification of complex and nuanced entities. It has thus favoured certain narratives that resist falsification and are in some ways self-inoculating against direct attacks, which both find in post-truth a hospitable environment and come to dominate its narrative ecology. Two of those types of narrative are nostalgic narratives and conspiracy theories, both of which thrive in times of rapid change, uncertainty and confusion in different ways. It is hardly surprising to see a resurgence of nostalgic narratives in our uncertain and confusing times harking back to a 'golden age' of stability, order and comfortable prosperity. This can be the past of a nation, an organization, a group or an individual and may be constructed variously as heroic, romantic, happy, orderly, free, communal or even as harsh and difficult but always in such a way as to outshine a present which appears lacklustre, impoverished and lacking. The nostalgic past, the product of fantasy and

myth, is highly idealized in such a way as to reflect the discontents and insecurities of the present.

The nostalgic past positively eschews any encounter with the past of historians that may steal its shine. In general, nostalgic narratives can be viewed as the flip side of the ideology of progress (Lasch, 1991). When faith in a better future wanes people are liable to experience nostalgia, which can then define the prevalent mood of a whole period. Thus, Boym (2001) argued that for Russia the twentieth century started with utopia and ended with nostalgia. In our times, nostalgia sustains entire empires of consumerist society, such as the heritage and tourist industries and a large part of the entertainment, film, music and the arts sectors where the word 'traditional' features as part of the sales pitch. Nostalgia has also fuelled an aggressive, xenophobic type of narrative that has assumed great prominence in our times, in which an idealized past of purity, authenticity, community, self-reliance and heroism confronts what it casts as the hegemonic narratives of late modernity – multi-culturalism, diversity, cultural and sexual equality, intellectualism, urban sophistication and so forth. The chief aim of aggressive nostalgic narratives is to accentuate or exacerbate the discontents of today, by persistently maligning the present from the perspective of a mythical past.

Aggressive nostalgic narratives are narratives that hinge on betrayal and fall. It is not surprising, therefore, that they often merge or cross-fertilize with another powerful post-truth narrative that focuses on betrayal and fall, conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories may be par excellence the narrative of post-truth politics, combining iconoclasm with plausibility, fancy with factuality, absurdity with logic. Like nostalgic narratives, conspiracy theories relish their status as counter-narratives, relying on master narratives for their vitality and sustenance, seeking to puncture or debunk official accounts and to explain failure and loss by appealing to various invisible and dark but always purposeful forces. While conspiracy theories have long expressed paranoid anxieties and been associated with right wing ideologies (Hofstadter, 1966), in our times they have colonized large sections of the internet and can be found in every political colour from extreme left to extreme right. Populist leaders like Trump have embraced the narrative of conspiracy as one of their favourite genres. For example, he spearheaded the 'birther' conspiracy aimed at undermining the legitimacy of Barak Obama. But so too have many of their adversaries, for example, in seeking to account for Trump's election and for the Brexit result. Casting

somebody else's argument or opinion as a conspiracy theory has become itself part of the narrative ecology of post-truth. In this way, we now have the strange situation where climate scientists warning of global warming are accused of being conspiracy theorists by the very conspiracy theorists who deny climate change. There are several factors that make conspiracy theories powerful narratives in our times – one is their self-inoculating qualities. Debunking a conspiracy theory through appeal to material evidence or by exposing its internal absurdities and inconsistencies has become very difficult, and is more liable to be viewed as evidence of the power of the conspiracy (Aaronovitch, 2010; Oreskes and Conway, 2010; Basham, 2001). The effective deployment of conspiracy theories, like that of nostalgic narratives, has thus become a crucial feature of post-truth narrative ecologies and a potentially powerful instrument of leadership.

Leadership narratives in post-truth times

The articles included in this special issue offer a compelling picture of the ecologies that characterize leadership narratives in post-truth times. In particular, we have compelling evidence of narratives invoking dark forces and conspiracies that threaten 'the people' (Carsten, Bligh, Kohles & Lau, 2019) and the ways in which these are more of less effectively deployed and amplified through the social media (Auvinen, Sajasalo, Sintonen, Pekkala, Takala & Luoma-aho, 2019). Deye and Fairhurst (2019) demonstrate how these narratives simplify the complexities of our times, creating us-them, friend-foe dualities that favour populist forms of leadership, while Carsten et al. (2019) explore how and why leaders who deploy such narratives are naturally cast in heroic/charismatic ways by their followers. This is a response to the simplistic belief in a combative and belligerent individual who can be relied upon to defeat foes and cut through the complexities of social and political life with the aplomb of Alexander the Great cutting the Gordian knot.

In the struggle against 'the establishment' and the corrupt elites, individuals seemingly untarnished by contact with power, like comedians and other celebrities but also business people, like Berlusconi and Trump, are liable to be swept to leadership positions, at least briefly, offering cynical irony as a means of taking on the elites (Milburn, 2019). Such leaders offer what are temporarily seen as effective counter-narratives to the hegemonic narratives of the 'establishment', though a different type

of counter-narrative is identified and analysed by Just and Muhr (2019). By exploring the narratives spawned by the Women's March, these authors demonstrate eloquently how a collectivist (as opposed to individualistic) and decidedly unheroic/uncharismatic set of leadership narratives can grow from the discontents of 'the people', that cast the 'strong man' narratives as hegemonic. Overall, then, the articles in this special issue suggest that populist leadership in post-truth times thrives by offering a counter-narrative to what it casts as the narrative of a corrupt elites, a narrative that casts the populist leader as one willing and able to defend the people against the conspiracies and betrayals of the establishment and various dark forces that threaten them. This counter-narrative assumes hegemonic status in some instances and may then be challenged by new counter-narratives like those of Occupy movements (Wall Street, London and elsewhere), the Women's March and the People's Vote March.

Taken together, the papers that form this special issue raise a variety of fascinating insights into leadership in a post-truth era. They contrast with most leadership literature which remains relentlessly positive about the impact transformational, authentic or otherwise powerful leaders are said to have on the world. Some scholars have even suggested that leaders who depart from their idealized depiction of leadership are not really leaders at all (e.g. Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999). We disagree. Leadership can be a force for harm as well as good, and it is imperative that we develop a deeper understanding of how this occurs. Thus, the papers in this special issue draw attention to leadership behaviours that lie, deceive, misrepresent and distort, with a view to advancing sectional interests even as they often claim to do otherwise. Charisma is conventionally viewed by mainstream leadership scholars as a valuable means of positively influencing followers (e.g. Bass and Riggio, 2006). But it is also used to prey upon people's fears, fantasies and grievances in order to undermine rational thought and respect for evidence. Researchers need to pay more attention to how charisma, the ability to offer a compelling vision and a skill for developing radical ideas can be deployed to undermine truth, empathy and rationality.

We also need to consider what forms of leadership can effectively counter the post-truth narratives that have acquired such potency in our time. This must surely include a greater focus on how giving leaders – 'strongmen' – more power leads inexorably towards disappointed expectations and a contaminated body politic. How

do we most effectively counter conspiracy theories? Do mainstream leadership theories need just a little tweaking in order to become part of the solution? Or are radically new leadership discourses needed to move us forward? Human progress is not assured, and the environment in which post-truth narratives have taken hold poses many threats. It is our view that the study of leadership can offer at least some answers to all these problems. This requires a deeper commitment on the part of scholars to engage more seriously with real world problems, and perhaps to reconsider ideas that have had a hitherto totemic status within the academy. We publish this special issue as an invitation to consider these issues, a provocation to debate and as a contribution to make leadership studies part of the way forward rather than part of the problem.

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