

# The Nation is not Enough: A Post-Structural Discourse Analysis of Greta Thunberg's Global Populism

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## Abstract

Transnational populism has enriched the hitherto saturated field of populist studies in the recent years. Nonetheless, the concept remains a largely theoretically and empirically overlooked phenomenon. To tackle this twofold research lacuna, this article scrutinises the discourse of Greta Thunberg, the most prominent figure of the global climate movement nowadays. Thunberg's public speeches will be examined through the means of a Post-Structural Discourse Analysis and the extent as well as the construction of her transnational populism are analysed. The research highlights that the dislocatory effects of climate change have provided the foundation for Thunberg's populist antagonism that occupies a significant role in the discourse. Notably, Thunberg constructs a 'global people' that is set against the 'world leaders'. Subsequently, the article further develops the conceptualisation of transnational populism by bringing forward the term global populism that describes populist phenomena which circulate around a 'global people'.

**Keywords:** global populism, discourse analysis, antagonism, Greta Thunberg, the people, the elite

## 1. Introduction

In the last two decades, the world has experienced an unprecedented success of populist actors across the entire political spectrum (Urbinati, 2019). Consequently, the term populism has enjoyed a ubiquitous presence in public discourse and simultaneously triggered a lively academic debate about the concept's essence. Recently, the novel conceptualisation of transnational populism has enriched the scholarly discussion. Emerging from the discursive camp, scholars argue that it is possible to construct a transnational people that transcends national borders (Moffitt, 2017). This innovative approach opens the saturated field of populism research to hitherto ignored phenomena. Notably, it dismisses the pejorative perception that populism is *per se* an anti-plural phenomenon (Katsambekis, 2020). In lieu, the concept of transnational populism allows to grasp inclusionary populist movements that represent a 'plural people'. The concept of transnational populism harbours an increasing importance in the recent populist literature (Moffitt, 2017). Nevertheless, researchers highlight both that the concept is an empirically "as-yet understudied political development" (De Cleen et al., 2020, p.146) and that "there has been very little true conceptual reflection on" (De Cleen, 2017, p.355) it. This research aims to target this twofold gap in the research by analysing the public speeches of Greta Thunberg.

Thunberg started her *Skolstreik för klimatet* in August 2018 and therewith inspired people globally. Initially, she paved the way for the global Fridays For Future (FFF) movement and is ever-since the most well-known figure of the global climate movement.

Arguably, Thunberg's discourse constitutes a most-likely case for transnational populism because previous research has already indicated both the populist nature of her discourse (e.g., Arias-Maldonado, 2020; Ruitenbergh, 2020) and her conveyed global identity that transcends national borders (Murphy, 2021).

Nevertheless, it remains puzzling so far how Thunberg combines her global self-understanding with the populist form of articulation. Consequently, this research aims to tackle the research gaps by answering the research question: "How and to what extent does Greta Thunberg utilise a transnational populist discourse in her public speeches on climate change? Therefore, this article conducts a Post-Structural Discourse Analysis (PDA) of thirty public speeches of Thunberg. The research is situated within the discursive approach to populism and its akin concept of transnational populism.

This article claims that Thunberg's speeches harbour a populist antagonism that occupies a considerable room in her discourse. This antagonism is initiated by the dislocatory effects of climate change that are performatively utilised by Thunberg. She discursively constructs a 'global people' that represents humanity against the negative and threatening outside of the climate crisis. This 'global people' is pit against the antagonistic 'world leaders' who inadequately cope with the collective threat. In this regard, the findings corroborate the concept of transnational populism and underpin it with valuable empirical evidence.

The article further develops the conceptualisation of transnational populism by bringing forward the term 'global populism' to describe populist phenomena that circulate around a 'global people'. Arguably, this concept presents the most extreme form of transnational populism and thus increases the subtleties of the concept. In short, global populism describes phenomena in which a 'global people' is set in an antagonistic relation against 'the elite'. Firstly, this article lays down the conceptual framework by outlining the discursive approach to populism and the concept of transnational populism. Secondly, it provides the methodological framework. Thirdly, the PDA of Thunberg's public speeches is conducted with the focus on the dislocatory effects of climate change and her construction of an antagonism between a 'global people' and 'the world leaders'. Subsequently, it indicates a new trait of transnational populism, namely global populism. Finally, the conclusion connects the results of the study to provide an answer to the research question.

## **2. Conceptual Framework**

### **2.1 Discursive Approach to Populism**

Accompanying the rise of populist actors, the academic debate on populism has been experiencing a sustained heyday for two decades, resembling a "populist *Zeitgeist*" (Mudde, 2004, p.542). However, besides the consensus that populism is pivotal nowadays, there is a decisive discrepancy in the employment of the term. Consequently, the "essentially contested concept" (Gallie, 1956, p.97) of populism leaves it imperative to narrowly define the utilisation of the term. The following section thus depicts the conceptual framework of this paper by defining the discursive approach to populism and the concepts of transnational populism as well as dislocation.

The discursive approach to populism has been mainly inspired by the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) on discourse theory. They refer to discourses as all “systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects’ through the construction of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers” (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000, pp.3-4). Drawing on Gramsci (1971), they regard the perpetual struggle for hegemony as pivotal to the social reality constructed by discourse. However, they stress the impossibility of a hegemonic project to provide an ultimate foundation to society. Instead, they shine light on the permanent process of socio-political dislocations, whereby hegemonic projects can only partially fixate the struggles. Hence, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) identify a paradoxical *perpetuum mobile*, as an infinite struggle for hegemony takes place, in which political projects convey to present a totality that can never fully be achieved.

Building on these ontological tenets, Laclau (2005) applied discourse theory to populism. Thereby, he shifted the focus from content to form (Panizza & Stavrakakis, 2021). Accordingly, Laclau highlighted that populism *per se* does not contain any specific ideology. Instead, he stresses that a populist actor can be identified by a “particular logic of articulation of those contents” (2005, p.33). Katsambekis has conveniently condensed this peculiar logic in three steps:

- (1) ‘the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating “the people” from power’;
- (2) the creation of links among popular demands that are left unsatisfied by an unresponsive ‘elite’ (chains of equivalence);
- and (3) the representation of ‘the people’ of populism as marginalized and underprivileged plebs that claims to be the legitimate community of the people, the democratic sovereign. (Katsambekis, 2020, p.9).

On this basis, the Laclauian-inspired discursive approach lays down two *sine qua non* criteria for populism: (1) *people-centrism* and (2) *anti-elitism* (Katsambekis, 2020). The former criterium lays down that the privileged reference (nodal point) in a discourse is made to ‘the people’. According to Katsambekis (2020), “people-centrism implies privileging a collective subject that is perceived as the democratic sovereign” (p.10). This does not only encompass the direct reference to ‘the people’ but it can also include equivalent signifiers that construct a chain of signification (e.g., ‘the many’, ‘us’, ‘humanity’, ‘the working class’ or ‘the innocent’) (Laclau, 2005). Correspondingly, *anti-elitism* refers to the antagonistic construction of society wherein ‘the elite’ and its equivalent signifiers are presented as antithetical to ‘the people’.

The formal imprint of the discursive approach to populism indwells two decisive theoretical implications for this research. Firstly, the discursive approach neither considers populism *eo ipso* as a pejorative nor a positive phenomenon. Instead, the associated researchers emphasise that populism as a vehicle is not decisive for this assessment, but rather the ideology associated with it (Panizza & Stavrakakis, 2021). Thus, it recognises populism as a discursive logic that is not limited to specific values or contents. As a consequence, the discursive approach refrains from dismissing populist actors *a priori* as threats to liberal democracy (Katsambekis, 2020).

The clear separation of form and content allows the discursive approach to circumvent a widespread pitfall among scholars of populism. They are subject to a fetishisation through which immanent elements are attributed to populism (e.g. inherent threat to democracy, nationalism) that the concept of populism does not naturally have (Böhme, 2006). Following the discursive approach to populism, it remains a form of discourse that is explicitly freed from additional characteristics (Laclau, 2005). Thus, the omnipresent fetish of populism research manifests itself in the attribution of inherent characteristics that amalgamate populism and the accompanied political ideology. Conversely, the formal consideration of populism opens the gate to counteract this mystification by separating articulation and content (De Cleen et al. 2021, p.160).

Secondly, Laclau emphasises that the empty signifier of ‘the people’ is always the result of a “performative operation” (2005, p.97). The concept of empty signifier refers to “terms, concepts, slogans, or even names that lose their specific content and can be presented as universal” (Panayotu, 2017, p.3). Consequently, ‘the people’ must be constructed and are not an *a priori* given entity. That is why the discursive approach bears an open and flexible understanding of ‘the people’ which can present itself chameleon-like in different guises.

In this respect, the discursive approach can be demarcated from the hegemonic ideational approach. The latter was mainly coined by Cas Mudde who defines populism as a

thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p.7)

Both approaches - discursive and ideational – share the view that populism consists of an antagonistic schism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ as well as that it can be flexibly attached to ideologies. Nevertheless, despite their similarities, they decisively part concerning the concrete perception of ‘the people’. Namely, the ideational approach understands ‘the people’ as a “homogenous [and] pure” (Mudde, 2004, p.243) entity. In contrast, the discursive approach harbours a more flexible perception of ‘the people’ that can also be a heterogenous entity.

Katsambekis (2020) elaborates on this differentiation by highlighting that the ideational approach’s perception of populism as a “thin-centred ideology” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p.7) can only hardly grasp plural populist actors because of its immanent emphasis on homogeneity. Thereby, he points to the fact that Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) label the social movements of *indignados* and Occupy Wall Street as populist and outline that the movements “tried to develop a definition of “the people” that was inclusive” (p.48). On this foundation, Katsambekis (2020) criticises the homogeneity thesis of the ideational approach because “[i]t seems paradoxical to suggest that a movement privileges a homogeneous and anti-pluralist notion of ‘the people’, while simultaneously acknowledging that it adopted an inclusive discourse” (2020, p.12). Following Katsambekis’ reasoning, the narrow definition of ‘the people’ from the ideational approach hinders scholars from identifying pluralist populist discourses.

This short conceptual excursion indicates that the choice of the analytical lens determines whether a transnational populist phenomenon can be perceived. Accordingly, it is no coincidence that the concept of transnational populism has been mainly epitomised by scholars who are related to the discursive approach, given that the ideational approach with its sutured definition of ‘the people’ imposes theoretically higher hurdles for grasping transnational populist discourses.

## 2.2 Transnational Populism

The flexible understanding of populist discourses has facilitated the emergence of the novel concept of ‘transnational populism’ anchored within the discursive approach. Already Laclau (2005) stressed that it is possible to construct ‘the people’ with a universal garb that transcends national borders and ethnic identities. Nonetheless, only recently the concept of transnational populism has been coined by Moffitt (2017) and De Cleen (2017). By arguing in a similar vein as Laclau, these scholars highlight that it depends on the nodal point of the people, whether a populist phenomenon can be transnational. Accordingly, Moffitt stresses that “‘the people’ (...) must go beyond the borders of the nation-state. That is, ‘the people’ under transnational populism must be spread over a number of different national contexts” (Moffitt, 2017, p.410). Hence, the transnational construction of ‘the people’ is the decisive criterium to identify a transnational populist actor.

Moffitt (2017) and De Cleen (2017) outline that the discursive presentation of ‘the elite’, is more flexible and can still be located within the boundaries of the nation-state. Drawing on these theoretical foundations, transnational populism can be defined as “a dichotomic discourse in which ‘the **transnational** people’ are juxtaposed to ‘the elite’ primarily along the lines of a down/up antagonism” (De Cleen et al., 2020, p.154). Despite the growing theoretical debate in the academic literature, many researchers lament that transnational populism remains an often-neglected political phenomenon (ibid.). Therefore, only a few empirical studies of transnational populist actors exist, whereby the literature mainly focuses on the examples of the Occupy Wall Street and *indignados* movements as well as the DiEM25 movement (Aslanidis, 2018; De Cleen, 2017; Kuyper & Moffitt, 2020; Panayotu, 2017). Nonetheless, these works emphasise the difficulties to construct a fully-fledged ‘transnational people’ (Moffitt, 2017). This research aims to address this lacuna in the literature by an in-depth study of the discourse of Greta Thunberg.

## 2.3 The role of dislocation in populist discourses

A salient strength of the discursive approach is its ability to depart from an exclusively descriptive level and to conduct an ancillary analytical scrutiny of the genesis of populist discourse (Marchart, 2018). The emergence of populist discourses is thereby commonly linked to a sense of crisis (Moffitt, 2015; Laclau, 2005; Taggart, 2000). In this regard, Laclau indicates that “[t]he emergence of populism is historically linked to a crisis of the dominant ideological discourse which is in turn part of a more general social crisis” (Laclau 1977, p.175). Laclau’s reasoning is inextricably linked to his concept of dislocation. In reference to Laclau, Marchart (2014) defines the concept of dislocation “as an event that cannot immediately be integrated into the horizon of expectations: it is something we did not expect

and which therefore threatens the sedimented routines and processes of social institutions” (p.277). Put differently, dislocations occur and point to a lack within the hegemonic order that ostensibly claims to present a totality. Consequently, dislocations reveal the contingent nature of society and uncloset new antagonisms.

Laclau points to a “dual character of dislocation” (Stavrakakis, 2019, p.544). On the one hand, dislocations disrupt the social order and its identities by exposing their deficiencies and lacks. On the other hand, dislocations play an indispensable role in the occurrence of new subjects by bringing forth new frontiers. Referring to this Janus-faced nature of dislocation, Laclau (1990) notes: “If on the one hand, they threaten identities, on the other, they are the foundation on which new identities are constructed” (p.39). Importantly, Laclau stresses that the construction of an equivalential chain of populism presupposes a dislocation that enables the possibility for antagonistic frontiers. He explicitly stresses that “some degree of crisis in the old structure is a necessary precondition of populism for (...) popular identities require equivalential chains of unfulfilled demands” (2005, p.177). Nonetheless, the construction of novel antagonisms (and thus also ‘the people’) does not follow dialectically from dislocation. Instead, a performative act is required to fill the gap revealed by dislocation through the construction of ‘the people’.

From this follows that dislocations are a necessary condition, but by no means a sufficient condition for populist discourse since it additionally requires the performative act of constructing the antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’. This twofold effect of dislocation is accurately captured by Stavrakakis and Katsambekis: “the real of the crisis (what others would call the ‘objective’ dimension of the crisis) becomes accessible through mediation, through its performative construction and representation by populist discourse” (2019, p.39). In short, new populist phenomena emerge when a dislocation takes place with which the established system cannot sufficiently cope and if an actor actively constructs an equivalential chain on this foundation.

To grasp the gist and the genesis of the antagonistic frontier separating ‘the people’ from ‘the elites’ it is indispensable to consider the dislocation that opened up the possibility for the newly constructed antagonism. For this purpose, this article focuses on the dislocation and the discursive construction of climate change that arguably constitutes the pre-requisite for the populist antagonism in Thunberg's speeches.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Post-Structural Discourse Analysis**

This research utilises the qualitative method of discourse analysis which “emphasizes the way versions of the world, of society, events and inner psychological worlds are produced in discourse” (Potter, 1997, p.146). Nonetheless, the method of discourse analysis is multifaceted. This research uses the method of Post-Structuralist Discourse Analysis (PDA), also labelled as Essex School, that was initiated by Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) *opus magnum*, ‘Hegemony and socialist Strategy’.

Their influential theory of discourse takes a critical stance towards ontology and epistemology (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). However, while Laclau and Mouffe's "discourse theory stresses the ultimate contingency of all social identity, it nonetheless acknowledges that partial fixations of meanings are both possible and necessary" (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000, p.7). PDA is a convenient and natural choice because its theoretical roots are identical to the discursive approach to populism. Indeed, the latter has taken its approach decisively from Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory as well as Laclau's work on populism. Consequently, the internal consistency of the research can be reinforced by this choice. Due to the sophisticated operationalisation of the abstract PDA through the discursive approach of the Essex School, the method can be applied to populism without obstacles (Katsambekis, 2020).

Accordingly, the subsequent discourse analysis builds upon the discursive concept of populism. Thereby, it applies the formal discursive methodology outlined by Stavrakakis et al. (2017) that rests on the discursive minimal criteria of populism. They provide abstract questions that a discourse analysis of a populist phenomenon must answer:

- (1) Is the 'people' *the* central reference of a given discourse? (2) Is this people opposed to an established power bloc? (...) Is it indeed a *nodal point*, placed at the very core of its articulation, or is it located in the periphery? (Stavrakakis et al., 2017, p.425)

Thus, a PDA on populism scrutinises the discursive construction, articulation, and location of the antagonism between the two empty signifiers of 'the people' and 'the elite'.

The present analysis of Thunberg's speeches focuses on the occurrence and (transnational) framing of 'the people' and its dichotomous relation to 'the elite' in her discourse. Therefore, her discourse can solely be considered transnational populist if: (1) the reference to the people is at the core of the discourse and thus a proper *nodal point*. (2) the *empty signifier* of 'the people' refers to a transnational identity that transcends national borders. (3) this transnational 'people' is opposed to a discursively constructed 'elite'.

### 3.2 Case Selection

The research conducts a single-case study to ensure an in-depth analysis of the present phenomenon. The choice of a single-case study on Thunberg directly responds to the lack of studies on transnational populism (Moffitt, 2017). Furthermore, the ambiguous concept of populism in general as well as the subtlety of the discursive approach and its analysis *in concreto* make the limitation of the scope indispensable (Lisi & Borghetto, 2018).

The case-selection broadly rests on the logic of most-likely case design. According to Eckstein (1975), most-likely designs are crucial case studies that are explicitly valuable for testing theoretical arguments and concepts. In the present research, the design allows to test the novel conceptualisation of transnational populism. The present case satisfies the criteria to be considered most-likely, as the existing factors supported by established research hint that transnational populist elements should be present in the discourse of Thunberg. Namely, many scholars have already indicated the populist nature of her discourse (Arias-Maldonado,

2020; Beeson, 2019; Reinelt, 2019; Ruitenberg, 2020; Schmidt, 2020). Furthermore, the previous research points to the cosmopolitan and transnational identity of the movement and Thunberg herself (Murphy, 2021). It follows that there are two necessary pillars for the emergence of a transnational populist discourse. Yet, there is no research that brings the threads together and tests the occurrence of the concept in Thunberg's discourse.

### 3.3 Data Collection

This research uses Greta Thunberg's public speeches as primary sources. A discursive analysis of speeches is a widely used approach among scholars of populism (e.g., Aydin-Düzgit, 2016; Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). It also seems to be an appropriate choice because her speeches were important to generate immense media coverage and mobilise supporters around the globe (Carrington, 2019). In this regard, speeches present a direct form of communication through the articulation of political claims.

This article analyses speeches held by Greta Thunberg between November 2018 and March 2020. This time frame ranges from her first public appearance to her last speech for the time being before the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily prevented non-digital public events. Within this period, the analysis uses thirty accessible speeches (Annex). Due to the inaccessibility of some speeches, this research opted to use a non-probability sampling design (Bryman, 2016; Kumar, 2014). In this vein, it applied the purposive sampling approach of criterion sampling (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Hence, the qualitative analysis considers all speeches that were held in the *a priori* defined timeframe, accessible, and solely held by Greta Thunberg. The transcripts of the speeches are either retrieved from official websites, such as the webpage of FFF or manually transcribed from complete video excerpts. All transcripts are cross-referenced to increase the reliability and authenticity of the sources (Toshkov, 2016).

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 Context

What follows is a brief description of the context in which the discourse takes place. Thunberg's speeches are inextricably linked with the rise of the FFF movement (Kvamme, 2019). Indeed, she became the chief representative of the new climate movement and managed to inspire a worldwide wave of protests with her *Skolstrejk för klimatet* (Herrmann & Quindeau, 2020; McKnight, 2020). This has resulted in the rapid mobilisation of predominantly young protesters (Huth, 2020). Thereby, the movement shows an extraordinary commitment to raising awareness for the pending climate catastrophe.

To accentuate the urgency of the issue, the protesters rely on a radical form of activism by conducting a weekly school strike. This act of civil resistance has been labelled as "youth disobedience" (Mattheis, 2020, p.1) and resulted in enormous public attention. Consequently, Thunberg and FFF have been successful in establishing climate change as an essential topic on the political and societal agenda. Scholars list different developments to indicate the impact of the movement. Namely, they refer to the global electoral success of Green parties (Jung et al., 2020), the presence of the topic at international meetings (Sommer et al., 2019),

the catalysation of climate packages on the European and national level (Braw, 2019) and the unprecedented media attention for climate change (Rucht & Sommer, 2019).

The contextualisation conveys that FFF can be considered as a global social movement which aims to transform the whole world fundamentally and has an explicit global identity (Flesher-Fominaya, 2020). Importantly, FFF was capable to mobilise six million people in 100 countries during the global climate strike on 26 September 2019. This success corresponds to the movement's self-identification as a globally engaged actor. In this regard, FFF declares itself to be “a global climate strike movement” (FFF, 2021). Furthermore, Holmberg and Alvinus emphasise that FFF “managed to create opinion and equalise hierarchies between decision-makers, world leaders and the public worldwide” (2020, p.88). This view is corroborated by other scholars who clearly point out the movement's global scope in general and Thunberg's in particular (Murphy, 2021). Taken together, FFF's self-identification as global actor and its worldwide impact suggest that it represents a global social movement.

Moreover, it is significant to stress that the impetus for the movement comes from the youth, a subgroup of society, that is excluded from the democratic process (Mattheis, 2020). Young people have no voting rights and no channels to participate politically. Hence, civil disobedience is a means to articulate the systematically oppressed interests. As outlined by Celikates (2016a, p.991), “civil disobedience as an episodic, informal and extra- or even anti-institutional form of political action allows citizens (...) to protest and participate, when (...) the official and regular institutional channels of action and communication are closed to them.” Bringing this together, FFF politicises the problem of climate change and makes through the means of civil disobedience an insensible subgroup of society visible. In Rancièrian terminology, the movement's protest arguably constitutes an act of politics because it confronts the hierarchical social order with the logic of equality (Rancière, 1998). Accordingly, the protest of FFF embodies the “politicizing and democratizing potential” (Celikates, 2016a, p.982) of civil disobedience.

#### 4.2 The Dislocatory Effect of Climate Change

In the following, the dislocatory effects of climate change and its role in Thunberg's speeches are indicated. This analysis follows the dual nature of dislocation by indicating the ‘objective’ and performative dimension of the crisis. To start, this section engages with the dislocation's ‘objective dimension’. It is imperative to point out the immanent limitations of describing this level of dislocation. After all, recurring to Laclau (1990), even the descriptions of the supposedly neutral reflections on climate change operate within the discursive horizon, since the act of writing and thinking is necessarily located within discourse. Although scientists thus strive to square the circle by trying to describe an objectivity that cannot be reached, this *Sisyphian* task is indispensable to represent the material character (i.e. the reference point) of the discursive construction.

There is a broad and growing academic consensus that points to the existence of an anthropogenic climate change and its devastating consequences (Cook et al. 2013; Oreskes, 2004; Powell, 2017). This assessment is prominently articulated by the Intergovernmental

Panel on Climate Change, whose reports make it clear that climate change is predominantly caused by human interaction and leads to severe impacts in the present and the future (IPCC, 2021).

Transferred to the abstraction of discourse theory, it can be argued that climate change destabilises the hegemony, as the latter cannot sufficiently cope with the ruptures initiated by the former. From this follows that climate change reveals that the ostensible totality of the social order bears gaps. This dislocation, stemming from the inability of the present system of signification to absorb the dislocatory effects of climate change, results in a multitude of unsatisfied demands.

*In concreto*, the consequences of the crisis, among other things, destroy living conditions, increase the number of natural disasters, and exacerbate global inequality (Islam & Winkel, 2017). However, the existing hegemony cannot provide sufficient solutions to these and several other problems which results in an unsatisfaction of demands (Mouffe, 2018). This reveals the contingency of the social that opens the opportunity for new struggles of discursive articulation (Laclau, 1990). Thus, climate change indicates the limits of the hegemony (Stavrakakis, 2017, p.546) and the resulting gap in the structure that creates the space for new identities. Nonetheless, the dislocation of climate change does not necessarily determine the emergence of new antagonisms and actors (Stavrakakis, 2017). Instead, a performative act in form of a radical construction is needed to discursively strive to fill the lack in the structure (Laclau, 1990). This directly leads to Thunberg's performative construction of climate change.

Thunberg frames climate change as an existential, homogenous, and global threat. She constructs a discourse in which the universal peril of climate change endangers a homogenous civilisation. Thus, she claims that climate change "affects all of us" (350.org, 2019) and that humanity is "at the beginning of a mass extinction" (UN, 2019). Consequently, she portrays climate change as the negative outside that provides the required foundation for a common global identity. Accordingly, Thunberg emphasises that climate change "is the biggest crisis humanity has ever faced" (EKOenergy, 2019) and hence, "humanity is now standing at a crossroads" (Channel 4 News, 2019). Furthermore, she stresses that humankind is "facing an existential threat" (FFF, 2018a) which cumulates in the formula: "Either we go on as a civilisation or we don't" (TEDx Talks, 2018).

This depiction explicitly neglects the heterogeneity of society. Namely, Thunberg sketches that "our house is on fire and it is not just the young people's house" (350.org, 2019), so the movement is "fighting for everyone's future" (EUROACTIV, 2019). Thus, the dislocation of climate change constitutes the foundation of the nodal point that establishes the equivalential chain among humanity and discursively overcomes its immanent heterogeneity.

Thunberg's radical construction of the crisis circulates around the depiction of climate change as an existential and global threat. Swyngedouw (2010) outlines that the projection of climate change is a discursive construction that homogenises the social. This view is supported by Machin (2013) who claims that "[t]he homogenising depiction of climate

change negate the social heterogeneity of the world's population and the dissimilarity of the impacts” (p.119). These generic elements of climate discourse are mirrored in Thunberg's discourse. Nonetheless, they are not *a priori* given but discursively constructed characteristics (Hulme, 2009). Without Thunberg's performative construction of the crisis, the dislocatory effect of climate change could not take place.

Thus, this section has shown that climate change makes visible the immanent ruptures of the present hegemony and thus enables the possibility for new social actors to emerge. On this foundation, Thunberg portrayed climate change as a homogenous, global, and existential threat. Therefore, climate change functions as precondition and negative outside for her populist antagonism between ‘the global people’ and ‘the world leaders’ that is scrutinised in the subsequent section.

#### 4.3 ‘We the People’: Construction of a Global People

The following section concentrates on the discursive construction of the ‘global people’ in Thunberg's discourse that builds upon the aforementioned dislocation. In her speeches, Thunberg utilises two different constructions of ‘the people’.

Firstly, she grounds ‘the people’ in generational terms. Thus, she frequently mentions “us children” (350.org, 2019), “my generation” (CBC News, 2019a), and “the young people” (350.org, 2019). Thereupon, she portrays a generational conflict in which the youth is burdened by the adults as the former bear the brunt of the climate crisis. Thereby, she turns the common role allocation upside down. The adults are referred to as “irresponsible children” (EUROACTIV, 2019) that failed to do their “homework” (EUROACTIV, 2019) so “it falls on [the youth] to be the adults in the room” (ITV News, 2020).

Thunberg understands the youth as an articulator of the ecological crisis to raise awareness among all people. She stresses that “most people are not even aware” (Europarl, 2019), because “they have not been told” (ibid.). She indicates that once the lack of consciousness is eradicated “we can go back to being children” (CBC News, 2019a). Hence, the dualism of ‘young people’ and ‘adults’ does not reflect populism because the division is neither antagonistic nor Manichean. Instead, the gap between youth and adults is surmountable and only perpetuated by a knowledge disparity.

Correspondingly, Thunberg's reference to the youth does not reflect the logic of populist articulation indicated by Laclau. Notably, she does not portray them as “democratic sovereign [that] claims to be the legitimate community of the people” (Katsambekis, 2020, p.9). Instead, she solely appeals to the adults to act in the children's favour. The following quote captures this: “[young] people like me are not allowed to vote. (...) You need to vote for us, for your children” (Europarl, 2019). Likewise, she points out that “we [the young people] are doing this to wake the leaders up. We are doing this to get them act. [...] We demand a save future, is that really too much to ask?” (350.org, 2019). Furthermore, she highlights that the children “are stepping out of our comfort zones, telling the people in power that they must take their responsibility and protect future and present generations” (AP Archive, 2019).

Hence, the ‘young people’ neither demand to be actively included in the formal democratic process to shape the future nor do they claim to be the true democratic sovereign. Therefore, Thunberg’s discourse does not construct the youth as a privileged agent of social change that marches for its democratic emancipation. In lieu, they solely appear as supplicants hoping to be heard. From this follows that the separation between youth and adults is not characterised by the typical populist down/up antagonism. Consequently, the dimension of generational conflict in Thunberg’s discourse is not populist. On this foundation, Zulianello and Ceccobelli (2020) claimed that Thunberg’s entire discourse cannot be named populism. However, they overlook the polyphonic nature of ‘the people’ in populism. A discourse can potentially contain multiple different discursive constructions of ‘the people’ so that the neglect in one instance cannot falsify populist elements *tout court* (Katsambekis, 2020).

Secondly, Thunberg constructs a ‘global people’ that is collectively endangered by the threat of climate change and the inaction of ‘the world leaders’. The transnational scope of her discourse is already captured in the diverse locations of her speeches (Annex; Stone, 2021). Moreover, she adopts a universal address in her speeches. Namely, she repeatedly speaks in the name of “our civilisation, (...) humankind” (Europarl, 2019), “humanity” (Channel 4 News, 2019), “homo sapiens” (FFF, 2019), “the people around the world” (FFF, 2018a) and *expressis verbis* refers to “[w]e the people”. She sketches that FFF is “fighting for everyone” (EUROACTIV, 2019) and thus reveals a global consciousness (Ingram, 2017, p.655). This view is echoed in the dedication to the Time's award, which Thunberg received in 2019 “for bringing a fragmented world a voice that transcends backgrounds and borders” (Felsenthal, 2019, p.49). Alluding to the global construction, Ruitenbergh (2020) aptly notes that Thunberg's demands “revolve around a new construction of the people” (pp.561-562).

The global constitution of the people directly corresponds to the dislocatory effects of climate change outlined before. Namely, Thunberg’s performative act of framing climate change as a global problem paves the way for her construction of ‘the global people’. These findings embody the Janus-faced nature of dislocation: climate change as a disruptive force threatens the existing social order but at the same time allows the constitution of the new identity of ‘the global people’. Nonetheless, the construction of the antagonist that manifests the global identity of ‘the people’ remains enigmatic so far and will be tackled in the subsequent section.

#### 4.4 ‘World leaders are betraying us’: Humanity vs. the World Leaders

To shed light on the importance of ‘the people’s’ antagonist, it is necessary to consider Laclau’s (2005) concept of the ‘logic of equivalence’ that is applied in the discursive approach. Laclau emphasises that, following the logic of equivalence, individual demands are linked to each other under a common heading that discursively negates the existing differences. The unifying element in this construction is succinctly stated by Marchart. He emphasises that “a chain of equivalence is only effectuated vis-à-vis a common negative outside, a moment of pure negativity to which the antagonistic relation of equivalences gives

expression” (2018, p.115). Hence, the individual demands link together to form a common identity because of a significant other that functions as an antagonist to the demands.

With this in mind, it stands out that Thunberg juxtaposes ‘the world leaders’ as an antithesis to the ‘global people’. This dualism bears an already familiar element because it encompasses the discursively constructed ‘global people’, but it complements them with its radical outside that manifests the chain of equivalence. Accordingly, Thunberg’s discourse epitomises how ‘the elites’ work against the interests of humanity. She conveys that humanity is “betrayed by the people in power” (ITV News, 2020) because the “emergency is being completely ignored by politicians” (ITV News, 2020). Thereby, she depicts a dualism between the ‘global people’ and ‘the global elites’. In this vein, she claims that

[o]ur civilization is being sacrificed for the opportunity of a very small number of people to continue making enormous amounts of money. Our biosphere is being sacrificed so that rich people in countries like mine can live in luxury. It is the sufferings of the many which pay for the luxuries of the few. (FFF, 2018b)

Furthermore, she laments that

[w]here I come from the things are very different than here. But when it comes to the climate, the ecological emergency, and the people in power, it is pretty much the same. In fact, everywhere I have been, the situation is more or less the same. The people in power, there beautiful words are the same (...) the empty promises are the same, the lies are the same, and the inaction is the same. (350.org, 2019)

Consequently, Thunberg homogenises ‘the elites’ and treats them as a transnational group that selfishly works against the general interests of humanity. The global scope of ‘the elites’ is exemplified by the fact that Thunberg predominantly refers to them as “the world leaders” (ITV News, 2020). The empty signifier of ‘the elites’ transcends national borders and hence mirrors ‘the people’ in this regard. Thunberg describes both ‘the people’ as well as ‘the elites’ with a global scope.

On this foundation, she predicts that the world leaders “will be remembered as the greatest villains of all time” (EUROACTIV, 2019) and their “legacy will be the greatest failure of human history” (EUROACTIV, 2019). Likewise, she illustrates that “whatever they are doing, they’re doing it wrong” (CBC News, 2019b). This purely negative delineation cumulates in the diagnosis that “[t]he political leaders are failing (CBC News, 2019b) humanity for their self-interest.

Thunberg manifests this narrative by portraying ‘the people’ as indispensable corrective for the failures of ‘the world leaders’. This notion can be best illustrated by the following quote:

we have not come here to beg the world leaders to care for our future. They have ignored us in the past and they will ignore us again. (...) The people will rise to the challenge. And since our leaders are behaving like children, we will have to take the responsibility they should have taken long ago. (FFF, 2018a)

Thereby, Thunberg frequently touches upon the indispensable role of ‘the global people’ as democratic sovereign. *Ergo*, she presents the action of ‘the people’ as the last chance to cope with the ecological crisis that is ignored by the elites. Concretely, she states that

Together and united we are unstoppable. This is what people power looks like. We will rise to the challenge, we will hold those most responsible for the crisis accountable and we will make the world leaders act. We can and we will. (ITV News, 2020)

In doing so, she directly refers to popular sovereignty and elevates it to the principal engine of democracy. Simultaneously, she discursively hints to the hegemonic position of her discursive construction of ‘humanity’ as a collective group. To illustrate, Thunberg claims that “[i]t is public opinion that runs the free world. In fact, every great change throughout history has come from the people. We do not have to wait. We can start the change right now. We the people” (Connect4Climate, 2019). Consequently, Thunberg locates the hope in the activism of ‘the people’. She stresses that “it is the people who are the hope” (Beckwith, 2019). Hereby, she symbolises a process of full universality in which ‘the global people’ strive to achieve absolute sovereignty to avert the negative and lethal consequences of the climate crisis and the dovetailed inaction of ‘the elites’. In her words,

The change we need is not going to come from the people in power as it is now. The change is going to come from the masses, the people demanding action and that is us. We are the once who are going to bring change. (ibid.)

Thus, Thunberg does not solely present humanity as underrepresented and mostly ignored plebs, she goes a step further by indicating their existential danger due to the failures of the selfish elites.

Furthermore, she strengthens the depiction of antagonism by carving out that the elites are suppressing the people’s voice, whereby this narrative accentuates the common down/up characteristic of populist antagonisms. On the one hand, Thunberg outlines that ‘the elites’ are “not listening” (Der Pilger, 2019) to the people and “will ignore” (FFF, 2018a) them in the future as well. On the other hand, she insists that ‘the world leaders’ are actively working against them. Notably, she postulates that “[t]he people in power are still not listening to us. They mock us, the spread lies and rumours about us, they threaten us, they hate on us and they make up at least one conspiracy theory every day” (Der Pilger, 2019).

Taken together, this political antagonism encapsulates the logic of populist articulation coined by Laclau. Concretely, a political down/up antagonism between ‘humanity’ and ‘the world leaders’ is constituted by the failure of the latter to tackle the ‘existential threat’ of climate change. Thus, the putty that manifests the logic of equivalence among the popular demands is the unresponsiveness and ignorance of ‘the elites’. On this foundation, the discourse conveys that ‘humanity’ as an empty signifier for a global people is the legitimate democratic sovereign that should be the protagonist to cope with climate change. Consequently, Thunberg elevates ‘the people’ as the only hope to avert the lethal hazard. This directly corresponds to the importance of performative construction of crisis (Moffitt,

2014). Thunberg shifts the blame for the hazard of climate change to the inactive elites and at the same time locates the solution for the problem within ‘the global people’. Hence, this antagonism could only emerge because of the dislocation of climate change and Thunberg’s distinct framing. Therefore, the discourse corroborates the fact that the emergence of populist antagonisms is inextricably dovetailed with dislocation.

*In nuce*, Thunberg’s discourse can be named populist, as it bears an antagonism that fulfils the criteria set up by the discursive approach. Thereby, the reference to ‘the people’ and its various empty signifiers occupy a prominent room in the speeches. In a vertical populist schism, these ‘global people’ are pit against ‘the world leaders’. Due to the prominence of this antagonism, it must be noted that Thunberg’s speeches indwell a high level of populism.

#### 4.5 The Concept of Global Populism

The analysis has shown that the discourse contains transnational populist elements because the linchpin of ‘the people’ clearly transcends national borders and reaches a global level. Nonetheless, as the discourse constitutes with universalism the most extreme form of transnationality possible, it is more precise to call it global rather than transnational populism.

Importantly, the parameters to identify global populist actors are identical to the analytical process for transnational populism. Namely, it depends on the depiction of ‘the people’ whether an actor can be considered as national, transnational, or global populist. In the latter case, ‘the people’ are discursively equipped with a global identity that can be reflected by reference to empty signifiers like ‘humanity’, ‘civilisation’, ‘the global people’, *et cetera*. In the familiar populist logic, this ‘global people’ is opposed to a radical negative outside to manifest the equivalential chain that manifests the people’s self-identity. This significant other can be a national, transnational or global type of ‘the elite’. Congruently, to the concept of transnational populism, it hinges on the nodal point of ‘the people’ whether an actor can be considered global populist.

On this basis, a definition of ‘global populism’ can be developed. Logically, it rests on De Cleen et al. (2020) trail-blazing definition of transnational populism, since the concept is not an entirely novel phenomenon, but merely an extreme variety of the already established. Accordingly, global populism can be defined as

a dichotomic discourse in which the demands of ‘the **global** people’ are juxtaposed to ‘the elite’ primarily along the lines of a down/up antagonism

Therefore, global populism describes an antagonism that separates ‘the global people’ and its equivalent empty signifiers from ‘the elite’. This definition reflects the minimal criteria of populism outlined by the discursive approach, namely people-centrism and anti-elitism.

However, although this research has increased the empirical evidence, it is important to underscore Moffitt’s (2017) assertion that forms of transnational populism are comparatively rare. This has mainly to do with the significant hurdles to the manifestation of a collective identity when national borders are transcended. The more people and different individual

demands are included in the construction of the people, the more individual demands must be held together by a common demand in a chain of equivalence. The result is that the difficulty of collectivisation increases with the discursively constructed size of the people. In Laclau's (2005) terminology, the difficulty of constructing an equivalential chain increases with the magnitude of the logic of differences present in a discourse.

Applied to the case at hand, it can be argued that Thunberg was only able to construct a 'global people' because she amalgamated it with calling attention to the existential danger of climate change for all of humanity as well as the associated inability of 'world leaders' to respond adequately. Hence, the constructed destiny for humankind was the radical negative outside that enabled the linkage of all individual demands under a global identity. Accordingly, the equivalential chain linking together 'the global people' was capable to overcome the vast number of individual demands within humanity. This was only feasible because Thunberg located the antagonists and dangers of humanity on a global level as well, thus creating a common denominator that made possible the collective identity. Succinctly, the "we're all in this together" narrative enabled the overcoming of the pronounced logic of differences in the discourse.

The example shows that a strong narrative is needed to construct a populist antagonism on a transnational or even global scale. It suggests that the transnational portrayals of dislocation and antagonist facilitate the construction of a 'transnational people'. Nevertheless, further research should build upon these pre-mature thoughts and identify the enabling factors for transnational or global populism.

## **5. Conclusion**

This article has analysed how and to what extent Greta Thunberg's discourse consists of (transnational) populist narratives. Therefore, it examined, by using PDA, Thunberg's public speeches. This research was situated in the discursive approach to populism and its dovetailed concept of transnational populism. Following this conceptual choice, the research was pre-eminently narrowed to the formal construction of populism and thus does neither include the content of the discourse nor provide normative judgements.

The analysis showed that Thunberg's discourse is impacted by the dislocatory effects of climate change. The dislocation indicates a lack in the dominant hegemony and thus enables the emergence of new social actors who nevertheless require an act of articulation. This is exactly what Thunberg does. She frames climate change as a homogenous, global and existential threat which functions as a point of departure for her populist antagonism. In this regard, she presents 'the people' with a universal and global connotation which mirrors her depiction of climate change. Consequently, she transcends the typical national boundaries of 'the people' and instead constructs a 'global people' that is presented as the democratic sovereign. Importantly, this framing satisfies the criterium for transnational populism outlined by Moffitt and De Cleen because her appeal is directed to a 'people' that goes beyond the nation-state.

Thunberg's 'global people' is part of a distinct populist antagonism. The constructed dichotomy consists of a cleavage between 'the global people' and the 'world leaders'. Hence, this antagonism entails the typical significant other of 'the people', 'the elites'. This populist antagonism portrays 'the world leaders' as enemy of 'humanity' because they are not sufficiently responding to the existential threat of climate change. Hence, 'the global people' are presented as indispensable corrective for the elites and thus presented as the legitimate democratic sovereign. Since the populist antagonism takes a salient role in the speeches, it can be stated that the discourse contains a high level of populist narratives.

The findings of the analysis have culminated in the new term of global populism that is located within the discursive approach to populism and refers to populist phenomena in which 'the people' have a global and universal identity. Therefore, global populism describes the antagonistic construction of a global people against an elite.

Furthermore, the article contributes both theoretically and empirically to the understanding of populism. Concretely, it has provided a study of a so-far mostly overlooked case of populism and at the same time applied as well as further developed the concept of transnational populism that has hitherto only rarely been applied. Thereby, it has explicitly shown the strengths of the discursive approach to populism with its flexibility and high explanatory value.

Nevertheless, this article has not been able to touch upon questions about the impact of the populist discourse on democracy and the topic of climate change itself. As a consequence, the analysis of the formal populist nucleus of the speeches should be extended by a more thorough understanding of Thunberg's discourse. Furthermore, future research should provide an in-depth study of the potential facilitating factors for the rare phenomenon of transnational populism.

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**Annex**

*Corpus of Speeches*

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Type of speech</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Words</b>
1	TEDx Speech	Stockholm	Other	24 <sup>th</sup> November 2018	1371
2	Cop24 (speech to UN Secretary-General Antonio Gueterres)	Katowice	Other	3 <sup>rd</sup> December 2018	525
3	COP24 (plenary session)	Katowice	Other	12 <sup>th</sup> December 2018	428
4	49th World Economic Forum (Speech: “Our House is on Fire”)	Davos	Other	25 <sup>th</sup> January 2019	713
5	Speech in front of the Economic and Social Committee of the EU	Brussels	Other	21 <sup>nd</sup> February 2019	1029
6	Speech at Global Climate Strike (GCS) in Hamburg	Hamburg	GCS	1 <sup>st</sup> March 2019	190
7	Speech at GCS in Berlin	Berlin	GCS	29 <sup>th</sup> March 2019	157
8	Speech at the <i>Goldene Kamera</i> awards	Berlin	Other	30 <sup>th</sup> March 2019	448
9	Speech at GCS in Iowa	Iowa City	GCS	10 <sup>th</sup> April 2019	452
10	Speech at EU Parliament in Strasbourg	Strasbourg	Other	16 <sup>th</sup> April 2019	1363
11	Speech at Extinction Rebellion March	London	GCS	21 <sup>st</sup> April 2019	234
12	Speech to MPs at Houses of Parliament	London	Other	23 <sup>rd</sup> April 2019	1746
13	Speech at the R20 Austrian World Summit	Vienna	Other	28 <sup>th</sup> May 2019	1169
14	Speech at GCS in Vienna	Vienna	GCS	31 <sup>st</sup> May 2019	803
15	Speech at National Assembly in Paris	Paris	Other	23 <sup>rd</sup> July 2019	1357
16	Speech at Amnesty International Award Ceremony	Washington D.C.	Other	17 <sup>th</sup> September 2019	611
17	Speech at US Congress	Washington D.C.	Other	19 <sup>th</sup> September 2019	1483

18	Speech at GCS in New York City	New York City	GCS	20 <sup>th</sup> September 2019	777
19	Speech at UN Climate Action Summit	New York City	Other	23 <sup>rd</sup> September 2019	495
20	Speech at GCS in Montreal	Montreal	GCS	27 <sup>th</sup> September 2019	984
21	Speech at GCS in Denver	Denver	GCS	11 <sup>th</sup> October 2019	631
22	Speech at GCS in Edmonton	Edmonton	GCS	19 <sup>th</sup> October 2019	915
23	Speech at GCS in Vancouver	Vancouver	GCS	25 <sup>th</sup> October 2019	777
24	Speech at GCS in Los Angeles	Los Angeles	GCS	1 <sup>st</sup> November 2019	536
25	Speech at GCS in Madrid	Madrid	GCS	6 <sup>th</sup> December 2019	330
26	Speech at COP25 in Madrid	Madrid	Other	11 <sup>th</sup> December 2019	1323
27	Speech at GCS in Turin	Turin	GCS	13 <sup>th</sup> December 2019	523
28	50 <sup>th</sup> World Economic Forum in Davos	Davos	Other	21 <sup>st</sup> January 2020	923
29	Speech at GCS in Hamburg	Hamburg	GCS	21 <sup>st</sup> February 2020	434
30	Speech at GCS in Bristol	Bristol	GCS	28 <sup>th</sup> February 2020	405