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Populism, Ontological Insecurity and Gendered Nationalism: Masculinity, Climate Denial and Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

This article proceeds from a critical analysis of gendered narratives of nationhood as manifested in far-right populist politics and discourses in response to major security challenges. We focus on how such narratives exemplify gendered nationalism and inform the discourses of populist political leaders and their followers, with a particular focus on the USA and the UK. We proceed from an engagement with the ontological security literature to show how masculine imaginations and fantasies of fear, hate and anger—'toxic masculinity'—are in fact gendered responses to ontological insecurity across two major cases of insecurity: climate change and the global coronavirus pandemic. The global coronavirus pandemic and climate denialism have gendered dimensions in populist, masculine discourses, as exemplified in the response to the climate activist Greta Thunberg and to the rejection of experts and lockdown measures in the case of Covid-19. A key contention is that the reinvention of ‘nationhood’, along gendered lines, has created a foundation for governing practices in which hegemonic discourses turn into normalizing narratives that justify masculinist responses to ontological insecurity.

Introduction

The proliferation of populist, nativist and xenophobic parties and movements after the millennium is hard to refute. These far-right movements and parties have not only attained powerful positions across Europe, the USA and Russia, but have also been elected to government in Brazil, India, Pakistan, the Philippines and elsewhere. Common among most of these populist parties and movements are an aversion to globalization and multiculturalism and anti-immigrant sentiments, which fuel a desire to recover the lost ‘greatness’ of a nation in decline, in Europe and elsewhere. These anti-globalization, anti-diversity and anti-immigrant discourses and narratives evolve
around emotive constructions of ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’, often exhibited in imagined shared traumas and notions of (good old) times of unity and resilience. Anger, pride, shame and other affective registers help to construct these narratives. These affective narratives involved in the imagining of the nation, are highly gendered and embodied. This can be seen in references to the motherland as nurturing its people or in visualizations of the nation as weak and vulnerable, requiring a strong protector to defend it against ‘decline’ or ‘invasion’. Less discussed perhaps, but equally present, are anti-feminist and anti-women discourses. Such anti-gender and anti-women discourses, on the one hand, tend to emphasize heteronormative values and understandings of gender and society while, on the other, they largely espouse gendered conceptions of feminine nations, traditions and bodies that need to be saved from ‘immigrant’ (specifically Muslim) authoritarian others. This latter discourse on ‘Muslim others’ is, at least in Europe, repeatedly framed as concerns for gender equality and, in turn, for the survival of the welfare state. However, whereas gender equality would involve a progressive and transformative view of gender norms, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim discourses are often couched in stereotypical views of women as inferior and/or in need of protection.

Populist and extremist politics thus appropriate the national narrative and reshape it, emphasizing specifically gendered traits of the nation that are then pushed to the centre of political debates. Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential election campaign evolved around a narrative of a weakened America harmed by globalizing forces, corrupt elites and immigrants, with the solution being to ‘make America great again’. Pro-Brexiteers also equated membership of the EU with the weakening of state sovereignty and a chance to ‘take back control’ by reclaiming the British nation-state and its ‘glorious’ past. Furthermore, the uniting of anti-science post-truth politics and nation-state nostalgia combine to significant effect when addressing major global security issues that confront our current times. This can be seen in how populist leaders have responded to climate change and the unfolding of the coronavirus pandemic.

In this article, we ask how we can understand the construction of gendered nationalism in the hands of populist and far-right political leaders and their followers? Moreover, how do these constructions play out and become normalized in inherently gendered narratives of climate change denial, anti-feminism and masculinist notions of entitlement? Both questions proceed from the assumption that masculine imaginations and fantasies of fear, hate and anger—‘toxic masculinity’—are gendered responses to ontological insecurity. Drawing upon a specific masculinist understanding of ontological insecurity, we argue that toxic masculinity prevails in far-right extremist rhetoric on the nation, climate change and the ongoing Covid-19 crisis. We discuss how populist and extremist discourses have unfolded in the USA during Donald Trump’s presidency and in the UK

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during the Brexit process, specifically focusing on how ideas of gendered nationalism and populism inform ontological security discourses surrounding these two developments. In addition, we study two major crises that speak to ontological insecurity—climate change (notably in the context of populist criticism of Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg) and the global Covid-19 pandemic—and how populist leaders engage a masculinist promotion of the nation in relation to these issues. The empirical material largely consists of media reports (including social media and visual images) and media interviews with political leaders and other public figures.

**Populism, ontological insecurity and gendered narratives of nationhood**

The rise of populist, nativist and xenophobic parties and movements is a global phenomenon. These parties and movements have directed their emotional messages not only against immigrant others, but also against national establishments and regional or global associations, such as the European Union and the United Nations, often in opposition to the promotion of human rights, global gender equality, economic transformative change and climate action. Three major developments are likely to have contributed to the increased strength of populist parties and movements: the introduction of austerity measures in response to the global financial crisis of 2008 and, specifically in the European context, the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis of 2010; the so-called migration crisis of 2015–2016; and the latest confrontations with ‘illiberal’ governments in Hungary, Poland, the USA, Brazil and India, whose policies are undermining these countries’ national legal systems.

**Populism, the far-right and ontological (in)security**

Populists typically adopt a rhetoric and governing style that challenges the authority, neutrality and expertise of traditional establishment elites. Populism comes in at least two different guises—a left-wing, class-based and more inclusive form and a right-wing, identity-based and more exclusive one. However, contemporary populism is largely associated with the (radical) right, because of the right’s focus on nostalgic narratives of the nation and the radical right’s nationalism. This longing for the nation has been defined as nativism, ‘an ideology which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (“the nation”) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the nation-state’. The focus on ‘welfare chauvinism’ is particularly associated with far right and centre-right discourses in Europe, where discourses on social welfare have shifted from being a ‘right’ to a ‘privilege’ that must be defended against migrants who exploit the welfare system.

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Even though there is a tendency, particularly visible in political and media discourses, to associate extremism and violence with radical Islam and jihadist movements, right-wing populism also fuels violence, as it often triggers anti-establishment insurgencies propelled by ‘anger’ and ‘resentment’. The recent increase in violent acts perpetrated by so-called nativist, ‘alt-right’ groups and individuals only serves to sustain this point. Several studies also show that far-right leaders use populist narratives that render three social categories salient: those at the top (the malicious elite), those at the bottom (immigrants, asylum-seekers) and those in between (the virtuous people).

Loss of faith in mainstream parties and moderate electoral candidates can, in part, explain the recent surge in far-right populist parties and leaders. However, several studies have identified a link between the increase in far-right populism and widespread perceptions of crises, insecurity, anxiety and alienation due to a sense of loss of control—what Anthony Giddens has termed a ‘run-away world’, defined by increased globalization and neoliberal reforms. Here, the conceptual lens of ontological security has opened for the scrutiny of not only the multitudes of fears and insecurities that lie at heart of populist politics and conflict, but also their gendered dimensions. Ontological security refers to a ‘security of being’ and has to do with a person’s elemental sense of safety in the world, where trust of others is like an emotional inoculation against existential anxieties, whereas ontological insecurity refers to ‘the consequent attempts to deal with … anxieties and dangers’, where ‘identity and autonomy are always in question’. Included in Giddens’ and Laing’s discussion of ontological (in)security is that individuals and groups tend to address profound anxieties and insecurities by searching for stable anchors, such as routines and biographical narratives, that can help alleviate feelings of ontological insecurity. This search for ontological security is tied up with narrative imaginations of what Giddens has signified as a ‘sense of place’, in

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17. Laing, op.cit. pp. 39, 42.
which spaces and narratives about certain locales offer important real and imaginary anchors for political leaders in order to pin down unknown anxieties among the electorate. Far-right populists thus make use of symbolic and mythical narratives that rest on imaginaries of a secure and stable past, in which nostalgia is used to appeal to supporters and guide future political actions. Such fictional narratives of the nation’s past greatness are conveyed to new generations in search of answers to their anxieties. However, such narratives also identify those who supposedly have taken this ‘greatness’ away—the establishment, immigrants, Muslims and women.

**Gender populism and gendered nationalism**

The gendered dimension of these nostalgic narratives is confronted by, as well as dependent on, various narratives of modernity, as far-right movements and leaders contrast and reimagine memories of the past. Here, nationalist parties and movements define national boundaries in ways that reflect the power of a dominant patriarchy—thus confining women to certain traditional roles and thereby challenging statist feminist notions of empowerment.

As noted by several feminist scholars, the control of female sexuality, bodies and reproduction is crucial to nationalism. This is what Yuval-Davis defines as the ‘burden of representation’—with women coming to represent national unity and its distinctiveness. As Kandiyoti has argued,

> the very language of nationalism singles women out as the symbolic repository of group identity. [Thus,] nationalism describes its object using either a vocabulary of kinship (motherland, patria) or home (heimat), in order to denote something to which one is ‘naturally’ tied. Nationness is thus equated with gender, parentage, skin-colour.

Kandiyoti’s emphasis on ‘nationness’ as something to which one is naturally tied implies that gender is performed in populist discourse and rhetoric—so-called gender populism. Gender populism relies on a simplifying understanding of gender as a “natural”, essential dichotomous order, based on positioning men and women in hierarchical locations in terms of power, and, in so doing, employs a heteronormative vision of gender identities.

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Manifestations of this dichotomous order are often visible in the idea of ‘the people’ versus ‘the feminist elite’, and in the far right’s opposition to ‘gender ideology’. Focusing on Brazil, Poland and Hungary, Mudde notes that the far right constitutes ‘gender ideology’ as a major threat: as part of a left-wing conspiracy designed to weaken the traditional nuclear family structure and women’s role as figurative mothers of the nation-state. Similarly, several studies have shown how emergent forms of gender populism include misogyny, sexism and opposition to feminism, gender equality and same-sex marriage, often by seeking to instantiate traditional family and associated gender roles. Such moves are often accompanied by a ‘strongman’ style of political leadership. Meanwhile, there has been an apparent rise in women’s participation in far-right movements, and the emergence of ‘femonationalism’ has seen far-right, neoliberal and feminist forces unite in their appropriation of feminist ideas and notions of gender equality to stigmatize Islam and Muslim men, and to sustain their populist agenda. Hence, although many far-right parties and movements converge in their emphasis on traditional family and gender roles, as well as in their opposition to such things as same-sex marriage and abortion, they often differ on issues of immigration and gender equality. Here, findings indicate that many European far-right parties and movements use gender equality as a key value separating the modern majority population from oppressive immigrant Muslims. This implies that gender populism does not conform to one ideological standpoint. Instead, Mudde suggests that there are varieties of sexism involved in far-right discourses, including hostile and benevolent ones, both of which are present in gender-based populism. Benevolent sexism proceeds from a patriarchal notion of men as physically strong and powerful and families as heterosexual, male-dominated and dedicated to the protection of ‘their’ women. Hostile sexism, in comparison, objectifies women, ‘who are often viewed as trying to control men through feminist ideology or sexual seduction’. Benevolent sexism defines the approaches of political leaders such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary or the government of the Law and Justice party in Poland, in which feminism, like homosexuality, is assumed to undermine traditional gendered notions of the family. Hostile sexism figures among gamers (e.g. Gamergate), ‘incels’ (involuntary celibates) and so-called pick-up artists (where politicized rape fantasies are openly debated). Common to both types of sexism—and something that is likely

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32 These people live in an online world where women are objects and identities are supposed to remain anonymous, calling themselves PUA’s—Pick-Up Artists—and use tactics like the Anti-Slut Defence and the Zero Night Stand, often emphasizing a rape culture where women and girls are objectified to the point that they are taught to live in fear (B. Walton, ‘Pickup Artists’ and Rape Culture: The Social Issue Behind the Problems at Waking Life Expresso’,
to fuel feelings of ontological insecurity—is the tendency to view contemporary feminism as a threat to the male self. This tendency is amplified and promoted by populist leaders. As Homolar and Scholz demonstrate in the context of the 2016 US elections, ‘by building his rhetorical toolkit around augmenting existing grievances and emphasizing the prospect of further rupture and defeat, Trump generated ontological insecurity, manifested simultaneously in a sense of loss and a desire for belonging’.34

**Masculinity, ontological insecurity and social media**

By picking up on feelings of alienation and inadequacy and sentiments of disempowerment among especially young white men, populist far-right parties and movements have been able to take advantage of subcultural networks as breeding grounds for toxic masculinities and political extremism.35 Such ‘masculinization’36 of nationalist discourse seemingly appeals to disaffected males joining far-right movements in search of a place of belonging. Kimmel defines this socio-psychological state as ‘aggrieved entitlement’ to explain how young men joining these movements express a ‘gendered sense of entitlement thwarted by larger economic and political shifts, their ambitions choked, their masculinity lost’.37

While economic factors such as downsizing and outsourcing contribute to ontological insecurity and alienation (feelings of emasculation, loss of male privilege), entitlement and resentment can come from different sources. In Sweden, for instance, the far-right Sweden Democrats (who gained 17% of the votes in the 2018 election) have traditionally appealed to white men with low levels of education. However, a recent report shows that their voters are not predominantly marginalized in economic terms, but rather unite around feelings of alienation from the larger society and anti-immigrant and anti-feminist grievances.38 Sweden’s (until recently) open approach to asylum and its pursuit of an overt ‘feminist foreign policy’39 as well as its support for national and global gender equality, have also provoked Sweden Democrat supporters. In the USA, Trump has long promoted a xenophobia linked to sexual anxiety, beginning his presidential campaign by demonizing Mexican immigrants as rapists, and the European far right has attacked Muslim refugees as ‘rapefugees’.40 Traditional and digital media discourses, as well as popular culture, have been key to the dispersion of such sentiments, whereby visual symbols, imagery and myths about imaginary pasts and ‘others’ have been

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39 Bergman Rosamond, op. cit.
securitized and sedimented. Political storytelling has become increasingly digitized, thus enabling access to mass audiences—a fact utilized to strong effect by Trump in his use of Twitter.41 Here, it is important to recognize that discourses are not simply textual or verbal but also visual,42 and that far-right populism deploys a range of visual images to portray its ideas (such as the red MAGA hats and Pepe the Frog memes).43

What needs to be emphasized is how these digital and visual developments of far-right populism reflect a gender populism rooted in historically contingent practices and discourses that continue to be related to national ideologies, identities and bodies. Accordingly, they provide evidence of a particular form of emotionally gendered nationalism that is loaded into national celebrations, memorial landscapes and other elements of national iconographies—events and visual images that convey particular kinds of masculinities in response to various forms of ontological insecurities. The next section deals with these specific aspects of gendered nationalism and gendered bodies as forms of gender populism. We discuss how these discourses, narratives and practices of gender populism have become manifest in a ‘masculinist’ logic that undergirds the ontological insecurity of gendered nationalism. This is exemplified through empirical illustrations of gender populism in the USA during the Trump administration and in the UK during the Brexit process. The discussion centres on the ways in which this masculinist logic has relied on gendered discourses stoked in masculinist claims of ‘protection’, ‘manhood’, ‘imperial loss’ and ‘mythical pasts’, highlighting how these have been played out not only in relation to toxic masculinity, but also in relation to anti-feminist discourses and contested truth-claims.

Gendered nationalism and gendered bodies

As noted above, gendered dimensions of far-right and populist narratives engage with a masculinist nostalgia perceived to be under threat. This masculinism is not simply performed at the individual level but also fuels the narratives of the nation, producing a gendered nationalism that seeks to recover the idea of a strong nation that has been weakened by feminization. Spike Peterson has noted that women are historically constituted within the nation in gendered terms—as biological reproducers of the state and as societal members supporting nationalist objectives.44 Similarly, nationalism is gendered because ‘the naturalization of domination (“us” at the expense of “them”) depends upon prior presumptions of men/masculinity over women/femininity’.45 Key here is the concept of ‘masculinist logic’—‘an underlying ethos or totalizing worldview that implicitly universalizes and privileges the qualities of masculinity, and in doing so, subordinates and “other” alternative ways of understanding, knowing and being’.46 Masculinist logic underwrites the ontological insecurity of gendered nationalism. It also prevails

46(Nicholas and Agius, op.cit, p. 5).
in what Agius and Edenborg define as ‘gendered bordering practices’, where masculinist logics of hierarchy and strength inform the security policies of states. Mastery over sovereignty and destiny fuels the narratives around ontological security because failure to assert sovereignty means threatening the survival of the nation and the state in the minds of the individual or group. In the imaginaries of far-right populist and centre-right movements, ideas of sovereignty and mastery rest on a political ideology that has as its core myth the homogeneous nation—a romantic and gendered version of the homeland and homeland culture, both of which act as emotional resources in the appeal to ontological security, as the following subsections explain in relation to the USA and the UK.

**Gendered nationalism in Trump’s America**

The amplification of gendered nationalism was a defining feature of Trump’s presidency. In Trump’s narrative, America had been weakened as a state, its national pride and prestige abused by other powers through globalization and ideas about diversity that failed to speak for ‘true Americans’. His campaign slogan ‘Make America Great Again’ captured the idea of a once great nation in decline and humiliation. The insecurity imagined in this discourse is an embodied one, where globalization steals jobs from working US citizens, partners take advantage of US security, and Mexicans and other ‘illegal’ migrants pour across the country’s weak borders, bringing crime, rape and violence, and destroying America from within. Slogans attached to ‘building the wall’ have been accompanied by further claims of decay: an America weakened by its own internal institutions, such as the media (‘fake news’) and government corruption (‘drain the swamp’ and ‘rigged systems’). Here, the nation is imagined as vulnerable and in need of (strong male) protection. In his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in 2016, Trump spoke of a ‘moment of crisis for our nation’, adding that ‘the attacks on our police, and the terrorism in our cities, threaten our very way of life. Any politician who does not grasp this danger is not fit to lead our country’. Employing a crisis logic, the solution to this ‘American carnage’ is (in ‘Trumpian’ discourse) found in the figure of the strong male leader who is able to protect America against both (progressive) internal and external threats.

Feminists have long observed that the ‘politics of protection’ relies on gendered notions of weakness and strength, legitimating actions that seek to ‘save’ or ‘protect’ citizens, in particular women. In the US context, such narratives pertain to the necessity of protecting not just the country’s borders but also its women. A key example here is Trump’s warning that a ‘caravan’ of many young, strong men was advancing towards...
the USA’s southern border in November 2018—‘like an invasion’.52 The use of inflammatory language in constituting migration as a threat to US women has been coupled with a general backlash against women, illustrated in the appointment of conservative Supreme Court judges who are committed to restricting abortion rights. The discourse of protection, then, mixes with populist impulses and infringements on women’s rights. Narratives, once established, can be repurposed and imbued with new messages, even if these are contradictory, with the protection logic pursued by Trump being inconsistent with the separation of women and children at the border and the caging of migrant children.

Trump makes use of discursive promises that he couples with masculinist virility and body language, juxtaposing himself against male leaders of other nations. Key examples here are his threats to North Korea and comparisons between the size of his ‘nuclear button’ and that of North Korea’s Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un,53 and admiration for authoritarian figures such as Russian President Vladimir Putin and Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte, while belittling political opponents like Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden for lacking strength and leadership. For Trump, politics is about winners and losers, the strong versus the weak, the effeminate versus the masculine. This masculinized embodiment54 has a good deal of support from voters. A recent study shows how the vote for Trump among (mostly Republican) men and the working class was affected by the view that American society had ‘grown too soft and feminine’.55 Such views fit into a broader pattern of gendered nationalism manifest in the president’s attacks on women, especially women of colour in Congress,56 with the president regularly questioning these individuals’ patriotism in an effort to undercut their arguments.

**Gendered nationalism and the Brexit process**

The Brexit referendum result in the UK in 2016 echoes the gendered populism associated with Trump. While largely analyzed in terms of race and class, feminist scholars have noted that Brexit is a gendered political project.57 The agents of Brexit were largely privileged white English males, such as Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Leader of the House of Commons Jacob Rees-Mogg, with the former being associated with many accusations of sexual harassment and misogynous language. Nigel Farage, another vocal supporter of Brexit and the former leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), has also drawn upon his English masculine attributes in campaigning for Britain’s departure from the EU. However, the majority of Scottish voters and

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politicians were opposed to leaving the European Union, most notably female First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, who remains committed to Scottish independence and re-entering the EU as a sovereign state. Brexit, then, is primarily an English exercise in gendered nationalism, supported and taken forward by leading Conservative male politicians, who managed to convince a sufficient number of discontented voters that leaving the EU would safeguard jobs at home and curb immigration. The prevalence of ‘intersectional inequalities’ that emerged from years of austerity policies in response to the 2008 financial crisis, along with the perceived threat of migrant labour from the EU, thus made Brexit possible.

Here, we contend that the decision to leave the European Union is an obvious act of gendered nationalism, guided by a desire to ‘take back control’ from Brussels and beyond, regardless of the economic and political consequences of doing so, one of these being the possible breakup of the United Kingdom itself, with pro-independence sentiments running high in Scotland. Nonetheless, the referendum debate and Britain’s departure from the EU were imbued with a protection logic that drew upon an imaginary threat of ‘the other’ against which Britain needed to protect itself through enhanced gendered nationalist practices. This logic was also made possible by appealing to an imaginary loss of a ‘whitewashed’ British imperial past, one that has given rise to a distinct set of traditions and religious values that are deeply embedded in Britain’s self-narrative—a story defined by a ‘postcolonial melancholia’ and a longing for a powerful masculinist past. Leaving the EU, then, would not only cure the loss of sovereignty and identity, but also restore Britain’s former glory, associated with times of imperialism and colonial and gendered repression. Tropes of masculinist protection prevail in such calls for the restoration of Britain’s former glory. Exploiting the electorate’s anxieties about threats against economic and ontological security, the emotional underpinnings of Brexit serve as a stark example of gendered, as well as racialized, nationalism—protecting the nation from anxiety over jobs, services and British identity—where the latter has resulted in an increase in gendered violence targeting specifically Muslim women who wear a hijab (headscarf) or a niqab (face veil).

Key here is also the 2016 killing of British Labour Member of Parliament Jo Cox, a proponent of the EU and anti-Brexit campaigner, who was murdered by a 53-year-old gardener with gendered far-right convictions.

The kind of racism and misogyny outlined in Trump’s America and in the Brexit process is in line with the ideas of far-right parties and movements whose meta-narratives evolve around emotive and exclusive masculinist ontological security constructions of ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’. It is embodied and envisages the nation in patriarchal terms. These narratives display a number of masculinist logics that inform populist discourses on major security threats and exacerbate ontological insecurity. They do so in

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60 Bhambra, op.cit.
62 Bhambra, op.cit.
ways that reinforce the desire to ‘protect’ the nation (or a specific idea of the ‘national interest’) against those who offer a different vision of societal and national security, as the next section on climate change and the current Covid-19 global pandemic illustrates.

**Gendered responses to climate change activism: the case of Greta Thunberg**

The gendered logics that underscore far-right populism—strength, self-interest, protection of borders, economy and heteronormative society—inform policy positions and shape our understanding of ontological security. Several scholars have identified a link between different forms of masculinity, sustainability and climate change.64 Here, Cara Daggett has noted that ‘as the planet warms, new authoritarian movements in the West are embracing a toxic combination of climate denial, racism and misogyny’ in what amounts to a ‘petro-masculinity’ and ‘the role of fossil fuel systems in buttressing white patriarchal rule’.65 Telling here are the connections between climate change denial, outright hostility for Greta Thunberg’s activism and her celebrity persona, and a masculine sense of entitlement to car ownership, as illustrated by the photos in Figure 1, taken by one of the authors in a university car park in Lund, Sweden.

Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg first acquired fame in 2018 by staging Friday school strikes for the climate in Stockholm outside the national parliament, actions that soon culminated in a global movement. Active on social media (with over 4.1 million followers on Twitter and 10.6 million on Instagram), Thunberg has become a prolific figure with significant global visibility, receiving invitations to speak at events such as the 2019 UN Climate Summit in New York and the 2019 UN Climate COP25 in Madrid, as well as the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos in 2020.

Far-right populist critics have refuted her message and activism, questioning her right to speak on climate change, and have attacked her character, motivation and appearance.66 For instance, in 2019, the leader of the Sweden Democrats, Jimmie Åkesson, declared that Thunberg should go back to school, as she is a child whose activism will not change the world. He also doubted her authenticity, claiming that her activism is staged and propped up by vested interests.67 He was, moreover, dismissive of the possibility of the environmentally sustainable global order that Thunberg calls for: ‘of course one can evoke media attention and be celebrated by sailing to America, but … how will trade and the world economy survive if such a transformation takes place? You cannot replace flights’.68 Åkesson reduces Thunberg to a person not grounded in reality,

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66Greta has joined a growing number of young women activists known for their vocal criticism of global injustices and gendered violence—Nobel Peace Prize winners Malala Yousafzai and Nadia Murad are examples of such young women who refuse to comply with typically patriarchal gender norms that are prevalent in the ideology of populist and far-right parties.


someone who does not understand the workings of the world or the national economy—and in so doing, he privileges masculine pro-market knowledge over sustainable change.\textsuperscript{69}

Climate change denialism has also been a feature of Trump’s campaigning and presidency. He has regularly called it a ‘hoax’, and in 2012 tweeted that it was a concept ‘created by and for the Chinese in order to make US manufacturing non-competitive’.\textsuperscript{70} Trump’s discourse about climate change positions the American economy and worker in opposition to the ‘globalist’ responses to climate change that rely on scientific expertise and cooperation; the environment is something to exploit and retain control over to benefit American ‘greatness’. This emphasis on economic greatness can also help to explain the coming together of industrialists and working men in their climate-denialist and anti-feminist views, where they tend to join forces to ‘reassert the privileges of masculine hegemonization’.\textsuperscript{71} A self-professed billionaire such as Donald Trump could thus come to power by offering a sense of ontological security and paternalism to working- and middle-class white men who find the promises of corporate capitalism alluring, even if largely out of reach (Pulé & Hultman, 2019). Moreover, Trump announced the USA’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement soon after coming to office in 2016 ‘because of the unfair economic burden imposed on American workers, businesses, and taxpayers’.\textsuperscript{72} Trump was, in part at least, elected on the populist promise of creating jobs in areas where heavy industry, typically employing male workers, had been shut down and jobs outsourced to other parts of the world. In appealing to the working-class vote, he resorted to the language of ‘petro-nostalgia’ and a ‘mid-20th century fantasy of American life, when white men ruled their households uncontested’.\textsuperscript{73} That

\textsuperscript{69}Daggett, op.cit.
\textsuperscript{73}Daggett, op.cit. p. 31
nostalgic dream does not embrace the idea of climate change action, associated with Greta Thunberg.

Indeed, Thunberg’s anger at the world’s inaction over climate change at the 2019 UN Climate Summit (her famous ’How dare you!’ speech) was belittled by Trump, whose sarcastic response exemplified a dismissal of her ethical message, knowledge and very persona. Thunberg’s discursive style and disregard for convention, as well as her global transformative message, sit uncomfortably with populist leaders who privilege the national economy and view sustainable change as threats to economic growth and nostalgic notions of the working man. Thunberg’s disregard for convention and her neurodiversity have been the subject of what can only be described in terms of a masculinist logic of misogynous bullying and dismissal of her knowledge. Fox News journalist Michael Knowles described her as a ‘mentally ill Swedish child’, forcing the news network to apologize on his behalf. In this context, Guardian journalist Gaby Hinsliff notes that

female climate campaigners are perhaps uniquely prone to press the buttons of what might be called toxic libertarians, people who combine a burning desire to do what the hell they like with the fury at the very idea of being nagged, nannied or told what do, especially by women.

This masculinist logic also prevails in populist discourse more generally, with far-right politicians such as Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro dismissing the idea that climate change is a matter of a global urgency, often by elevating his nation’s right to bolster its economic growth through forestry, despite the latter’s obvious threat to the global environment. Bolsonaro has on several occasions denied the connections between the recent fires in the Amazon rainforests and climate change, and has contested the land rights of indigenous groups living in that vast geographical area. Greta Thunberg has criticized Bolsonaro’s position by noting that ‘indigenous people are literally being murdered for trying to protect the forest from illegal deforestation. Over and over again. It is shameful that the world remains silent about this.’ This in turn has led Bolsonaro to dismiss Thunberg as a ‘brat’ who should not be given media attention—that is, should be silenced. Both Bolsonaro’s dismissal of climate change research and activism and his nationalist defence of Brazil’s right to extract resources from its rainforests appear to also be rooted in his preference for misogynous and racialized language. His belittling

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80 Ibid.
of Thunberg’s intervention on the Amazon rainforests is imbued with misogynous undertones, and he has also been known to verbally assault his nation’s black population, stating in 2018 that they were ‘apes’ who ‘should go back to the zoo’. ⁸¹

These discursive approaches by far-right populist leaders exemplify gendered populism and nationalism, where challenges to authority are met with portrayals of opposing views as weak, dysfunctional or backward. Under such leadership, the defence and survival of the nation against globalizing forces and scientific orthodoxy is prioritized and celebrated as a strength in response to an emasculated sense of ontological insecurity. This emasculation also carries through and upholds the populist approach to the current global coronavirus pandemic, where the economic imperatives of the state and distrust of expertise risk the health and security of the body politic, as the next example shows.

The corona crisis and toxic masculinity

As in gendered discourses on the far right and climate denial, toxic masculinity also defines the responses to the Covid-19 pandemic by populist leaders. Trump, Bolsonaro and others have dealt with the crisis primarily by dismissing it and the emergent global and national scientific knowledge on how to manage it. They have done so personally, in their refusal to wear masks and appropriately social distance, supposedly to appear strong and resilient in the face of the current crisis. Trump notably refused to wear a mask until July 2020, because it would reportedly ‘send the wrong message’ and make him appear preoccupied with health during an election year instead of focusing on reopening the national economy. ⁸² Trump also advised the US population to treat the virus as a common cold, giving them bogus advice by suggesting that they might inject disinfectant to treat the virus. He overlooked scientific knowledge, claiming that hydroxychloroquine was a ‘miracle’ drug that could cure Covid-19, in contradiction to scientific evidence. ⁸³ In Brazil, one of the worst-affected countries, Bolsonaro has dismissed the severity of the pandemic, saying: ‘because we have a more tropical climate we’ve almost reached the end [of the outbreak], or it’s already over … the virus doesn’t spread as fast in warm climates like ours’, and that ‘after being stabbed, I’m not going to be brought down by a little flu’. ⁸⁴ Both Bolsonaro and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson caught the coronavirus, later followed by Trump. While Johnson appeared somewhat humbled by his experience (praising the National Health Service that he and his party have done much to defund) and reflected that he perhaps should have taken the UK into lockdown earlier, Bolsonaro and Trump both continued to ignore the severity of the pandemic, regularly appearing

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⁸²Associated Press, 8 May 2020, ‘Face Masks Make a Political Statement in Era of Coronavirus’, https://apnews.com/7dce310db6e85b31d735e81d0af6769c.
without a mask in public and Bolsonaro vetoing sections of a bill that would make masks mandatory in public places.\textsuperscript{85}

Much of the populist response has been to project strength and authority at times of crisis and ontological insecurity. Trump has clashed with state governors over social-distancing measures and lockdowns.\textsuperscript{86} Aware that economic decline could affect his electoral chances, Trump urged economies to open up and tacitly—and at times overtly—gave support to (often armed) individuals in Michigan and other Democratic states protesting the lockdowns, tweeting ‘LIBERATE Minnesota and Virginia’.\textsuperscript{87}

Another key feature of his coronavirus policy was to blame China for the outbreak. Here, he reiterated the same nationalist and populist rhetoric he used before the pandemic to stage a trade war with China, but a particular form of ‘corona-nationalist’ discourse has also been advocated as a way of providing a metaphor for a ‘foreign infection’\textsuperscript{88} invading the body politic and bringing the nation down. As the Covid-19 pandemic evolved, Trump, like other populist leaders such as Bolsonaro and Johnson, projected a masculinized response, ‘wary of showing vulnerability and prioritizing highly masculinized views of strength’, which included contradicting or ignoring public health experts and refusing to wear masks or practise social distancing.\textsuperscript{89}

As of 9 November 2020, the USA has had 8.8 million cases and 243,771 deaths related to Covid-19.\textsuperscript{90} Furthermore, the impact of the coronavirus places women in a more vulnerable position: increased rates of domestic violence are widely reported, and in the USA women are over-represented in the care industries, with 85% employed in nursing and 76% in healthcare roles.\textsuperscript{91}

By contrast, the female leaders of Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Norway, Taiwan and New Zealand have been lauded for superior ‘crisis management’ compared to male leaders because of their ‘resilience, pragmatism, benevolence, trust in collective common sense, mutual aid and humility’.\textsuperscript{92} Furthermore, the possible connection between the spread of the coronavirus and environmental degradation, while not yet conclusively established, suggests the need for significant change in human activity in a post-Covid world. While populist leaders look for a ‘return to normal’, many are suggesting that the ‘new normal’ will require a transformative rethink of global consumption and economic growth, as well as a turn towards more sustainable methods of production. As the World Health Organization has noted: ‘More generally, most emerging


infectious diseases, and almost all recent pandemics, originate in wildlife, and there is evidence that increasing human pressure on the natural environment may drive disease emergence (...) strengthening health systems, improved surveillance of infectious disease in wildlife, livestock and humans, and greater protection of biodiversity and the natural environment, should reduce the risks of future outbreaks of other new diseases'.

Our discussion of gendered responses to climate activism and the global Covid-19 pandemic is illustrative of the tendency to dismiss female knowledge and to elevate the self and the nation in a fashion that is detrimental to people’s sense of ontological security. As we have illustrated, Bolsonaro, Trump and Åkesson all draw on masculinist tropes in dismissing Thunberg’s calls for climate actions. A key contention here is that there are close connections between climate change denial, the coronavirus crisis and prevalent myths about the strong male leader defending his nation and its economic growth in the face of climate change and other security threats.

Concluding remarks: gendered bodies and masculinist ontological insecurity

In this article, we have explored how gendered logics underpin far-right populist conceptions of the nation and ontological insecurity. In doing so, we have examined how anti-feminist sentiments and discourses inform the exclusionist imagining of the nation and the desire for protection and order against undermining forces. Central to our discussion has been the framing of such discourses in the context of ontological (in)security. Populist appeals to order and control and a recovery of national pride, borders and strength are specifically about creating a sense of ontological security, be that for individuals or levelled up to the state. As populist discourses, particularly those of the far right, are now a regular or normalized part of the global political landscape, the ways in which such discourses become entrenched in the public sphere leave us with important questions that are in themselves a feature of masculinized ontological insecurity.

Undoubtedly, and as discussed throughout, patriarchal discourses on toxic masculinity have not only become more entrenched in the public sphere, but have also come to characterize democratic politics in which voters are mobilized on the basis of emotional appeals to a masculinist logic and a promise to protect the nation from exogenous threat. Such a logic is also evident in the backlash against feminist ideas, with the latter being perceived as threats to the masculinist undergirdings of the nation. The rise of ‘angry white men’ finds a home in the discourses of far-right populism and in the idea that gender politics and feminism have gone too far. This logic, in turn, has given rise to a sense of loss and entitlement in the face of economic, social and cultural changes, which feed the notion that democracy and mainstream politics fail to represent the interests of those ‘angry white men’.

This backlash culture has contributed to sentiments of gendered ontological insecurity among populist leaders. Moreover, research on feminism, gender populism and the emergence of far-right parties and movements shows that groups, institutions and

94 Nicholas and Agius, op. cit., p. 4.
states in Europe and elsewhere have become increasingly concerned with defining and closing down community and national boundaries in response to actual or perceived threats against what they see as ‘their’ culture, religion or tradition. And, as we have contended throughout, this is always a gendered process that rests upon binary understandings of gender norms and gendered nationalist appropriations. Such appropriations are also evident in the close links between climate change denial, racism and misogyny, and have furthermore become visible in populist and extremist discourses in relation to the coronavirus crisis—not least manifest in the increased hate attacks against female and otherwise gendered public figures.

The ontological insecurities displayed through this masculinist logic are frequently justified through a discourse that elevates the nation’s lost, romanticized and mythical past—a past that can be recreated, remembered and reshaped through a reinstalment of strong male leaders who can guard the nation against progressive ideas, newcomers and ‘the other’ more broadly. As Peterson and Sisson Runyan have argued, this is a deeply political process, as

masculinism also operates to materially exclude or marginalize all those who are feminized, whether women or men. Understood as a key ‘move’ in producing, reproducing, and naturalizing gender hierarchy, masculinism and masculinist lenses are political and deeply implicated in exclusionary practices that discriminate women’s knowledge and position in society. While the gendered aspects of far-right populism have not gone unnoticed, bringing them and their implications to the fore may enable resistance to such masculinist ‘exclusionary practices’ and narrow visions of the nation and the world.

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95 Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking, op. cit.

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