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POST-TRUTH = POST-NARRATIVE?
Reading the narrative liminality of transnational right-wing populism
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Introduction
On October 23, 2016, The Atlantic’s Rosie Gray tweeted an unsettling video of two American men at the Cleveland Convention Center teaching each other the German word “Lügenpresse” to hurl it at reporters. Part of the scene’s discomfort obviously stems from the history of the word: It dates back to German nationalism of 1914 and soared during Nazi Germany a few decades later (Noack 2016). Part of the discomfort lies in the seemingly effortless transnational compatibility of new populist nationalisms it exemplifies: The word had just recently found new popularity at rallies by PEGIDA, a self-avowedly populist anti-immigration movement by German Islamophobes, where it accompanied physical attacks on reporters. Translating to the “lying press,” the term throws into relief the extent to which this new populism, on both sides of the Atlantic, is driven by a rejection of the press’s role in producing the socially consensual narratives that are the basis of all political deliberation. A final punch, however, is added by the genuine, playful joy both men shown in Gray’s video clip seem to feel at this moment of teaching, learning, and using the newly acquired “skill.” They don’t seem to know much about the word or its history. Using it as a “meme” that spreads and easily crosses cultural borders, they are happy to use it, bereft of context, as they join a transnational movement of populist nationalists trolling the press.

This chapter will engage the transnational success of new right-wing populism by zooming in on two formal features spotlighted by this example: a particular signifi catory playfulness, and a penchant for the decontextualized, incoherent, and thus—ideologically, geographically, culturally—highly mobile soundbite. To do so, I will model these two features as liminal to the symbolic form of narrative. Put differently, the appeal of populism is frequently explained by its offering up of “simple narratives,” an explanation that jibes with a general tendency on behalf of pundits, scholars, and activists to read politics as deeply narrative, a tendency I will explain in more detail below. Against this view of populism as a result of strong, simple narratives, I want to advance a counterintuitive claim: To understand the transnational success of new right populism, “narrative,” I will argue, is not a particularly helpful concept.
Where narrative, understood as a symbolic form, stresses coherence, causality, and teleological drive, new populist rhetoric is marked by other symbolic dynamics. To get at these, it makes more sense to turn to other symbolic forms—here “play” and “database”—and to think about how this rhetoric profits from dwelling in the liminal areas between narrative, play, and database.\(^1\) After all, it might be this narrative depletion that facilitates the transnational compatibility of these new populist nationalisms.

To make this argument, I will proceed in four steps: I will first briefly summarize the extent to which “narrative” has become a key term for understanding and discussing politics on both sides of the Atlantic, and, secondly, comment on its recent crisis. I will, thirdly, position narrative as a symbolic form, one among many, that shares a liminal region with other symbolic forms. Lastly, I will read single, exemplary rhetorical moments from these new right movements against the symbolic forms of play and database, respectively, to suggest that an interest in narrative liminality can focalize some of their non-narrative qualities.

**Narrative in politics**

Long before the rise of Donald Trump, “narrative” emerged as a key category for discussing politics on both sides of the Atlantic, as even the most cursory glance at political reporting and punditry after the late 1990s shows. Conspicuously paralleling the work of politics and of reporting, the term is typically used to explain the persuasive power of political messaging. Understanding politics as narrative here creates a crucial interface between reading, writing, and politics, and it empowers journalists, pundits, and scholars alike to engage politics by analyzing narrative, i.e., by telling stories about storytelling. To give two brief examples: in this view, a chief function of President Obama was to be the “Narrator in Chief” (Bai 2012), and George W. Bush lost his grip on power and popularity not simply because he began a needless, catastrophic war, or because he steered the country into recession, but because he never recovered from the “Katrina Narrative” (Rich 2006, 201).\(^2\)

The underlying premise of this interest in politics-as-narrative echoes the narrative turn in the humanities (and beyond): It assumes that much of our (perception of) reality is shaped by narratives, that reality and facts don’t simply “are” but that they gain their meaning, their relevance, and thus, their practical existence, by being “emplotted” into narrative (see Bruner 1998). Narrative here is characteristically loosely defined, but any minimal definition, to be meaningful, would have to include events that are causally related and that involve one or more actants. More importantly, the underlying framework assumes that the internal logics of narrative, “narrative necessity’ rather than [...] empirical verification and logical required-ness” determine the acceptability and, thus, political and social salience, of narratives (Bruner 1991, 5). Narrative, in this view, has a particular quality of internal organization, narrativity, that makes the crucial difference between simply representing individual experiences and the kind of world making that organizes them into a meaningful whole.

Narrative’s general popularity in discussions of politics made it a ready concept for explaining the rise of new right-wing populism in Europe and the US in the mid-2010s. Here, typically, the assumption is that populism provides particularly “simple” narratives that can help people understand a complex world. In one of many similar articles, characteristically pulling together Donald Trump, PEGIDA, and the new German nationalist party AfD, into one “Fleeting Modernity 2.0,” journalist Patrick Gensing (2016) for example writes that “Trump offers a clear narrative that cannot be refuted by facts because it relies on an ideology of irrationality, just like the German right extremists.”\(^3\) As he goes on to explain, a main asset of both Trump’s and PEGIDA’s narrative is its “closed” quality, “eine
geschlossene Erzählung,” that does not rely on external validation and avoids internal contradictions.

**Post-narrative politics**

While the notion of narratives in general, and of simple, closed narratives in particular, thus stands ready to explain the new nationalisms, the concept also is under increasing stress. This, in part, has to do with it simply being overused and exhausted, leading Erik Wemple to “Plea to Pundits: Stop Saying ‘Narrative’” (2016). As he shows, there are often other, more precise terms, which suggests that the fashionable “narrative” has expanded to a catch-all phrase for any kind of messaging.

More importantly, much of the messaging of the new nationalists, in the US and in Germany, belies even the most rudimentary definitions of narrative. As *The Economist* summarizes: traditionally, political propaganda was “meant to be coherent,” in “post-truth politics,” however, there is no narrative coherence anymore:

Content no longer comes in fixed formats and in bundles, such as articles in a newspaper, that help establish provenance and set expectations; it can take any shape—a video, a chart, an animation. A single idea, or “meme”, can replicate shorn of all context, like DNA in a test tube.

(“Yes”)

Notably, Donald Trump’s rhetoric fits that picture: often, his messaging is simply too incoherent to count as storytelling, leading, for example, the *Boston Globe’s* Michael A. Cohen to exclaim:

To call this incoherent babble an insult to incoherent babble. Trump jumps from one idea to another like a frog leaping from lily pad to lily pad. He regurgitates snippets of information that he appears to have gleaned from watching television, with no apparent sense of how they are connected to each other. It’s like taking a word salad and throwing it against a wall.

*(Cohen 2017)*

If a narrative’s power resides in its cohesion, in the “narrative necessity” of its development that strings together individual events into a meaningful whole, Trump fails miserably, and “narrative” can hardly be the category that explains his electoral success.

Moreover, it is this incoherence, rather than the simple story, that unites Trumpism with the new German Nationalism of the AfD and PEGIDA. In his article, Gensing describes a speech by Björn Höcke, an AfD politician speaking at a rally, who attempts (and fails) to lay out a grand narrative of how the:

multiculturalism of the old parties had destroyed the security fabric of the state. It is all a bit complicated, and Höcke has to work on his rhetoric some more. The reception is cool, so he boils things down: Many politicians want to destroy our state, he tells his audience angrily. This message resonates: chants against the “traitors of the people” echo through the night.

*(Gensing 2016)*

What this passage describes, then, is not the success of a narrative but narrative’s failure. It is only after Höcke has reduced his failing story to a single sound bite, a meme, a vignette that
merely suggests narratives, rather than a chain of causally related events, that the audience catches on and answers with a ritualized chant.

But it is not only the messaging of its leaders that makes the new right appear as a strangely under-storied movement. At the height of the PEGIDA marches and in response to allegations of censorship, several public German TV stations turned to putting the uncut raw material of their coverage of these marches online (Pegida 2017). Before, PEGIDA followers had complained that the cut, “censored,” versions of interviews conducted at the marches made them appear stupid, xenophobic, and extremist; now, their most striking feature was their incoherence. Rather than telling a—however simple—narrative of immigration, nation, and people, the protesters struggled to find words, tried to string together grievances, and mostly had trouble to meaningfully connect them to the march’s concern with the “Islamization of the Occident” (e.g. 0:08:32), after all the motto of the marches. The footage still showed racism and xenophobia, but more than anything it showed failures of articulation. Possibly the most striking form of such populist aphasia, then, is the PEGIDA anthem released in December 2015: it is literally without words and consists only of men’s voices humming (Aykanat 2017). If stories are a way of ordering experience, the inarticulate interviews and the inability to find words for the anthem speak of a lack of narrative, not the power of simple ones.

Such meaning- and story-lessness resonates with an observation Slavoj Žižek made in 2006, when the new nationalist populism was still in its infancy. Commenting on the “French and Dutch no to the project of a European constitution,” he speaks of a clear-cut case of what in “French theory” is referred to as a floating signifier: a no of confused, inconsistent, overdetermined meanings, a kind of container in which the defense of workers’ rights coexists with racism, in which the blind reaction to a perceived threat and fear of change coexist with vague utopian hopes. […] The real struggle is going on now: the struggle for the meaning of this no—who will appropriate it? Who—if anyone—will translate it into a coherent alternate political vision? (Žižek 2006, 551)

In his opposition between the “kind of container,” in which experiences can paradigmatically coexist in discontinuous form, and the “coherent […] political vision,” a sustained, syntagmatic structure that relates experiences to one another meaningfully, Žižek, without using the term, evokes the familiar logic of narrative. Narrative is expected to lend coherence to the “confused, inconsistent, overdetermined meanings” that otherwise simply reside next to one another. The resonance of the new right-wing populism, in spite of its lack of narrativity, then, seems to suggest that political salience here does not depend on narrative.

**Symbolic forms and liminality**

Such a demise of the “symbolic form” of narrative has been prominently diagnosed as a symptom of the dawning computer age by media scholar Lev Manovich (1999). His notion of the symbolic form builds on Erwin Panofsky, who, in turn, had taken it from Ernst Cassirer, and the disciplinary and temporal distance the concept has traveled makes it hard to fully fix the term as Manovich understands it. For my purposes, his use might best be understood as referring to a particular logic of signification, a way of storing and transmitting experience that can be contrasted with other forms serving a similar cultural function but following different *modi operandi*. Indeed, Manovich’s main goal is to introduce the database
as the “symbolic form of the computer age” (Manovich 1999, 81) and to contrast its logic with that of narrative.

Accordingly, narrative as a symbolic form is characterized by its foregrounding of sequence, of syntagmatic coherence, a quality Manovich juxtaposes with the paradigmatic logic of the database, the elements of which signify not primarily by way of their connectivity but by way of their interchangeability (Manovich 1999, 89). Expanding on Manovich, and working along other presumed binary opposites of narrative, play would similarly constitute a symbolic form—one that is marked by nonlinearity, interactivity, speculative, rule-bound experimentation, and agonistic competition.\(^5\) Notably, these different forms do not have to be considered as polar opposites, and they come with considerable overlap, but Manovich’s discussion of narrative and database as distinct symbolic forms does draw attention to the extent to which symbolic logics other than narrative might help discuss cultural phenomena.

In Manovich’s account, database and narrative constitute “natural ‘enemies’” that are “[c]ompeting for the same territory of human culture, … to make meaning out of the world” (Manovich 1999, 85), and while he does acknowledge that these forms “produce endless hybrids” (Manovich 1999, 92), much of the work in his wake has focused on refining the opposition between different symbolic forms rather than focusing on the extent to which important cultural work happens precisely in the gray zones between them, most notably in the liminal zone between narrative and other forms.\(^6\) Such an approach is, for example, able to retain the narrative turn’s interest in world making while simultaneously focusing on the role other symbolic logics play. While much conceptual work needs to be done to harvest the analytic potential of such a perspective on narrative liminality,\(^7\) I will use the remaining pages of this chapter to read select instances of new right-wing rhetoric for how they tap into the liminal zone between the symbolic forms of play, database, and narrative.

**Political speech as play and database**

Indeed, “play” might be an immensely productive register to think about some of the more puzzling aspects of new right rhetoric, as Katja Kanzler and Marina Scharlaj have already shown. Working to analyze the “mostly non-narrative nature of [Trump’s] campaign” (Kanzler and Scharlaj 2017, 321), they point out:

> Whereas exchanges between pop and politics used to be organized around the symbolic form of narrative and, more specifically, the genre of melodrama, Trump’s campaign orients itself toward what has been called the “gamedoc”–genre of reality tv in which the competitive game dominates as symbolic form. Among other things, this has had a grave impact on pop-cultural forms of political critique, which have been trained on the debunking of narratives. The symbolic logic of Trump’s campaign is not just tied to a new invective style of electoral politics, it has also preempted and deflated much pop-critique, recoding critical attacks in ways that actually strengthen the candidate. (Kanzler and Scharlaj 2017, 319)

As Kanzler and Scharlaj argue, in his style (but also in his biography as a reality-tv star, of course), Trump is able to evoke the less-narrative symbolic order of the competitive reality tv show. While “narrative elements have become significantly reduced in his campaign communication in ways many observers register as an absence of semantic substance and coherence” (Kanzler and Scharlaj 2017, 321), it is precisely this absence of coherence and its
substitution by a logic of competition that has allowed him to survive “debunking” criticism and attacks that continued to operate on the narrative plane and that hoped to derail his campaign by pointing to its incoherence and incongruity.  

While Kanzler and Scharlaj, interested in the invective mode, focus on the agonistic quality of play, this symbolic form can also go a long way in reading as “ludic” some of the—in traditional terms—outrageous claims, by Trump and his followers, as well as the German new right populists. Read thus, the goal of this game is finding and making the most outrageous statement possible while still getting away with it. Similar to a bullfight with decency (or: political correctness), the participants here make more and more risky moves only to pull away in the very last second, and the spectacular, winning quality lies not in the content of what is being said but in the skill of provocation. During the election, Donald Trump’s claim that “the Second Amendment people” might be able to stop Hillary Clinton, presumably by assassinating her, along with the multi-day controversy the statement spawned, is a prime example of this particular kind of playfulness. Notably made off the cuff, the full statement—“Though the Second Amendment people, maybe there is, I don’t know”—contained just enough vagueness and deniability to be survivable.  

Accordingly, when Republican politicians, voters, and pundits then defended Trump by saying that he was joking, this was not just political tribalism; it also spoke to the suspension of seriousness the symbolic form of play entails: made as part of this “game,” the statement embraced play’s experimentation: It had long opted out of the referential contract that usually operates politics; it worked not indexically, referring to a real Clinton killed in a real world, but ludically, as a rhetorical stunt that showed the candidate’s trolling prowess because he was able to say such a thing without being burned. This particular ludic stunt quality was captured succinctly in the reaction, first visually and later verbally, of the “man in the red shirt” seated behind Trump as he made the remarks. The scene that shows his shock and disbelief, his mouthing of “wow” clearly recognizable, was replayed many times before he was found and interviewed. The visual and his remarks confirmed that he was jolted by the moment and that he despite (or because) of being “taken aghast” was going to vote for Trump. And his insistence that Trump was “trying to make a joke” underscores how solidly the crowd was operating in a ludic framework (CNN Newsroom 2017).  

Very similar dynamics, if less well documented, also operate in the German context, most compactly captured perhaps in Akif Pirinçci’s (failed) attempt at a similar stunt at a PEGIDA rally in 2015. Trying to get as close as possible to the taboo without being burned, the author suggested that German elites would like to gas the PEGIDA followers, but that, “unfortunately, the concentration camps were currently inoperative” (Sueddeutsche.de 2017). While Pirinçci had miscalculated—the PEGIDA organizers condemned his statements and his publisher ceased selling his books in protest—the underlying goal was the same as Trump’s: a “ludic” transgression, in which Pirinçci would make one of the most taboo statements in a German cultural contexts, regret over the absence of concentration camps, while hoping to get away with it by throwing in just enough obfuscation and deniability to stay in the game: after all, he did not wish for the camps to be restored, he alleged, in “ironic” exaggeration, that the German elites did so.  

Apart from such ludic dynamics, the new right populism’s lack “of semantic substance and coherence” (Kanzler and Scharlaj 2017, 321) also heavily resonates with the symbolic form of database as Manovich understands it. In this context, Kellyanne Conway, the Trump adviser who added the notion of “alternative facts” to the political lexicon, offers particularly intriguing examples: In July 2017, she appeared on television with flashcards with the words “Conclusion,” “Collusion,” “Illusion,” and “Delusion” to “argue” that the media’s interest
in the Trump campaign’s collusion with Russia was in fact delusional (Holpuch 2017). A few days later, she suggested in an interview with CNN’s Chris Wallace that in the context of “this ridiculous Russian Collusion Delusion” the American public were “promised the next Watergate and we don’t even have water polo, we don’t have a watermelon” (Walters 2017). While there is a certain ludic quality to both appearances, the underlying poetic principle in both cases is clearly that of paradigmatic interchangeability: In the first case, the phonetic similarity between the four nouns is meant to suggest that they occupy the same semantic space and can simply be exchanged for one another; in the second case, they are all, obviously, compound nouns involving water—which, by suggesting a general interchangeability of the serious and the banal, invariably also waters down the impact of “Watergate” as the epitome of political scandal. As spectacular, and as bizarre, as these two appearances may be, they sit particularly well with a political style that more generally discards a coherent, narrative political vision in favor of a database of underconnected statements from which followers can arbitrarily choose, combine, and recombine.

While Conway thus is an extreme example, thinking about new right populism in general (and Donald Trump’s political appeal in particular) as being informed by a database logic can help explain his success in face of his incoherence. In a widely circulated post-election article on “The Data that Turned the World Upside Down,” Grassegger and Krogerus (2017) wrote about the Trump campaign’s data operation and the involvement of the advertising firm Cambridge Analytica. For the company that specializes on micro-targeting, i.e., on crafting a tailored message for every consumer/voter, “Trump’s striking inconsistencies, his much-criticized fickleness, and the resulting array of contradictory messages, suddenly turned out to be his great asset.” He did not provide a coherent narrative that his campaign would have to make voters believe in. Instead, he offered a vast database of mostly incoherent and incongruent sound bites, memes from which voters could pick and choose to manufacture their own projection of what they thought he said or meant.

Speaking more generally, on both sides of the Atlantic, the new right populism is marked by a particular ideological mobility in which, apart from a fear of (Muslim) immigration, most other aspects, such as the views on finance, welfare, environment, gay and transgender rights, or infrastructure investments, can be added or dropped and freely recombined into countless configurations. The uncut PEGIDA interviews with their endless stream of people worrying over their retirement money, about the tax evasion of soccer manager Uli Hoeneß, about Salafists, about the border, and about a general disconnect between the political elite and the people, underscore how much these rallies and their anti-immigration sentiment served as a “container” full of “confused, inconsistent, overdetermined meanings” and how much the average PEGIDA supporters’ expression is more meaningfully described as reflecting a database of underconnected fears freely floating in paradigmatic association.

Conclusion

The transnational rise of new right populisms, it thus seems, is not driven by a coherent vision, a narrative, simple, grand, or not, that makes sense of the world. Coming after the demise of grand narratives, it instead operates based on a toolbox of memes, a database of elements out of which their followers, in an interactive, rule-bound, and often experimental “ludic” process, construct their own narratives. Narrative alone, therefore, is not a helpful concept to understand the rhetoric of new right populism on either side of the Atlantic because it suggests a coherence these movements do not have and, apparently, do not need. Rather than subject the world to one coherent, grand-narrative interpretation, they dwell in
the liminal areas narrative shares with other symbolic forms. Focusing on this liminality does not mean denying these movements narrativity altogether. But to understand the transnational success of new right populism, to understand how playful provocation and incoherent memes came to dominate politics, it is imperative to see how even the more narrative moments in these movements are fueled by other symbolic forms, such as play or database. After all, it might be precisely their non-narrative, fragmented, incoherent qualities that lend them such transnational mobility.

Notes

1 This methodological framework is heavily influenced by the conceptual work done in the “Narrative Liminalities” working group, and it owes massively to Katja Kanzler, Stefan Schubert, and Frank Usbeck.

2 For a more detailed reading of these two specific examples, see my respective essays (Herrmann 2009, 2015). Notably, thus focusing on the narrative quality of politics also allows for a particular form of interpretive audience engagement resembling a “popular narratology” (Herrmann 2015, 323): By discussing narrative and politics online, newspaper readers engage the narrative quality of politics in a particular textual-critical way, as “amateur narratologists,” as Jason Mittell has famously described the new, “sophisticated” pleasures of fan engagement of “complex television” (Mittell 2006, 38).

3 For German language sources, my translations throughout.

4 PEGIDA followers often lamented that their freedom of speech was censored by political correctness, and one possible reading of this is as an externalizing projection of such speechlessness: Faced with the inability to string together their experiences in a working narrative, they blamed outside censorship for their aphasia.

5 Play was cast as non-narrative most poignantly in the disciplinary debates about whether video games were a matter of narratology or ludology. For examples of this debate, see Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan (2006).

6 Most notably, N. Katherine Hayles (2007) has recast the binary as “symbiotic” rather than antagonistic.

7 As of 2018, such conceptual work is being done in a transnational research network funded by the DFG/German Research Foundation. For more information, please see www.narrative-liminality.de.

8 This dynamic is illustrated, e.g. by the futility of contrasting Trump’s behavior in office with his comments before. Accordingly, when CNN’s Jake Tapper, curiously invoking play, says that there is “a game we like to play around the office called, ‘Is there a tweet for that?’ Meaning has President Trump ever before criticized President Obama for doing the exact same thing he is now doing,” he actually does engage in a game of sorts. However, in this game, showing the incongruence between word and deed does not effectively criticize the president as it would were his appeal based on a coherent narrative of personal identity, character, and values. Instead, Tapper’s framing, involuntarily, underscores that the criticism really is “just that: “a game we like to play around the office” (CNN 2017).

9 The same textual dynamics regulate the internet practice of trolling, a verbal game that similarly suspends seriousness and that is organized mostly around (more or less) skillful provocation.

10 Note how, as the game progressed during election season, Trump had amassed enough “credits” to make more plainly absurd and outrageous statements (such as his doubling down on how Obama being the founder of ISIS was not meant metaphorically but literally) without his campaign being seriously hurt (“Yes”).

11 The man’s ambivalent reaction of pleasurable disbelief would be called a “pop” in the terminology of professional wrestling, another register immensely helpful for understanding the dynamics around Donald Trump’s political success. (For more on politics, representation and wrestling, see Herrmann (2016)).

12 The Guardian’s Amanda Holpuch picks up on this by titling her article on the incident “Cards Against Humanity,” in allusion to the popular party game in which participants are forced to make taboo and politically incorrect statements. Conway chided her critics afterwards for not having enough humor to appreciate her performance.

13 For a related, if inverse, perspective, see O’Neill (2016), who reads Trump as akin to a machine learning algorithm trained on the data set of his supporters.
Bibliography


“Yes, I’d Lie to you.” The Economist September 10, 2016.