Drive or Die – The Role of Narratives in the Sweden Democrats' Political Storytelling of Transport Politics

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Abstract:

In this thesis, I examine the political storytelling of the Sweden Democrats, a far-right populist party that has steadily gained political momentum in the past 15 years. Notably, they have positioned themselves as defenders of automobile society, a topic which has become increasingly prominent in Swedish political discourse. By using narrative analysis, this thesis aims to investigate how the Sweden Democrats' portrayal of cars intersects with their ethno-nationalist and techno-optimist politics and to analyse the main components of their narrative. The research uncovers a variety of articulated justifications for car use and identifies potential emerging trends within the party's discourse. Drawing comparisons between the car and the Swedish welfare era ('folkhem'), the Sweden Democrats explicitly link driving with the expression of Swedish values, framing less automobility as a threat to the Swedish national identity. The party also utilised the car as a populist symbol, leveraging it to gain political traction by portraying themselves as the voice of 'the common people' and casting other political parties as adversaries – of both the car and the people. Furthermore, the instrumentalisation of the car also enabled the party to justify an ethno-nationalist and racist political agenda, which significantly constrained future outlooks for alternative transport modes. The Sweden Democrats presented two contrasting visions of the future – an electrified car utopia and a motionless car dystopia – effectively delegitimising alternative paths forward. The research underscores the need to move beyond analysing the ties between fossil fuels and the far-right and turn attention to the objects and practices enabled by it.

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1. Introduction

The continuation of fossil-fuelled vehicles for private usage significantly contributes to a range of societal and environmental issues. This self-perpetuating system has been referred to as automobility. Automobility does not merely concern the cars themselves but the complex machinery supporting their usage, consisting of technologies, societal practices, cultures, and norms (Sheller & Urry 2000; Böhm et al. 2006). Today, most Western countries are car-dependent; Sweden is no exception. Despite transport emissions standing for almost one-fourth of the country's yearly emissions, the topic of automobility is seldom discussed in Swedish politics. Few politicians dare to question the car as a human right; doing so would be tantamount to political suicide (Hägerstrand in Lundin 2015, 207). Andreas Carlgren, previous minister of environment, stated: 'We should chase emissions – not motorists' (ibid, 208). This quote is somewhat reflective of most party stances on transport politics today. While its environmental impacts are acknowledged, the car is never accused as the root of the problem. Most suggested solutions are characterised by system rationalisation, not any structural changing measures which aim to replace the car with other transport modes or decrease car travel by lifestyle changes (ibid, 208)

The previous government coalition (2014-2022), consisting of the Social Democrats and the Green Party, attempted to tackle the issue of emissions from the transport sector through the reduction mandate — a part of a broader EU initiative. The law on the reduction mandate (2017: 1201) was first issued in 2017 to decrease emissions from traditional fossil fuels by providing a long-term policy instrument by incorporating biofuels. The gradual increase would continue until 2030, during which petrol, diesel, and kerosene would consist of 28, 66 and 27 per cent biofuel, respectively (ibid, 5 §; 5 §a).

Since its implementation, the reduction mandate has been a target for vociferous criticism from the Sweden Democrats (the SD from hereon), the right-wing populist party. They were the only party who voted against its implementation. The SD declared the reduction mandate unnecessary and expensive in countless follow-up motions, interpellations, opinion pieces, and ad campaigns (e.g. Kinnunen et al. 2021; Morell 2022; Sverigedemokraterna 2022a; Bäckström Johansson and Ahlqvist 2023). Rising prices on fuels were considered intolerable – a punishment

to Swedes. When asked about the environmental implications of lowering the reduction mandate during the 2022 election, Jimmie Åkesson, the party leader, repeated the argument: 'The world is not getting better because we here in Sweden are getting it worse' (Sverigedemokraterna 2022d).

Something is happening in Swedish transport politics. The car, an indisputable commodity for many years, now needs defending. The right to drive is a rising topic not only among the SD; the Conservatives and Christian Democrats have also joined the ride. Most notably after the media attention after the rise of *Bensinupproret 2.0* (transl. 'the Petrol Rebellion 2.0') (Arvidsson et al. 2019). During the 2022 election, the aforementioned parties promised to significantly cut petrol and diesel prices and lower the reduction mandate (Olsson et al. 2022; Sverigedemokraterna 2022b; 2022c).

Following the election, the new Tidö-Government was formed, consisting of the Conservatives, Christian Democrats and Liberals with the support of the SD. While the SD were not given any official governmental positions, they acquired key positions in parliamentary committees and an acknowledged role in shaping, informing, and supporting policies. On May 7th, 2023, the Tidö-parties posted a joint opinion piece announcing the cutbacks on the reduction mandate to 6 per cent for petrol and diesel during the period 2024-2026 (Kristersson et al. 2023), which was voted through on November 30th, 2023, along with the reduction levels for 2027 also being abolished (2023/24: MJU5). Instead, the sole focus should be on the electrification of the car fleet. Lowering the reduction mandate is currently the most substantial shift in Swedish climate change mitigation policy, for which the SD has taken much credit.

By only looking at SD's stance on biofuel and the reduction mandate, the party may appear as a defender of fossil fuels, as many far-right actors (Daggett 2018; Lockwood 2018; Malm & the Zetkin Collective 2021). However, they have also taken a techno-optimist approach: 'Electrification is the future of motoring, but electrification in turn requires a good supply of reliable, cheap, and environmentally friendly electricity through nuclear power.' (Sverigedemokraterna 2024). Can the shift to promoting nuclear electrification be seen as a 'green turn' compared to SD's previous denialist/sceptical stance? Caiani and Lubarda (2023) suggest that the recent 'green turn' in far-right environmental communication has more to do with grasping political opportunities rather than being ideologically anchored. Most far-

right parties, the authors explain, have adopted a 'conditional environmentalism', which refers to an ecological modernisation where climate mitigation does not impede economic growth (ibid, 9). Much of SD's environmental policy suggestions align with Caiani and Lubarda's findings, as they only point towards technological solutions in a somewhat near future. While the SD seemingly prefers fossil fuels over biofuel, it does not appear to be an inherent link between the party and fossil-fuelled dreams. They have realised that petroculture is a dead end if they wish to keep automobility alive.

With this said, how should one interpret SD's car craze? The car is described not only as a necessary and sometimes only accessible transport tool but also as protecting the driver and their family. Painting public transport or walking as unsafe travelling modes in an increasingly violent society, the car provides a feeling of freedom and safety (Sverigedemokraterna 2024). They wholeheartedly embrace automobility, but to do so, they must speak both about the reduction mandate and electrification. This has led them to argue for a 'phase-out with liability' of sorts, echoing the Social Democrats' previous stance on nuclear power (Socialdemokraterna 2006, 6). Some scholars have argued that the debate about fuel prices has become part of public opinion formation. For example, Enbom (in Olsson et al. 2023, 4-5) points out how this issue easily fits into SD's story about the Social Democrats giving way to the Green Party, the main enemy in far-right circles. Ekengren Oscarsson (in Arvidsson et al. 2019, 4) stated that Sweden's underdeveloped urban-rural debate is a dimension of conflict that characterised the political discourse. While I agree with both statements, in the context of SD's politics, I cannot help but ask myself: are they defending the car or something they consider inherently Swedish?

In this thesis, I explore how the SD expresses the car in narrative form. It contributes to the research field on the political ecologies of the far-right (e.g. Lockwood 2018; Forchtner 2020; Vihma et al. 2020; Malm & the Zetkin Collective 2021; Fiorino 2022; Caini and Lubarda 2023; Allen et al. 2024). While the literature has covered the far-right's relation to petroculture, less attention has been given to examining the specific habits and objects enabled by the petroleum infrastructure. As LeMenager (2014) writes, decoupling such memories and practices is a primary challenge for ecological narrative. Using the car as the object of focus enables me to explore associations and symbols indirectly associated with petroculture.

Through narrative analysis, I examine accounts by party members and relevant documents, analysing the relations between themes, characters, and plot points and evaluating them in light of relevant literature. My research question boils down to this: How does the portrayal of the car in the Sweden Democrats' political storytelling intersect with their ethno-nationalist and techno-optimist ideologies? I aim to piece together a cohesive storyline on how the SD conceptualises and (de)politicises the car, by looking beyond the reduction mandate and single policy matters to understand how the car can act as an agent to construct a national identity and achieve national goals.

The structure of the thesis proceeds as follows: The background chapter begins by describing the Swedish *folkhem* era, the emergence of automobility within it, and the political discourse around technological innovation during this time. This is followed by the theoretical chapter, where I elaborate on my conceptual framework, consisting of far-right populism, narrative analysis, and the usage of golden ages within the far-right. In the methodology chapter, I lay out my epistemological stance, methods, and ethical considerations and positionality. The empirical analysis is divided into three parts following a classic narrative structure: an equilibrium, an equilibrium disrupted, and an equilibrium (re-)established. Each chapter focuses on a specific plotline, and the meaning of these is then analysed and summarised. Part 1 begins by describing the SD's depiction of the car's significance for the *folkhem*. Part 2 focuses on their understanding of the car in the present day, where automotive society is depicted as under threat. Part 3 explores how the SD envisions the future of the car. I then bring up some general implications of SD's storytelling. The final chapter summarises the research findings.

2. Driving into the future – The folkhem, modernity and the breakthrough of automobility in Sweden

Folkhem literally means 'people's home', although the translation fails to capture its multifaced meaning. In Sweden, the term was originally incorporated by the conservatives Rudolf Kjellén and his son-in-law Manfred Björkquist, yet the Social Democrats, with Per Albin Hansson in the lead, were by far the most successful. His now famous folkhem speech in the 1928 debate symbolises a turning point for the social democratic attitude toward people and class (Götz 2004, 99). It encapsulated the party's efforts to construct a society based on equality, solidarity, and confidence in progress, in which the labourer became synonymous with 'the common folk' (Hellström 2010, 97). The Social Democrats took power in Sweden in 1932 and held it until 1976. Lundberg and Åmark (2001) write that while the ideas the Social Democrats held were not always new, the will and capability to do so definitely were. Some examples of implemented policies included initiatives on the economic position of wives and children to the father, the active labour market policy, and legislation on people's pensions (ibid, 161-3). However, the building blocks of the *folkhem* are far more encompassing. Jansson (2018, 86) considers the *folkhem* to consist of five interconnected projects: ideological, state-building, economic, social, and nationalistic. The concept of *folkhemmet* is deeply ingrained in the Swedish political discourse and national identities today; it implicitly references Swedish people and what makes up their Swedishness – in Sweden and the rest of the world (Andersson 2009; Norocel 2013).

Since the inter-war period, Sweden has been considered sophisticated and socially advanced nationally and internationally; in other words, it is especially modern. The model of society in Sweden, with its extensive welfare system, effective production and happy citizens, managed to encapsulate the notion of a modern society (Andersson 2009, 97). Notably, the construction of the *folkhem* was not only a question of building a new country but also the making of the modern Swede. This was characterised by techno-rationalism and scientific underpinnings, such to the extent that people would have no choice but to conform to the new standards of modern life (Larsson 1994; Olsson 2017). Organising society to the

new modern standard required a break with tradition, institutional renewal, and the introduction of standardised modernisation of techniques (Larsson 1994, 167). However, since the 1980s the Social Democrats' has opted for a rebranding of the *folkhem* to make Sweden more attractive for international investments and financial capital, but also as multicultural and environmentally conscious (Lundberg & Åmark 2001, 173; Socialdemokraterna 2006, 6).

In making the *folkhem*, mobility became one of the defining traits of modernity and the welfare state (O'Dell 2016). Automobility's breakthrough in Sweden happened between 1953 and 63. The economy was left relatively unaffected after the Second World War. Therefore, mass motorism expanded earlier and faster than in its Nordic neighbours and the rest of Europe (Andréasson et al. 1997). Additionally, Sweden had an unopposed national car industry. However, other differences also facilitated motorism in the Swedish context. The socioeconomic costs of motorism and levels of taxation on cars were far less restrictive and did not halt the spread of mass motorism or car ownership as it did overseas (ibid, 25-6).

There is no space here to engage at length with the actors involved in Sweden's automobile development; existing literature already provides a more than satisfying depiction of this expansion (see e.g. Andréasson et al. 1997; Blomkvist 2001; Lundin 2008; Henriksson 2011) What is most important to note is that the network consisted of a variety of organisations with *Svenska Vägföreningen* (The Swedish Road Association) serving as the umbrella organisation (Blomkvist 2001, 19), many of the groups had strong commercial powers which supported the financial and material operations (Andréasson et al. 1997, 29).

The cohesion and consensus in this network did not mean there were no public figures (Martinsson 1960; Tengström 2009), politicians, or public authorities who were suspicious of the network's intentions or the car in general. Conservative circles feared that the development of mass motorism would escalate out of government control and without their proposed restrictions (Andréasson et al. 1997, 32). Yet, most of the critique was drowned out by the overwhelming belief that the car is a human right. Concern was non-existent among the network members; their conviction was that motorism benefited society and would contribute to increased welfare. As they saw it, they were merely promoting the interests of consumers (ibid, 32).

The Social Democrats had previously shown scepticism towards the car, as they considered it an upper-class accessory. However, in the mid-1950s, their stance drastically shifted. In the book *Har vi råd med bilen?* (*Can we afford the car?*) from 1956, Sten Andersson, a social democrat, writes: 'car owners are now in all social classes, and we are breaking down the barriers that still exist', and: 'the question is whether the development of motoring is not the most tangible aspect of the democratisation of our time' (as quoted in Lindgren 2008, 5). Meanwhile, the railroad, the main novelty in the previous century, was considered outdated. Its very form became associated with the totalitarian systems of Stalin and Hitler, and many European thinkers regarded the car as the antidote against communism (Blomkvist 2001, 183).

The optimism towards a technological future was dominant within the Social Democratic Party. Technological progress was considered inevitable. In the election magazine *Aktuellt for dej* (sic!) (*Topical for you!*), the reader follows an ideal Swedish family on a journey throughout Sweden, discovering the latest modern technologies. This was, of course, done in their new Volvo PV 444: 'Since Sigurd has a car – for work, and for the joy of having a car – they did not have to think about the mode of transport.' (as quoted in Blomkvist 2001, 6). Blomkvist (ibid, 9) interestingly points out that developments in technology and science were something that profoundly affected the social democratic ideology:

> The party's new task was given by progress itself, by the inherent systemic characteristics of the welfare state, by its intrinsic weight. The Social Democrats' idea was that the role of the state, and thus of the party, should be strengthened because, according to the analysis, the people in the 1950s demanded 'public goods'.

A more technological society required social democratic politics. Hence, we see the strong associations between the welfare state and the promise of a better, more affluent life and technological progress established in Swedish politics.

3. Conceptual framework

In this chapter, I present the ideas that frame and guide my analysis and contextualise how the far-right operates within these concepts to provide an understanding of my approach to analysing the material.

Defining populism

Populism entails politics based on the distinction between two homogenous and antagonistic camps, the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' (Müllers 2017). The interpretation of populism's relationship to liberal democracy has sparked longstanding debates, with some viewing it as an outright threat to democracy while others see it as its most authentic manifestation (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017). The term 'populism' has not escaped criticism, often being wielded as a political battle term thrown against political opponents or deemed too vague and applicable to every political figure. Nevertheless, recent interpretations, particularly scholarship around the 'performative turn', have preferred a minimal definition. Mudde and Kaltwasser (ibid, 7) have defined populism as a thin-centred ideology, indicating that it cannot thrive without attaching itself to a right-wing or left-wing host ideology. It provides a: 'mental map through which individuals analyse and comprehend political reality. It is not so much a coherent ideological tradition as a set of ideas that, in the real world, appears in combination with quite different, and sometimes contradictory, ideologies.' (ibid, 6). Its vagueness allows for exploring its ambivalent features depending on the political context.

'Far-right populism' (FRP) is a contested term, with ongoing debates about its definition, existence, how it should be distinguished from other ideologies and social movements, and characterisation vis-à-vis terms like right-wing extremism, the radical right, and the 'alt-right'. So far, there is no scholarly consensus on whether far-right populism is an ideology, philosophy, specific media phenomenon, or political style (Wodak 2018, 23). For instance, Rydgren (2018) argues that the term 'right-wing populism' is outdated, advocating instead for recognising a spectrum of ethno-nationalist parties, all exhibiting populist elements. Unlike ethno-nationalists, the radical right rejects the state of current democratic systems and their institutions. However, the boundaries between ethno-nationalism and radical right sometimes blur (ibid, 9). On the opposite spectrum, Brubaker (2017,

360) definiens populism as a 'discursive and stylistic repertoire'. This approach focuses more on the discursive and linguistic elements, emphasising the performative and communicative aspects rather than the ideological underpinnings (Jansen 2011; de Vreese et al. 2018). Hence, a rather generous inclusion of various kinds of populism. I find this definition promising since I am interested in the narratology of the SD. However, I agree with Wodak (2018, 25) that FRP should *not only* be seen as a rhetorical style or a media performance phenomenon. The ideology that is communicated must also be accounted for. The fusion of content and form is at the root of FRP's success (Pels 2012).

Apart from the definition of populism in the first paragraph, I would like to add four elements Wodak (2018, 26) identifies. While all FRP parties do not embrace all these characteristics, they are often realised in specific combinations of:

1. Nationalism/nativism/anti-pluralism: Far-right parties portray a homogenous community often rooted in nativist terms. The homeland is strongly valued and needs protection from 'invaders'.

2. Anti-élitism: Anti-elitist and anti-intellectual, often accompanied by scepticism towards the EU and a preference for reducing democracy to majoritarian principles reflecting 'the will of the people'.

3. Authoritarianism: Featuring a strong charismatic leader who alters between championing the common people and the role of the 'strict father'. The party exhibits strong hierarchical structure.

4. Conservatism/Historical revisionism: Far-right parties often represent traditional, conservative values and seek to construct a narrative past that reinforces the mythos of the 'homeland', where only those deemed 'true' members are deserving of social welfare.

Narratives, far-right populist storytelling, and the fantasmatic logic

A common assumption in discourse theory is that 'language profoundly shapes one's view of the world and reality, instead of being only a neutral medium mirroring it' (Hajer & Versteeg 2005, 176). This entails analysing linguistic objects, e.g. narratives, storylines, and metaphors, to understand why problems are understood in specific ways and how particular framings of a debate contribute to

fixing or legitimising certain elements whilst others are rendered problematic (Hajer 1995).

The concept of narration becomes a central focus in analysing how the SD has constructed the meaning of automobility. Narratives serve as a form of configuration which actors use to make sense of the world and order it in a specific manner. Within traditions such as anthropology and psychology, narrative has long been recognised as fundamental to the human condition (Levi-Strauss 1978; Bruner 1991). Miskimmon et al. (2015, 5) define narrative as distinguished by emplotment: 'entailing an initial situation or order, a problem that disrupts that order, and a resolution that reestablishes order'. These configurations, or plots, 'weave together a complex of events to make a single story' (Polkinghorne 1988, 19). No clear distinctions are made between the real and fictional in narratology (Freistein & Gadinger 2019). Storytelling is subjective and links to practical judgement, selective interpretation, and personal experiences; the sequence of events does not need to be real (Somers 1994; Patterson & Monroe 1998). Further, it offers a setting, characters (heroes, villains, and victims), and moral lessons (Jones, Shanahan & McBeth, 2014).

While myth-like narratives occur on an individual level, they more often emerge out of collective processes (Jung 1959, in McFadden 2022, 559). Gavriely-Nuri (2017, 124-5) stresses that narratives: 'form part of a group's identity', set in a social and cultural context. This is particularly pertinent in the context of FRP, as its foundational values rest on an imagined community demarcated by signifiers of 'us' versus 'them'. Narration also plays a pivotal role in ideology formation, further underscoring its collective nature as a 'set(s) of ideas by which men posit, explain and justify ends and means of organised social action, and specifically political action, irrespective of whether such action aims to preserve, amend, uproot or rebuild a given order.' (McFadden 2022; Seliger 1976, 14).

This does not mean that narratives cannot be strategically broken, something frequently attempted by FRP actors (Wodak 2015; Ekstöm et al. 2020 472-3). FRP storytelling is distinguished by its varied (and sometimes contradictory) usage of rhetorical devices such as excuses, calculated breaches of taboos, fearmongering, and conspiracy theories (Wodak 2015; 2018, 26-32; Freistein et al. 2022). Koschorke (2018, 17) highlights the 'ontological indifference' of narratives; what makes a story convincing is not merely its truth claims but believable storylines and

characters. Tragic plotlines are typically applied as they call for urgent political action and quick solutions. But utopian, romantic, or myth-like plots are also utilised (Freistein et al. 2022, 9). The latter is often used to describe a national past as a better place, in other words, a 'golden age' by far-right leaders.

I use the 'logics approach' to gain a deeper understanding of the ideological dynamics underpinning SD's political storytelling (Glynos & Howarth 2007; Glynos 2008). This stems from the Lacanian perspective on fantasy, which assumes that the subject is constituted by an unescapable ontological lack. The subject enters a world with already existing symbols alien to them, which they will never fully grasp (Kinnvall 2018). Lacan's subject is never autonomous but constantly relies on master signifiers (woman, man, Swedish, British, etc.) in the construction of the self for recognition in the social order (Epstein 2011, Eberle 2018). This implies that the subject's understanding of self always occurs through the other, resulting in a perpetual sense of lack – the lack of a stable identity, complete sense of self, and certainty (Kinnwall 2018, 531).

The Lacanian (1978, 1988) notion of subjectivity is positioned in the realm of narrative. Both point to notions of a problem, aspirations towards an idealised state, and a sense of wholeness – the beatific aspect of fantasy. Conversely, impending doom is implied in the event of failure – the horrific aspect of fantasy (Eberle 2019, 248-9). Central in Lacanian theory is recognising the impossibility of realising one's fantasy, as it can only survive if it remains unsatisfied (Glynos 2008, 283). Still, the fantasy must maintain the illusion of attainability. Fantasising transforms the subject's ontological lack into an empirical one, a lack of particular 'objects' whose recapture promises the restoration of wholeness (Eberle 2019, 246). The pursuit of a complete identity thus manifests through acquiring certain 'objects', taking the form of different consumer goods, sexual partners, and political goals, often expressed through concepts of freedom, security, and justice. However, empirical objects inevitably fall short of filling the ontological lack, leading to the construction of new narratives to explain why the desired object is out of reach (Eberle 2019, 247; Glynos 2008; 283).

Glynos (2008, 277-8) identifies three types of logics: the social, political and the fantasmatic. Together, they capture the conditions that make a practice 'work' or 'tick', thus making it possible to understand how a practice becomes possible, intelligible, and vulnerable. While my thesis predominantly focuses on fantasmatic

logics, it is imperative to clarify the roles of the preceding two logics to comprehend its operation. If social logics characterise a practice through rules and norms, the political logics provides a framework for understanding social practices' emergence, contestation and/or transformation over time. Political logics aim to capture the collective mobilisation processes that occur when social relations' political dimension emerges. This involves the dynamic processes of constructing, stabilising, strengthening, weakening, and dismantling political boundaries (ibid, 278). The fantasmatic logics contributes to understanding *why* specific practices and regimes grip subjects, adding an explanatory and critical layer to the process of accounting for change and continuity. This is significant, since grand narratives in today's politics only work through constant attempts to remove them from everyday political squabbling, making them less likely to be challenged (Freistein & Gadinger 2019, 223). Thus, by utilising the layer of fantasmatic logics, it is possible to understand the resistance to change in social practices and the speed and direction when change happens (Glynos 2008, 278).

Like narratives, fantasmatic logics does not assume a neat distinction between dimensions (social, political and fantasmatic). By moving problems from the political arena to the fantasmatic, contested objects may turn apolitical, as their meaning becomes altered and underlying issues are ignored. For example, lies or 'alternative facts' are made irrelevant if they evoke strong emotional appeal, and 'political correctness' is often ridiculed. This makes political contestation challenging, as an apolitical object cannot be addressed by concrete political promises (Freistein & Gadinger 2019, 223).

Freistein and Gadinger (2019, 223-4) illustrate how one can interpret the populist storytelling utilised by far-right actors by applying the element of fantasmatic logics. Narendra Modi was re-elected as the Indian prime minister despite failing to implement previous promises of economic growth. This can be explained by his Hindu-nationalist and anti-Muslim stance, even mobilising large numbers of voters whom his policies had previously harmed. Modi plays on the appeal to a fantasy where (otherwise heterogeneous) India is characterised by unity and purity. Donald Trump's 'Make America Great Again' slogan has little to do with everyday politics but proposes a vision appealing to his political audience (ibid, 223-4).

Similar parallels can be drawn to SD's ambivalent definition of Swedishness. While they continuously claim the Swedish identity and values need protection, the

terms 'Swedish' and 'Swedishness' are not defined by the party (Lindholm 2023). Nevertheless, SD and the previous examples evoke feelings of pride among the voters and party members, a desire for a better life and attempts at depoliticisation. Fantasy contains a logic where 'the subject's very being is implicated', and its usage in storytelling provides points of identification (Glynos 2008, 283; Freistein & Gadinger 2019, 224). 'When successfully installed, a fantasmatic narrative hooks the subject – via the enjoyment it procures – to a given practice or order, or a promised future practice or order, thus conferring identity' (Glynos & Howarth 2007, 130).

The usage of golden ages

Lastly, I consider the concept of golden ages to be relevant. In the literature on nationalism and symbolism, referring to the 'Golden Age' is central to establishing political legitimacy, authority, and authenticity, functioning as continuity against untoward (unwelcomed) change, crisis, or decline (Smith 2009; Elgenius 2011; Karakaya 2018). According to Smith (2009), members of a nation may perceive this decline from a standard of former grandeur and national creativity, where the golden age reveals the nation in its 'honest state'. Further, he notes that golden ages serve as moral guidance to reverse the nation's bemoaned present decay (ibid, 34). Even though most far-right parties do not wish to return to past times in a literal sense, they gain direction to reconstruct their desired future, revealing the 'one true path' (Rydgren 2018). In other words, the narrative structure of golden ages is almost identical to Miskimmon et al.'s (2015) definition of narrative. It also showcases simplistic elements similar to fantasy, with only one desirable outcome. I consider the far-rights' rhetorical usage of golden ages to add a crucial layer when applied to narratives since the focus not only pinpoints the root of their frustration with the present state but constitutes the backbone for what society they wish to recreate.

The SD's ethnonationalist message is packaged with connotations of doom and decay, enemies within and without the nation and sentiments of nostalgia for a Sweden bygone (Hübinette & Lundström 2011; Elgenius & Rydgren 2017; 2019). As Smith (2011, 37) points out, using the past facilitates the interpretation of one's present situation. This is done through comparison, contrast and continuities of form: 'In the panorama of a nation's ethno-history, depicted as a series of colourful

tableaux, at once didactic and picturesque, the distant golden age represented that period, or moment, of pristine glory when the creative energies of the nation were at their most vigorous and their virtues most apparent' (ibid, 96).

The *folkhem* era is portrayed as the Swedish Golden Age, depicted as a time characterised by safety, a homogenous population, and social cohesion in which the Swedish nation is likened to a national family (Elgenius & Rydgren 2019, 590-1; Norocel 2016). Swedish democracy, Swedish values, and the Swedish people are depicted as interconnected. Further, the Swedish 'success story' and economic development during this time are depicted with strong parallels between the development of democracy and homogeneity (Elgenius & Rydgren 2019, 591). The SD contrast the idyllic aesthetics of 1950-60s Sweden with the present day where the *folkhem* is described to be on the brink of collapse due to the (unwelcomed) presence of migrant others and a political elite disconnected from the needs of the common people (ibid, 591). Elgenius and Rydgren (2022) ascribe the SD's electoral progress to successfully framing and synchronise perceived social problems because of migration, blaming the left and liberals, and providing solutions. With these concepts in mind, let's proceed to the methods chapter.

4. Methods

Epistemological stance

In this thesis, I employ a social constructivist philosophy of science. This perspective understands human knowledge as invented rather than discovered (Kukla 2000). The constructivist assumption is that the human world is neither given nor natural but of artifice; it is constructed (Kratochwil 2001). More specifically, I subscribe to the critical paradigm, which underscores power dynamics' ability to influence our representations of the world along the lines of particular patterns (Kincheloe 1997). Knowledge is produced by social, political, economic, and cultural values that crystalise over time (Ponterotto 2005). It considers the social world mediated by power relations in a constructed lived experience within social and historical contexts, shaping social reality (Ravenek & lberte Rudman, 2013). To quote Smith and Sparks (2005, 3): 'narratives do not spring from the minds of individuals but are social creations' (Smith & Sparkes, 2005, 3). The power dynamics of societies give rise to practices, systems, and situations of marginalisation (Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2017). Given the subject matter, I consider it important to take a critical approach. McFadden (2022) stresses the importance of uncovering the 'collective functions' of narratives to contribute to the knowledge production that attempts to anticipate, de-radicalise and counter the far-right. Taking a critical stance makes it possible to denounce the harmfulness of certain epistemologies.

Research methods

Data collection

My primary research approach was qualitative. I conducted five semi-structured interviews with members of the SD on the parliamentary and local levels. The two local politicians were also members of the SD interest group SD Motor. The interviews were conducted between October and November 2023 during my internship as a researcher assistant at the 'White Skin, Black Fuel' research project alongside three of my classmates. The interviews with Martin Kinnunen and Mattias Bäckström Johansson were conducted jointly with the internship group, while the remaining three interviews were conducted independently.

To identify potential key informants, I examined various political documents, watched political debates in parliament, browsed affiliated websites, and read opinion pieces. After identifying prominent figures who showed engagement in car politics and/or related topics, emails were sent out requesting an interview. In total, around 20 emails were sent out, which resulted in five interviews. To complement the primary data, I also examined materials on the SD's website and Facebook page, written opinion pieces, articles, interviews, and a series of political documents. Below is a table of the politicians I interviewed; the local politicians have been anonymised.

Name:	Position:
Martin Kinnunen	Environmental spokesperson for the SD
Mattias Bäckström Johansson	Party secretary for the SD
Thomas Morell	SD parliamentary and vice president in the transport committee
Informant 4	Local politician and member of SD Motor
Informant 5	Local party member and member of SD Motor

Interviews

I am primarily interested in identifying what Czarniawska (2004, 53) calls 'familiar narrative constructs'. Instead of being on the lookout for individual life stories, I am interested in organisational stories, familiarity, and recurring themes. Each community can be understood as a site of narrative production; the interview can thus become a site where the interviewer partakes in a narrative previously produced or becomes a microsite of narrative production (ibid, 53). One should, however, not assume that interviews automatically evoke narratives. The opposite may occur, in which narratives are consciously avoided. Then, the interviewer's task is to 'activate narrative production' (Holstein & Gubrium 1997, 123).

The interview guide was semi-structured and developed in Swedish. The first questions were straightforward and aimed to address their political positioning

regarding the reduction mandate. The other questions encouraged reflective answers and revolved around the car's role in Swedish welfare, as well as how they envisioned the future of the car. Encouraging the informants to reflect by themselves will, in a good scenario, generate questions or discussions the researcher may not have considered (Göransson 2019: 134). The interview questions also developed as I proceeded to do the interviews. When I realised a question did not encourage detailed responses or confusion, I went back and reviewed them. For example, one of my questions changed from: 'How would you describe the car's role in Swedish welfare?' to 'How would you describe the car's role in Swedish welfare *historically*?' and accompanied the question with a short prompt. The questions varied depending on whether the informant was a parliamentary or local politician. For a full overview of the questions, I refer the reader to the interview guide (Appendix 1 and 2).

The interviews were recorded, and quotes will be presented according to standardised tradition, which involves converting everyday speech into written text. To enhance readability, incomprehensible sentences, repetition, and grammatical errors are edited. However, these edits are made sparingly to ensure the original message remains intact and unaltered. All the interviews were conducted in Swedish and have been translated by me. Two informants requested that their quotes be proofread and approved before completion.

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) is a method for 'identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 79). It is an inductive approach where codes and themes emerge through intensive engagement with textual data (Smith et al. 2021). Given my chosen theoretical approach this method is best suited to analysing the conducted interviews. The first step involves familiarising oneself with the data by transcribing the recordings (Braun and Clarke 2022, 43). In the beginning stages, the researchers' task is not to dispute the informants' accounts or explain them with reference to theory but to try and understand it on its own terms (Smith et al. 2021, 203-4). The transcribing was facilitated through the transcription software Deepgram. However, as the interviews were in Swedish, I had to review each transcript thoroughly to ensure accuracy. The second step of TA requires a coding process. I printed out each transcription and

closely read them while underlining quotes with coloured pencils. Each colour represented a code label; for example, light blue referred to all quotes about the reduction mandate, red represented public transport, and so on. After coding all the interviews, I sorted the quotes and codes from each interview into themes in a computerised table column, where one side included the textual extracts and the other the name of the code and a short review. In the third step, all datasets from each interview were moved into a table, collated, sorted, and analysed into broader themes. In the fourth step, all themes are reviewed and refined. This gave me a better overview of the material and made it possible to identify what similar themes were brought up or when accounts differed. In the fifth step, I organised each theme based on how the car was conceived in past, present and future settings. The final and sixth step requires full articulation of the analysis, which, according to Braun and Clarke, must provide 'sufficient evidence of the themes within the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 93).

Ethics

Several ethical considerations need to be addressed when conducting research with human subjects, especially in the context of the far-right. Potential participants were emailed about the research project and that the material could be used for further research (e.g., additional articles or theses). They were also encouraged to ask further questions before deciding to participate. Participants were re-informed at the beginning of each interview about who I was and that they had the right to withdraw at any time. I did not use consent forms since some interviews were done online, additionally, having consent forms would be difficult to fill in and collect. I consider the politicians to consent to participate when agreeing to be interviewed (per email) and before starting the interview (verbally). While all informants declined when asked if they wanted anonymisation, I still decided to anonymise the local politicians by replacing their names with pseudonyms. However, I should add that despite alternations in their personal information, it is impossible to keep them entirely anonymous (Davies 2008, 60). The parliamentary politicians were not anonymised since they were already public figures.

I find it important to bring up some of the ethical concerns that arise in interviewing far-right affiliates. As Mondon and Winter (2021) write, most dilemmas boil down to the scholarly obligation of not harming the research subjects

(the risk here being that one might 'demonise' them), which comes into conflict with the moral imperative of wanting to separate oneself from xenophobic and racist views propagated by certain far-right parties or politicians. This has led some scholars to avoid interviewing far-right actors altogether for the sake of 'moral hygiene' (Gingrich and Banks 2006, 7). Mondon and Winter (2021) also warned that providing far-right actors with a platform risk normalising their message. While I consider it necessary to be aware of such concerns, I do not believe this research method should be necessarily abandoned. In terms of risks of demonisation, all informants, to a varying degree, possess powerful political positions. In this context, I interpret their statements as representing the party line rather than personal opinions. In-depth interviews should be considered unique material, making it possible to analyse rather than amplify far-right views. That is, if the topic is treated with nuance, and the researcher has critically reflected upon their positionality and potential social implications of their project (Damhuis & de Jonge 2022).

Limitations and self-reflection

Attempting to produce value-free, objective knowledge with a critical approach is something I consider to be both impossible and ineffective in this case. The methods I have chosen to interact with the data could be considered limiting, primarily as they reflect my subjectivity and bias: analysing narratives and the coding process are impacted by my experiences, interpretation, and personal beliefs of the world (Braun & Clarke 2022, 14-5). Additionally, the focus of this thesis is confined to the SD. This may skew the image of certain policy matters. For instance, the reduction mandate has received criticism from the environmental movement and some scholars (Forssblad 2023). However, the scope of the thesis limits any extensive engagement with these actors.

I consider myself as a female researcher of colour (ROC). Not much literature currently tackles engaging with the far-right from this position (e.g. Ramalingam 2021). I struggled with interviewing research subjects who are considered 'unsympathetic' due to their rhetoric against more fragile and marginalised minority migrant groups (Gingrich and Banks 2006, 24). In the beginning, I found it difficult to ask them about political statements with racist undertones, fearing that this might anger them. I also found myself asking some of them to elaborate on remarks that were blatantly racist or nodding to encourage them to continue speaking. However,

I do not consider this to be an obstacle in the search for 'objective' truth; the data reflects the far-right's performative strategy under such unique circumstances and adds a different dimension that is neither better nor worse than if I would have interviewed them as a fully Swedish or white person (Ramalingam 2021, 60; P.J Rhodes 1994).

5. Empirical analysis

The following section presents the analysis of the three major plotlines which constitute the SD's political narrative. These are: 'the car and the past', 'the car and the present', and 'the car and the future'. The two latter also diverge into various subplots. The 'car and the present' plotline consists of three subplots: the reduction mandate, the Social Democrats – the destroyer of the 'good life', and saving the common people. The car and the future consist of the subplots, car utopia and car dystopia.

5.1 Equilibrium – The car and the past

The SD have already shown great interest in the *folkhem*, portraying it as the Swedish golden age. The first plotline, 'the car and the past', deals with how the SD narrates the car into their understanding of the *folkhem* and its connotations to political, social, and economic development using a romantic, myth-like plot. It quickly became evident that the car shared many of the positive connotations of this era and the party's understanding of progress and freedom. This was exemplified by Mattias Bäckström Johansson, SD's party secretary, when asked about what the car meant for Swedish welfare:

> Well, I think that [the car] is a very important factor. Coming from the post-war period, what's perhaps the most obvious is that we come from a very... if you look at the time period, from a very poor 19th century Sweden where you lost some of their glory after all the wars, you lost one half of the country and so on. Where it was not so well equipped in the First World War and an economic downturn in the 1930s and then very quickly after the post-war period, we had very good conditions, and very quickly, this country began to flourish economically when you build out the welfare system and so on. (Interview 22-11-2024)

This long quote illustrates how the car not only propelled Sweden into modernity but also restored Sweden's former 'glory'. Bäckström Johansson goes back to the early 19th century when referring to Sweden losing Finland to Russia in 1809 (after this, Sweden was officially neutral and avoided active participation in war). According to him, Sweden was incapable of showcasing its strength through military means. However, it became possible through the help of technological

advancements and economic prosperity during the *folkhem* era. Sweden's 'success story' and 'extraordinary socioeconomic development' marked the beginning of a 'collective sense of being exceptional' (Ruth 1984, 92). The sense of Sweden as being technologically exceptional will echo in many of the statements throughout. While the SD also showcase expressions of Swedish exceptionalism, they connect it to the positive correlations between ethnic homogeneity and the national welfare state (Elgenius and Rydgren 2019, 591). Although this notion was not explicit in this quotation above, Bäckström Johansson describes a time when Sweden did not experience a significant amount of immigration. This did not occur until the 1970s, the point in time that the SD identifies as the start of moral decay and the breakdown of Swedish cohesion (Sverigedemokraterna 2011, 21).

Thomas Morell, a member of parliament and vice president of the transport committee, elaborated on the importance of the car for the development of the Swedish industry. He first stated: 'Well, you wouldn't be sitting here if the car didn't exist. It's very simple' (Interview 25-10–2023). He then described the importance of mobility for technological and socioeconomic progress by stating: 'We have had a tradition in Sweden with good engineers, and that part has created an industrial society that has been in the absolute top-class. […] And one of the pillars of all this is mobility.' Here, the notion of Sweden as a technologically exceptional nation is again highlighted. Increased mobility thus becomes associated with economic prosperity and high education levels. This connection extended to the Swedish automobile manufacturers Volvo and Saab, which Morell pointed out. In the examples above, the car is used to dramatise and narrate a part of Sweden's national biography (Edensor 2004). The national car industry becomes a signifier of the country's economic virility and modernity while articulating notions of national pride (ibid, 103). Cars, in other words, are what made Sweden great. This plotline makes obvious linkages to Sweden's advanced technological skills, framed as both a condition and a result of automobility. It also illuminates a lurking sentiment of the SD's pride in Sweden as a high-tech nation. This plotline can be seen as a reflection of the techno-optimist and (techno-)nationalist ideology present during the folkhem era and exemplifies how science and technological advancements are seen as the bedrock of the nation. Hence, it is not very surprising that the SD contextualises the car within the realm of such technological ideas.

A common feature in the plotline was the connotations of automobility with freedom. (Kinnunen & Kroon 2020; Sverigedemokraterna Stockholm 2021; Sverigedemokraterna 2022). On their official website, the headline title on the page about car and fuel runs: 'The car means freedom for all' (Sverigedemokraterna 2024). This is by no means a novel identification (Maxwell 2001; Sheller 2004; Hagman 2009; Goodwin 2010; Berg et al. 2015). However, it is interesting how the party members imagine the mobility shift. Informant 4, a local party representative and member of the interest group SD Motor, described how Sweden and the rest of Europe 'opens up' and become accessible through the car, calling it 'an enormous sense of freedom' (Interview 06-11-2023).

The expansion of automobility was depicted as overwhelmingly positive. Never did the members bring up adverse effects of automobility that were expressed during this time, such as the demolition of areas of historical and cultural value, increased traffic accidents and congestion, which all generated criticism from the public (Lundin 2008, 268, 279, 281). The omission of the negative side effects of automobility produces an overly romanticised and depoliticised picture of the car's public reception. Informant 4 even joked about the later imposed speed limits: 'Well, until 1967, our roads had no speed limits. Then you could drive as fast as you wanted! *laughs* After 1967 […] it became 90km/h almost everywhere.' (Interview 06-11-2023).

Driving is also considered an ideological practice by the party. This differs slightly from the earlier comments on the specific car brands and the national car industry. Instead of cars reflecting Sweden's greatness, driving and its associations with freedom is framed as an inherently Swedish practice. Bäckström Johansson vividly described how Swedish ideals were represented through driving:

To be able to have access to a car in a very short time, to be able to travel around the country, to be able to go to neighbouring countries, and be able to get around on your own. Of course that is something that gets into the national spirit, that this is really a symbol of freedom. And if we look at the 50s and 60s, that's not many generations ago. I think it's something that is passed on from generation to generation. If you want to take a more philosophical approach to it... it's an essence that we have managed to capture an image of, and that is shared by our representatives, members, and voters. (Interview 22-11-2023)

Through its embodiment of ideal notions of freedom associated with Swedishness, roughly translated to the 'people's spirit', driving is transformed from a means of travelling into an expression of Swedish ideals using fantasmatic logics. Fantasies of the past conjure images of one nation free both physically and in spirit, with Bäckström Johansson blurring the line between Swedishness and driving. Similar to Morell, negative aspects of automobility are selectively ignored and reframed as a romantic myth of Swedes acquiring new-found freedom.

Chapter summary

This plotline describes the car as a facilitator and embodiment of the development of Sweden's welfare state. By normalising the car's presence in everyday life through practical usage and narrative form, the car becomes part of Sweden's journey into greatness. Above all, the 'car and the past' plotline condensed SD's positive associations with the car. It stands for an era when things could only become better, and Swedes actively participated in making that happen through their technological innovativeness. The automobile transformation is understood as an inevitable condition for the development of Swedish welfare. However, this cannot be argued to be a unique trait in SD's storytelling. As already outlined, automobility has been embraced and can be justified from across the political spectrum.

In conjunction with the car's expansion in society, it becomes incorporated into the perception of Swedishness. This takes mainly two forms. First, it is associated with the development of the Swedish welfare state, technological advancements, and large automobile companies. Secondly, with analogies of newfound automobile freedom seeping into the Swedish national spirit and daily habits. This highlights the car's profound impact on the SD's sense of national identity, which should be considered unique among Swedish parties. Moreover, this narrative also paints a picture of what the SD considers a good and prosperous society, creating a backdrop for understanding the perceived decline of society and car use.

5.2 Equilibrium disrupted – The car and the present

As previously noted, the car in Sweden is something politicians tend not to criticise, at least not too much. Most parties either want to increase (Social Democrats, Greens, and the Left party) or decrease (the SD, the Conservatives, Christian Democrats, Liberals, and Centre Party) taxes on fossil fuels, focus on the transition to electric vehicles and increase the number of charging stations (Ramnewall 2022; Punt 2022). The Greens is the only party supporting significantly reduced car use; however, this stance is uncommon and controversial in Swedish politics. On the contrary, the SD has taken the opposite standpoint. The SD in Stockholm wrote the program 'We fight for the car' (Sverigedemokraterna Region Stockholm 2021), and on SD's official website, it reads: 'The Sweden Democrats are the party of striving forward, for a brighter common future. For a democratic, reasonable, and just Sweden. A Sweden where we build cars, not burn them.' (Sverigedemokraterna 2024a).

Why is the SD the only party making such explicit statements? Moreover, why are these statements so often about the need to 'defend' or 'fight for' the car? This chapter dives into the plotline, 'the car and the present', about why the car is perceived to be under threat by the SD. However, investigating and dissecting all elements of this plotline is simply an impossible task for a master's thesis. Hence, I will focus on three overlapping and reinforcing subplots: the reduction mandate, the depiction of the previous Social Democratic-led government, and the victimisation of the common people.

The reduction mandate

Most of the SD's criticism has been directed towards the reduction mandate, known in Sweden as *reduktionsplikten*. In 2017, Martin Kinnunen, the environmental spokesperson for the SD, and party member Runar Fliper submitted the motion 'Balanced and Effective Climate Politics' (2017/18:3887), accusing the reduction mandate to generate high tax losses, have low efficacy, and increase emissions. To them, the reduction mandate was a failed venture that should be abolished (ibid, 8). This line of reasoning continued throughout the years, from implementing the reduction mandate to its sharp cutbacks.

Most criticism has its roots in economic concerns, both on a national and international level. On the one hand, the party argued that citizens could not afford higher fuel prices, and on the other, it would negatively affect the Swedish economy overall. Additionally, SD has stated that Sweden has taken on a disproportional and still insignificant responsibility with the reduction mandate (Morell 2022; Morell, Andersson & Fransson 2023).

When Informant 4 was asked about how he imagined it would be like living with a continued paused or increased reduction mandate, he replied:

'If you look at the economic situation in society today, you can see that this nation that has already been kicked in the balls would be even worse off. So many people today live with their noses barely above the economic surface. A decrease would make life somewhat easier.' (Interview 06-11-2023).

The reduction mandate can, in this excerpt, be compared to pouring salt on an already open wound. Sweden is portrayed as a nation betrayed by irresponsible politicians, as the wording 'kicked in the balls' suggests. Such dramatisation of crisis and breakdown is a typical plot pattern in populist storytelling (Moffitt 2016). This lengthy excerpt is from Matthias Bäckström Johansson, where he makes repeated linkages towards crisis and punishment:

Of course, it does something with people's perception of what is going on. Where will it end? When we take on price increases in Sweden that others do not. And then you end up being taxed and penalised just because you live in a certain place. […] I think that other parties have underestimated the view of the car, that we are a freedom-loving people, and that the car is a symbol of freedom for people to be able to get from point A to point B, not to be dependent on anyone else. And when you have the feeling that the state is attacking this freedom that you have and that can take you to different places and then wants to limit you, well, then you get angry. Even if you can afford to pay it, you will be really angry. And that I think they [other politicians] have missed it. (Interview 22-11-2023)

The car seemingly transforms into a sort of glue that keeps one's understanding of oneself – and the nation – intact through its repetitive associations with freedom

and Swedes as a 'freedom-loving people', bringing forth the previous plotline about the connection between Swedes as drivers.

Apart from the reduction mandate being said to punish Swedes, it was also portrayed as a threat to Swedish industries. While making such statements, Sweden's role in climate change mitigation was repeatedly minimised or neglected, as seen in this quote by Thomas Morell:

> If you look at what Sweden contributes to in total, it's a small amount in the world, isn't it? Then there's no reason for us to, like, kill ourselves. Then it's better that we adapt to the rest of Europe. […] Because then we have the same competitive situation between the countries. It doesn't matter for the globe because our emissions are so small. (Interview 25-10-2023)

Pointing towards international climate action has been common throughout SD's climate line. Vihma et al. (2021, 230) note that this is a new form of climate nationalism since the party does not typically favour international cooperation in other areas. However, the authors further state that the party's approach to the Paris Agreement is complicated, as they do not want the EU to have too much decision-making power. Jimmie Åkesson stated that Sweden would have to leave the Paris Agreement if 'ordinary honest Swedes' could not drive to work because of climate legislation (Arenander et al. 2022).

Lastly, some party members were concerned about the reduction mandate's potential negative effects, mainly referring to how effective biofuels are compared to traditional fossil fuels. Some suggested that biofuels release toxins, increase CO2 emissions or risk damaging car engines. Interestingly, these statements were often made in connection to the environment, as exemplified by Informant 5:

> Yes, the reduction mandate increases emissions overall […] our vehicles consume twenty per cent more fuel. And for every per cent more they use, they emit a corresponding amount of more exhaust gases. In other words, this reduction mandate is a disaster for the environment. (Interview 09-11-2023)

This positioning makes it possible to portray oneself as caring for the environment while simultaneously delaying or objecting significant policy changes to decrease emissions. As exemplified by Thomas Morell: 'So if you now have objectives that

I should reduce emissions of some substance. Will the measures I take lead to that level? Or will I get side effects or higher emissions from something else? Then it might be worse.' (Interview 25-10-2023).

These statements are a shift compared to the SD's previously climate denialist/sceptical stance (Schaller & Carius 2019; Vihma et al. 2021; Vowles & Hultman 2021a, 2021b). However, they are not factual either. There is currently little evidence proving that emissions from biofuel are more harmful than traditional fossil fuels (Energimydigheten 2023, Lundberg 2023). Fantasmatic logic often functions to reconcile contradictory claims, enabling SD to twist the purpose of the reduction mandate as environmentally harmful. False statements about the side effects of biofuel do not matter in SD's narrative, as its purpose is to strengthen the image of the SD as the party who truly cares for the environment by promoting a careful political approach to environmental policies.

Biofuels are assumed to embody inherently destructive traits that are either worse for the environment or dilute pure fossil fuels. As Informant 4 puts it:

'As I said, I have nothing against electric cars per se. But our vehicles have been running on forms of gasoline that are not really gasoline. It is some other crap you have to pour into the cars. And diesel with vegetable soup in it' (Interview 06-11-2023).

Earlier scholarship has outlined the connection between fossil fuels and nationalism, using illustrative examples of Norway and Poland (Malm & the Zetkin Collective 2021, 104-32). The wealth of neighbouring Norway is built around its oil industry. FrP, the Norwegian far-right party, not only claimed that domestic oil is part of the green solution, but they also combined fossil fantasies with campaigns against Muslims, the Left and other forces foreign to the nation (ibid, 131). On the other side of the globe, former US President Donald Trump said that if he returns to the White House, he will close the border and 'drill, drill, drill' (Colvin 2023).

However, such explicit statements are absent in SD's storyline. Sweden possesses no national fossil assets and relies on imported fossil fuels to sustain automobility. To reconnect with previous accounts, descriptions of the car show much stronger connotations of national well-being in the Swedish context. The need to 'keep drilling' is not as strong as the need to 'keep driving'. Instead, I interpret SD's dislike towards the reduction mandate as a

reaction against a threat towards a perceived decline in the 'quality' of fossil fuels, subsequently negatively affecting car usage. Their main concern is the need for an abundant and cheap energy source to ensure Swedes' automobile practices. Biofuel's association with unreliability and ineffectiveness makes it undesirable from that standpoint.

The Social Democrats – the destroyer of the good life

A fundamental building block in the populist narrative is the imagination of a 'true body' of people being attacked by an external being of (evil) forces, be it the EU, the capitalist system, or migrants, and the need to protect the 'true people' who are ignored by the political elites (Freistein & Gadinger 2019). This subplot revolves around about what the SD considers as 'the elite', namely the Social Democrats and the Social Democratic-led government (including the Left Party, the Green Party and later the Centre Party). The Social Democrats, who were previously credited for the expansion of automobility during the 1950s and 60s, were later transformed by the SD into an enemy of the car, the people and a destroyer of the good life. The previous government coalition is painted as irresponsible, deceiving, and self-destructive, who carried out the reduction mandate against the will of the common people.

In a 2022 ad campaign post on Facebook by the SD, Jimmie Åkesson posed with crossed arms and a grim look on his face, staring straight into the camera. The caption read: 'Fuel prices are digging holes in Swedes' wallets. Reduce fuel prices now, or we will do it after the election. […] There must be an end to 'sosse-prices' now' (Sverigedemokraterna 2022a). The term sosse is often ascribed to a member or sympathiser of the Social Democratic party. While the interpretation of the term varies, SD often uses sosse demeaningly. 'Sosse-prices' in this context refers to the increased fuel prices following legislative decision-making by the Social Democrat-led government. This is further exemplified on their official webpage, where SD states that the previous government were not satisfied with the already high fuel prices but wanted to 'increase costs even more to force people to park the car permanently' (Sverigedemokraterna 2024b).

The SD has often accused other parties of having expensive or useless climate policies, which is mainly present in their critique against the reduction mandate,

arguing for what they consider to be a more realistic line of reasoning (Vihma et al. 2021, 230). Martin Kinnunen, their environmental spokesperson, described that the SD had been against the reduction mandate even before it became legislative. He reflected on why the SD has taken such a strong stance against it:

> 'Well, if you look at how the previous government dealt with this, it was... They had a vision that this would be the solution and everyone else would follow suit. But we can see that not everyone did that, but everyone else had a more sober view of how to solve these climate goals.' (Interview 16-10-2023)

The process of making asymmetrical, implicit moral judgements fills a 'double task' by creating unity through polarisation (Koschorke 2018, 73). Through characterisations of naivety, carelessness and overambition, the previous Social Democratic-led government are accused of imposing unrealistic and punitive policies. While they are accredited for a fantasy of the past, the Social Democratic-led government are today portrayed as the villain. They are deemed to have lost legitimacy to act in the name of the people, as they are unable to serve their interests. By doing this, the SD legitimises their party to embody the voice of the people while also rejecting the politics of the Social Democrats. The heroes of the story are the SD themselves. Not only do they claim to have been right all along about the consequence of the reduction mandate, but it is also now, thanks to them, that the reduction mandate has finally been abolished.

Saving the common people

The last subplot is connected to the previous one; however, it is more explicitly populist in depicting the SD as the voice of ordinary people (e.g. countryside dwellers, innocent families with children, etc.). It also follows a hero's plotline, with SD being at the forefront of demanding the right to drive and the car becoming a physical protector from those deemed dangerous.

For the local politicians, the SD has managed to speak up against the politically correct. They drew on the same linkages as Kinnunen and Morell but also brought the element of SD being the only party expressing the voice of the common people. According to Informant 4, speaking up against the politically correct involves certain risks, such as being labelled as an environmental enemy. However, SD has

gained success by doing so since they voiced the people's concerns, whereas it has been more important to appear green by other political parties (Interview 06-11-2023). Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) bring up Paul Taggart's notion of 'the heartland' when describing populists' idea of 'the general will'. This points to the 'community and territory that portrays a homogenous identity that allegedly is authentic and incorruptible' (ibid, 19) – mirroring what the fantasmatic logic is set up to serve – depoliticising politics to make it more palatable. Through claims that oppose 'political correctness' and break 'taboos' set up by the elite, the SD feeds a fantasy of politics without corrupt politicians. They are not in politics for personal benefit, risking their party image to speak for the people.

SD's pivot towards the countryside population is another keystone for the party. With little or no access to public transport, countryside dwellers are portrayed as those who need a car most of all. After the publishing of a debate article where the Tidö-parties promised a decreased reduction mandate in 2024, Jimmie Åkesson posted on Facebook: 'It is undoubtedly a very big victory, not least for ordinary, honest people who do not live in big cities' (Åkesson 2023). Referring to 'the people' as ordinary and honest (here, there is also an element of honour) was repeated throughout the years when discussing fuel prices. Hence, for the SD, driving is seemingly something Swedes deserve.

In an article with *Dagens Samhälle*, Richard Jomshof, the SD's former party secretary, stated that many who choose to live in the countryside share the party's values:

'It may also be that you have chosen to live in the countryside because you are a certain kind of voter with a certain kind of values and opinions. You stay because you simply don't want to move to that city that may have developed in a certain way.' (Delby 2019, 5)

He also affirmed that the party had gained support from [white] Swedes trying to get away from immigrants, for instance, leaving Malmö for the countryside. Resulting in them becoming car-dependent and appreciating SD for taking a stance against the high fuel prices (ibid, 5). Swedish rurality being located within notions of a historically situated Swedishness or Swedish nationalism by the SD has previously been suggested by scholars (Nilsson & Lundgren 2018, 76). With

rurality considered a defining trait of the Swedish national character, the families in the countryside become the pillar of Swedish society, compared to the inhabitants of the multicultural cities and suburbs. Threatening automobility thus becomes an existential threat to the families in the countryside – and the Swedish nation as a whole.

The question is, can the car be understood as a fantasy in the Lacanian sense? Sort of. It is possible to argue that since most people in Sweden already attained the car, it should not be considered an object to desire. However, the determination to uphold automobility against the background of global climate change definitely is. The car can be interpreted as somewhere in between; it is a realised fantasy that risks being taken away. In SD's narration, Swedishness is not attained through getting a car but upheld through driving. On the one hand, driving is considered a necessary means to go on about one's daily life, and it expresses Swedish values of freedom and its connection to the expansion of the welfare state – Swedish people *need* to drive. On the other, the car is also portrayed as being under threat by other political parties or policies, either getting more expensive or parked for good. By presenting this looming threat of car removal, SD manages to create a potential ontological lack. The car's uncertain prospects put the continuation of SD's understanding of the Swedish identity at risk, as it would be increasingly difficult to perform Swedishness without driving. They fill this ontological lack by pointing towards technological solutions through nuclear electrification of the car fleet. This plotline will be explored in the third chapter.

Lastly, the need for a car has frequently been depicted to protect the driver and their loved ones from eventual danger by the SD. Public transport is continuously described as multicultural and potentially dangerous by the party. Their official webpage reads: 'Moreover, as insecurity has grown in cities and people are reluctant to use public transport or walk at certain times of the day, the car is often the safest mode of transport. The car is a freedom worth preserving' (Sverigedemokraterna 2024b). When asked if they could elaborate on this quote, the answers varied between the local and parliament representatives. Matthias Bäckström Johansson replied in general terms:

We see a problem that this insecurity has become widespread, and, unfortunately, continues to spread. Some parts of it [insecurity] are justified in terms of the fact that

there is actually a risk that one's physical security is threatened. But in many cases, it is perhaps a matter of perceived insecurity that may not really correlate with the actual risk of being beaten, robbed, raped, or sexually assaulted. Nevertheless, it does affect people's choices in everyday life. (Interview 22-11-2023)

The two local politicians, Informants 4 and 5, fully agreed with the quotation from the official webpage. Informant 4 developed the statement by comparing the level of safety on a bus and a car during the evening:

‘So there are the bus stops... I'm not saying it's everywhere, but there are bus stops where... where even I might hesitate to stand on a Saturday night. Then it's not... not white man's territory, so to speak. It's... it can be dangerous just to go out.’ (Interview 06-11-2023).

Informant 5 made a similar statement, describing how vulnerable groups, such as youngsters, women, and older persons, run the risk of becoming victims of robbery at bus and train stations. I asked him to specify who committed the crimes on public transport, and he replied:

‘People from non-skiing countries to the greatest extent. Not all, I would like to point out, but ninety-five per cent are people from non-skiing countries. I know that with 100 per cent certainty. You look at the statistics, just look at our prisons.’ (Interview 09-11-2023)

In the present society, which SD deems becoming increasingly dangerous, the car becomes a necessary protector, illustrating cars' distorting effects on perceptions of security and surroundings (Gatersleben et al. 2012). The quotes also reinforce the idea of public transport systems as sites prone to danger (Elias et al. 2013). As established in the previous sections, the SD united in more general anti-establishment rhetoric and longing for Sweden's past greatness. The quotes by Informants 4 and 5 illustrate populist narratives' incorporation of otherness, generating feelings of 'us' and 'them'. Ahmed (2014) applies the discourse 'stranger danger' to highlight how boundaries are shaped between bodies that belong and bodies that are 'an origin of danger'. Using metaphors of gated communities and neighbourhood watch, she demonstrates how spaces, such as

neighbourhoods and nations, are embodied, where the 'strangers' are 'already recognized as not belonging, as being out of place' (Ahmed 2000, 21). Henderson (2006, 294–96) has coined the term 'secessionist automobility' to describe the process of physically separating oneself from spatial configurations or people, often those of different racial, class, gender or sexual orientation. Using Atlanta as an example, Henderson describes racially motivated physical movement in both North America and Europe enabled by automobility and the ability to travel through space without having to interact with people of colour. However, secessionist mobility is, above all, an anti-urban ethos to ascribe rural ideals attached to an anti-urban image of the city as a vice and immoral place (ibid, 300).

Chapter summary

Through the 'car and the present' plotline, the SD simultaneously politicises and depoliticises the car. On the one hand, they are the only party claiming to truly defend automobility. On the other hand, they assert that owning or using a car should not be questioned or made difficult by political means, which the reduction mandate came to embody. Driving is considered a right, a necessity of life, not a privilege or luxury. The fantasmatic logic works by apoliticising the car through its repetitive linkages to Swedishness and the 'common will', making it difficult to question the car without questioning Swedishness itself.

By drawing analogies between driving and Swedishness, the 'true people' and the elite, and the rural and urban, the SD creates a plotline with different layers of meaning. All plotlines work together, underscoring their discursive affinity to heighten support for continued automobility. The subplot about the reduction mandate is supported by the subplot about political characterisations, pointing to the need for someone to stand up for the car and the people, which the SD believe themselves to have achieved. The subplots illustrated are part of the broader storyline about Swedish society currently facing threats and decay (Elgenius & Rydgren 2019, 2017; Mulinari & Neergaard 2014; Norocel 2013), which stands as a pillar in the SD's political narration. In the next chapter, we will look at how the SD envisions the future of the car.

5.3 Equilibrium re-established? – The car and the future

The general structure of the narrative so far has looked like this: driving was once a natural part of Swedish life; today, automobility is under threat, but it is worth saving because the car constitutes a central node in Swedish identity construction and lifestyle; specific measures need to be taken to ensure automobility. The solution for the SD is electrification through nuclear power, focusing on system rationalisation rather than structural changing measures. Considering this, I wondered if, and if so how, the party pictured current automobile practices changing. However, no one did. Less automobility was associated with notions of societal decline. The two sides of SD's automobile fantasy are positioned as either beatific or horrific scenarios – an electrified car utopia versus a motionless car dystopia. The last plotline, 'the car and the future,' explores these two imagined trajectories.

The beatific side of fantasy – Car utopia

When describing the future of the car, the SD brings up various examples of how the car inevitably will become more effective and eco-friendlier, most notably with the help of nuclear power. It portrays measures to reach a fullness to come. If we only do this, it was argued, we can once again drive without worries. This narrative can be described as a beatific fantasy (Žižek 1998; Stavrakakis 1999, Glynos 2001, 2008; Glynos & Howarth 2007, 147; Eberle 2019). Instead of warning against a potential disaster scenario (as horrific fantasies do), they typically portray the future as promising if certain measures are taken. The advocacy towards electrification portrayed nuclear as the key to unlocking large amounts of 'reliable and cheap' energy (Sverigedemokraterna 2024b). Such proclamations establish a visionary, constructive and assuring tone in a way that performatively portrays nuclear to hold great potential. SD's politics are described as the pivotal means for these goals to be realised. In this sense, beatific scenarios contain a stabilising element (Glynos & Howarth 2007, 147). 'Sales of plug-in vehicles will dominate in the future. We will see a transition. It will be very costly to implement this transition a few years earlier. We will get there through technological development anyways.' (Interview with Martin Kinnunen 16-10-2023).

The shift from fossil fuels to nuclear-based electricity calls for a seamless energy transition, shifting from one reliable energy source to another, which was considered unattainable with renewable energy sources. The SD showcases a strong either/or attitude towards technologies, where nuclear is clearly preferred over other alternatives. Informant 5 made this juxtaposition to wind power: 'Yes, we must have a stable electricity supply. It's not possible to charge the cars only when it's windy outside.' (Interview 09-11-2023). Wind power is linked to the similar perceived shortcomings of biofuel mentioned in the previous chapter, as it lacks the reliable elements associated with nuclear. However, the nuclear technology the party advocates is largely underdeveloped (Schneider et al. 2023).

A techno-optimist stance concerning the green transition has prevailed in policy documents, media outlets and politics for many years (Arvensen et al. 2011; Clark et al. 2016). Techno-optimism refers to someone who believes that technology's impact/probability distribution is favourable (Könings 2022). Due to the salience of technological successes, there is a prevalent association between positive advancements and, therefore, what technologies will bring in the future (Clark et al. 2016, 98). Further, these depictions of technology often leave out or dismiss if the technology in question is relevant for present large-scale use, and the broader political, social (and environmental, my addition) issues that follow (Asayama & Ishii 2017, 55). This viewpoint cannot be argued to be typically far-right as it is shared across the political spectrum. However, as a more radical environmentalist approach would be difficult to defend from a populist standpoint, adapting a techno-optimist approach may be the most favourable. It allows the populist notions to co-exist alongside a modest climate policy, which promises an ensured continuation of 'the people's' way of living.

The party members provided various examples of how the car could be improved. However, their statements all echoed a(n almost) identical deterministic view of technological optimism that dominated Swedish politics during the mid-20th century:

'Of course, we will do what we can to reduce emissions, and if we can develop another technology in Sweden that we can then export, that's great. We have a tradition in the country and a very high level of technical expertise. Nothing is impossible. It can be

solved. That's kind of a basic attitude you should have.' (Interview with Thomas Morell 25-10-2023).

Here, Morell points towards both the past and the future, referring to Sweden's history as a technological innovator, possessing the ability to export green technologies (although not specified) to the rest of the world. Being a provider of green technologies is commonly addressed as Sweden's task in the green transition. In this way, the plotline portrays Sweden as both saviour and saved, establishing reassurance, and reinforcing the notion of Swedish technological exceptionalism.

The SD does not seem open to changing the automobile regime in the future, as found on their webpage: 'The car means freedom for everyone, and it should stay that way.' (Sverigedemokraterna 2024b). A similar statement was made by Informant 5:

> I don't believe in reducing car use at all. Because it limits people too much, you can see that with these environmentalists, and they can't get anywhere without getting into a car. They don't get on a bike and cycle to Stockholm to go to a meeting. So... no, the car will continue to be used even more than today. I'm pretty sure. (Interview 09-11-2023)

All party members expressed similar views. If cars were to change, the need to travel individually or in the company of one's choosing whenever one feels like it, will not: 'It is a speculation, but I am convinced that people will want flexible means of transport that they also own and can therefore use whenever they want in the future.' (Interview with Martin Kinnunen 16-10-2023). Highlighting the possibility of driving rather than driving itself has been addressed in previous research (Godskesen 2002; Hagman 2010). Access to a car increases a person's 'motility', meaning their capacity to move at their own will (Beckmann 2001, Kaufman 2002). However, Hagman (2010, 37) writes that this does not correlate with increased mobility. While mobility may result from being forced to move around, motility means independence and freedom. Green technology will thus enable Swedes to continue with their current driving practices, conferring the identity of Swedes as a driver, constantly in motion. It also avoids addressing any behavioural changes that are deemed cumbersome or inconvenient.

According to Janda and Topouzi (2015), people have and continue to relish in positive and inspiring hero stories. They introduce the concept of an 'energy hero story', following the basic plotline of a hero's journey: a hero ventures from their ordinary world to that of supernatural mystery. After encountering numerous battles and a decisive victory, the hero returns to his world, having gained a special gift, power or elixir which can save his home (Campbell 1968; Vogler 2007, 2015). The energy hero story describes a future world where energy-efficient technologies and strategies save society from climate change. The story works by being familiar, positive, and inspiring; people do not need to change since technology will solve this for us (Janda & Topouzi 2015, 519). Therefore, it is unsurprising to see this plotline presented by the SD. It minimises the need for extensive changes in consumption behaviours and generates a feeling that 'everything will be fine' among its voter groups. Looking back on the previous statements and background of Sweden as a technological pioneer, the presence of technological optimism is amplified due to its long-lasting political tradition. However, I diverge from Janda and Topouzi's argument that the energy hero story misses a proper foe (ibid, 519). The SD presents nuclear power as the ultimate energy source in this plotline, while questioning the necessity of the reduction mandate and continuously discrediting renewable energy sources. Both become an obstacle to achieving their version of green transport politics. This was summarised by Martin Kinnunen: "We will see an electrification, but this fast track on biofuels that starts to reach [inaudible] in 2030 is not socio-economically sound.' (Interview 16-10-2023).

The horrific side of fantasy - Car dystopia

The SD's defence of automobility is noteworthy, with the connections between automobility, technology and the good life showing strong interconnections throughout all plotlines so far. Thus, asking whether the party could imagine or consider a future with less car use was a topic of interest. Especially considering calls from various scholars (Paterson 2007; Goodwin 2010; Sheller 2018) to significantly reduce automobility altogether, due its high environmental impact apart from emissions. Such proposals were considered both unthinkable and dystopian. Thomas Morell replied: 'Well, based on that reasoning, we should all commit collective suicide, because it would be best for the environment if we all

disappeared. How sustainable is that?' (Interview 25-10-2023). In this take on fantasy, a continued automobile regime was also the goal; however, it did not share the same optimistic approach as the previous beatific plotline. For the SD, nuclear electrification is seen as a necessary means to halt the downward trend that is impeding car use. This type of fantasy is instead often referred to as 'horrific', since it implies a narrative structure that predicts disaster if certain measures are not taken (Žižek 1998; Stavrakakis 1999, Glynos 2001, 2008; Glynos & Howarth 2007, 147; Eberle 2019). According to Morell, proposing less automobility is considered unrealistic and naive, leading to the exaggerated conclusion that the erasure of the human species is the only solution. A similar statement was expressed by Informant 4:

> No, I don't take the line of the environmental fanatics, but I try to take a line that means that... well, the average person, our voters, can have a decent life without being bludgeoned in various ways with punitive taxes, surcharges, and this and that. In the end, there will be some sort of revolution if everyone abandons their cars. What will happen then? You won't get anywhere. (Interview 06-11-2023)

Potentially decreased automobility poses a looming threat, making 'Swedish' everyday practices increasingly difficult to perform. SD understands the car as an integral part of Swedish society and identity and if its role as the superior transport mode is changed, a part of the Swedish national identity risks deteriorating with it. Without the present understanding of the car, there is no present understanding of the self. Thomas Morell also connected less automobility and societal regression and collapse. He described how society would reach a standstill after five days without cars or trucks. He continued:

> The only thing you can do then is take your mug, go out to the nearest body of water, and drink it. Then, with a bow and arrow, hunt for something to eat. And then we kind of realise the importance of this working. That's not to say we don't need to minimise our environmental impact. What is the alternative? It is that you get a farm with your own cows, your own chickens, your own pig and so on. So that you are self-sufficient, then you must ask the question: How many people today would be willing to return to that? (Interview 25-10-2023)

The SD's narrative about the car has significantly impacted the range of future alternatives they imagine. For now, the car will continue to thrive, and further down the line, a vehicle of similar qualities will always be in demand. There is no room for a future with less automobility and alternative transport modes due to the cars' strong association with societal and economic progress and means for identity expression. When the politicians' imagined material dispositions did not align with already established expectations of a 'good life', literal death was presented as an inevitable outcome of renegotiated automobile practices. It is the removal of the car that causes death, not the environmentally unsustainable practices that ensure the continuation of automobility.

Chapter summary

In the 'car and the future' plotline, electrification becomes the solution to decrease emissions from the car fleet through an energy hero story. Here, the role of the car, established in the 'car and the past' plotline, can be saved from the outside threat presented in the 'car and the present' plotline. This plotline has multiple functions. Firstly, imagining a future saved by technological solutions creates a notion of a secure identity, since daily practices can be continued sustainably. Secondly, by connecting the green solution to Swedish technological innovations, the SD simultaneously reinforces a sense of national superiority. Not only will technological solutions enable automobility, but Sweden will also be at the forefront of providing these solutions, enabling positive collective emotions of confidence and pride. This supports findings that the far-right not only mobilises by generating a collective sense of anger, loss, and indignation among its voter groups but also positive sentiments (Freistein et al. 2022; Freistein & Gadinger 2019).

By only imagining two opposite future scenarios, a utopia and dystopia, the SD further strengthen their energy hero storyline by pointing towards what they see as unrealistic and apocalyptic scenarios. Less mobility or questioning current automobile practices was constantly equated to no mobility at all, with no mobility being equated to societal regression, collapse, and linked to collective suicide. Hence, the 'car and the future' plotline portrays a situation with little room for doubt, where the 'struggle' for automobility becomes existential, where Sweden, or civilisation itself, is threatened.

5.4 Possible implications – moving forward

Towards the greenwashing of secessionist automobility?

An emerging takeaway from the data is the conjunction between the SD's already showcased ethno-nationalist political agenda, seeping through their attitude towards transport politics, and their unconditional optimism for technological solutions for the car fleet. As already brought up in the second chapter and previous literature (Malm & the Zetkin Collective 2021 363-81), the plotline about the victimisation of the common driver is partly about the need to protect oneself from the coloured other, especially in public transport. Understood as such, an electrification of the car fleet does not only endorse current automobile practices. By presenting themselves as green, at the forefront of promoting the electrification of the car fleet, the SD also manages to disguise their ambition to preserve the car as a 'metal cage'. My interpretation should not be confused with Weber's 'iron cage'. Instead, I take inspiration from Wells and Xenias (2015), coining the car as a 'personal security pod' (ibid. 107). In which the installation of new technological features (e.g. bulletproof glass, puncture-resistant tyres, and remote tracking systems) is designed to improve the passenger's safety. Using this in combination with Henderson's (2006) work on secessionist mobilities, and Caiani and Lubarda (2023) work on the far-rights 'green turn' one can interpret SD's narrative on the car as something more than the desire to protect the current automobile regime.

It is no secret that whites have taken to the car to avoid the presence and interaction with the coloured other. Most of this has explored the American context, where examples are more explicit, with a few identified cases in Europe (e.g. Frohardt-Lane 2011; Malm & the Zetkin Collective 2021, 365-72). While these case studies were explicitly connected to the far-rights infatuation for fossil fuel, and I agree with their interpretation, the far-rights so-called 'green turn' adds an interesting dimension to this phenomenon. Taking the SD's attempt at a greener rebranding, it is possible to still cling to linkages between perceived security and transport modes without explicitly addressing it in public political discourse. Instead, they can resort to claims of 'protecting freedom' or 'caring for the countryside' while avoiding addressing from *whom* [migrant others] the Swedish driver needs to be protected. Additionally, as the data suggests, the SD shows little to no interest in exploring alternative transport modes or decreasing driving.

To sum up, rebranding the car as part of the green solution works in a more subtle way to appear less xenophobic, making their transport policies more digestible and appealing to a broader political audience. It points to the need among scholars to stay attentive to how the far-right adapts in a political climate where parties across the political spectrum are forced to take an environmental stance and how nationalist agendas seep into said politics. However, this hypothesis requires further research to draw firmer conclusions.

All hail automobility? The feasibility and desirability of continued car dependency

Finally, it is crucial to address the real issues in the Swedish transport sector, which the SD have successfully picked up to favour their political agenda. It raises many important questions about how real-life issues and fears people are faced with in light of climate change can be challenged and addressed differently. Car-dependency is a reality for many people in Sweden, a result of active policies from both political blocks going on since the 1960s. As Lundin (2015, 207) states, the 'car city' is today a hidden urban development model. Bergman (2008) even coined the term 'highway city' to describe the new landscape that emerged from the urban factors generated by the motorway. To question the car in a car-dominated society will undoubtedly create feelings of fear and anxiety. The SD are addressing legitimate worries that should be taken seriously. However, SD's success in taking over political agendas has, in this case, resulted in one narrative dominating Swedish transport politics, which is packaged along with their ethnonationalist message that generates xenophobic sentiments and further political polarisation.

The energy hero story portrayed by the party gives no room for alternative solutions or transport modes. While the hero story (an optimistic narrative about electric cars) is persuasive and influential in the imaginary world, the vision is far from certain and complete to be realised. A hero story will eventually be eclipsed and require a 'learning story', in which people will have their eyes opened about the stern reality (electrification of the entire car fleet may not be durable or sustainable); otherwise, it risks turning into a 'horror story', where the promise of technology fails (i.e. not enough progress in electrifying the car fleet) (Janda & Topouzi 2015, 531). To avoid such scenarios, Janda and Topouzi (ibid, 531) explain

that by being translated into or complemented by learning stories, hero stories can serve as an educational opportunity when failing. This means that the SD (and most political parties) should pay closer attention to the risks and uncertainties associated with over-reliance on technological solutions and, more importantly, question whether such ventures are realistic or even desirable in the long run.

Well, some might say that, with caution, an electrified future might be possible for the car fleet. Are not cars that emit nothing certainly better than those that emit more? Yes, 'green' cars, to some extent, are a necessary complement to public transport in a sustainable transport system, especially in rural areas. However, a restricted number of cars is entirely different from electrifying Sweden's almost 5 million passenger cars today (Henriksson 2011, 44; Trafikanalys 2023). Regardless of fuel sources, many cars need to be phased out (Henriksson 2011, 44; Gössling et al. 2022; Harstaad et al. 2022). If automobility persists as the backbone of Sweden's transport systems, public transport will continue to be underfunded, and many necessary structural changes will fail to materialise. Then, the dream of the 'green' car may end up playing an outright harmful role (Henriksson 2011, 44).

Two big questions remain: how do we delink the car from associations with mobility and human well-being? Moreover, in the context of the far-right, how do we delink cars from associations to security from multicultural others and as a nationalist symbol? These questions are, unfortunately, far too big to cover in this thesis. Despite this, I would like to open the conversation about future possibilities. The car question is currently a relatively fixed narrative and may not be as flexible to change as newer ones. Nevertheless, this does not mean it is too late for new endeavours. This is the power of narrative. One first important step by non-far-right actors and networks is to offer learning stories that explain why current automobile practices cannot continue – along with localised alternative solutions with a strong vision of shared mobility. These need to be detached from the far-right political goals overall, but retort to the questions that the far-right has raised. Some scholarship has already hinted at possible shifts in re-imagining the car and reconstituting automobility (e.g. Dowling & Simpson 2013; Hopkins & Stephenson 2016. Goodwin (2010) presents some inspiring advice on how to 'delink' cars from associations with fossil fuels, mobility, and human flourishing. This involves both technological and material measures, such as increasing access and priority for other transport modes (ibid, 75). Delinking cars from human flourishing is a

difficult nut to crack, as it involves fundamentally questioning our values and understanding of a meaningful life. What does mobility add to our sense of meaningfulness? Does mobility make us free? (ibid, 76). However, such reimaginaries are the most accessible, and culturally reshaping our perception of the world is a constant collective process.

6. Conclusion

There have been well developed bodies of research on the far-right and fossil fuels, but they have primarily explored the fossil fuel industry at large, and there has been little attention to the far-rights relation to the specific objects and practices that fossil culture has enabled. My contribution here has been to explore the car's incorporation into far-right populist narratives by analysing the SD's transport politics. As I have illustrated, using narrative analysis, the car's serves multiple functions into SD's political storytelling. The addition of storytelling's fantasmatic dimension facilitates understanding how the far-right understands and justifies objects and practices enabled by fossil culture within their ideological framework. The findings also confirm earlier depictions of the far-right's usage of automobility to enable racial segregation. The findings also suggest that while the SD proposes a split with fossil fuels, they are against diverging from automobility overall.

All three plotlines strengthen SD's understanding of the car as essentially Swedish, both in its connotations and utilisation. This is explained by its strong associations with the folkhem, an era the SD longs to restore. By using fantasmatic logic, the car is politicised and depoliticised throughout various parts of the political storyline, where the boundaries between car usage and Swedish practices blur together. This has resulted in political attempts to address decreasing emissions being accused of harming the Swedish nation and people. Moreover, the second plotline also contained populist and antiauthoritarian sentiments, which both provide a strong sense of belonging to and speaking for 'the people', as well as a clear definition of a common enemy: the previous Social Democratic-led government and potentially violent migrant others, form which the car becomes a physical shield. Additionally, while some party members in detail described who they saw as potential offenders, the 'migrant other' is never explicitly elaborated in official documents; vagueness maintains the notion of a lurking threat, but also makes it possible to dismiss or dodge when asked to develop such beliefs. With the background of cars' strong association with performing Swedishness as a daily practice, relying on technological solutions to ensure their continuation to preserve their understanding of Swedishness adds another layer apart from any structural changes considered unnecessary and unrealistic by the party.

A notable finding, primarily derived from the interview material, is how the far-right includes/disguises their ethno-nationalist agenda into an ecological framework. Bringing forth the car as part of the green solution may enable far-right actors to appear as environmental promotors while keeping their ethno-nationalist ideological underpinnings less controversial in political settings. Or alternatively, they may appear greener to attract a broader political audience. This showcases how adaptable the far-right is. It is no longer possible to underestimate them as climate denialists or sceptical.

To summarise, while scholars researching the ecologies on the far-right have so far mainly focused on their relation to the fossil-fuel industry, potential strength lies in studying national cases and storytelling techniques to provide more instruments and a promising conceptual framework that may generate a fresh outlook on the ecological dimension of FRP. In an era imbued with the increasing momentum of the far-right, consider this thesis a call for further research on the intricate intersections between far-right ideology, ecology, and storytelling.

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8. Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview guide for parliamentary politicians.

Reduktionsplikten

1. Sverigedemokraterna har sedan införandet av reduktionsplikten varit öppet kritiska mot den. Kan du utveckla det argumentet; varför har just reduktionsplikten varit en så pass viktig fråga?

2. Sverigedemokraterna har varit det enda partiet som varit emot reduktionsplikten, men ni har nu tillsammans med de andra partierna i Tidöavtalet kommit överens på en sänkning till 6% av diesel och bensin. När/varför tror du deras ställningstagande i frågan förändrades? (Hur nöjda är ni med överenskommelsen ni kommit fram till?)

3. Fråga också om varför de inte tycker att reduktionsplikten som styrmedel varit viktigt? Sverigedemokraterna har antytt att reduktionsplikten varit ineffektivt både som politiskt styrmedel och för att minska utsläppen av CO2, kan du utveckla det?

4. Ni beskriver bland annat hur ökningen av reduktionsplikten kommer att resultera i att svenska företag blir mindre konkurrenskraftiga, samtidigt har många företag redan investerat i grönare drivmedel. Hur ska man få transportföretag att investera i grön teknik ifall de inte finns några långsiktiga styrmedel i politiken? Gör inte det de svenska företagen mindre konkurrenskraftiga?

5. Ni skriver dessutom att: 'En omställning av fordonsflottan behöver både av ekonomiska och ekologiska skäl få ta tid, och ske utifrån marknadens villkor.' Skulle du kunna utveckla det argumentet?

6. De flesta regeringar verkar ha svängt mycket historiskt i bilfrågan, och olika förmåner har getts till tex etanolbilar, dieselbilar och därefter elbilar. Nu har stödet för elbilar tagits bort (skulle inte stödet ha kunnat utformats på något annat sätt, behöver man inte en morot som konsument). Hur ska svenska hushåll kunna göra miljömedvetna val när det kommer till bilanvändande?

7. (Till Thomas Morell) I din interpellation skriver du bland annat att: 'EU varken kan eller vill ta efter konceptet med hög inblandning av

biodrivmedel. Sverige är sålunda inte ett föregångsland, som Socialdemokraterna så gärna vill tro.' Jag undrar därför om du anser att Sverige inte är ett föregångsland i klimatfrågan (att politiker ljuger), eller just bara i frågan om biobränslen? Vilket sätt Sverige ska bidra (om du tycker att vi ska det) till en grön klimatomställning?

8. Om vi skulle låtsats oss att reduktionsplikten inte sänktes (antingen att den pausades, eller fortsatte höjas), föreställer du dig att Sverige skulle sett ut, hur hade det varit att leva och bo här?

Bilen

1. Sverigedemokraterna lägger stor vikt på bilen i sin politik, den nämns bland annat på er hemsida och i er Valplattform. För vem är bilen viktig, varför är bilen viktig för er?

2. Redan innan valet beskrev Sverigedemokraterna att svenska hushåll inte får påverkas för mycket av miljöpolitiken. I debatter har reduktionsplikten beskrivits som särskilt negativ för människor på landsbygden, till skillnad från exempelvis påverkan på människor i större städer. Skulle du kunna utveckla det lite mer? (Väljarna på landsbygden ökade dessutom under det senaste valet.)

3. Ett förtydligande: Sverigedemokraterna nämner ofta att det är 'vanligt hederligt folk', eller 'vanligt folk' som kommer att gynnas av att skatten och reduktionsplikten sänks; vilka menar ni med vanligt folk?

4. På eran hemsida skriver ni bland annat: 'I takt med att otryggheten vuxit i städer och många drar sig för att åka kollektivt eller promenera under vissa tider på dygnet, är bilen dessutom ofta det färdsätt som upplevs som tryggast. Bilen är än idag en frihet som är värd att behålla.' Skulle du kunna utveckla det argumentet? (Håller du med om att bilen är en möjliggörare? – I så fall, på vilket sätt?)

5. Sverige blev en bilnation väldigt snabbt och mobilitet har beskrivits som ett prominent drag för Sveriges efterkrigstid. Hur skulle du beskriva bilens roll i svensk välfärd historiskt? Hur samhället vad utformat på den tiden?

6. På eran webbsida skriver ni om att bygga ut vägar, ni är generellt emot att hastigheten sänks etcetera, hur föreställer ni er bilens roll i framtiden?

Kommer den vara lika viktig som idag tror ni? Borde bilen vara lika viktigt som den är idag? (Det spelar väl ingen roll om alla bilar skulle elektrifieras, bilanvändandet i sig måste ju minska?)

Appendix 2: Interview guide for local politicians/members and SD Motor members.

Reduktionsplikten

1. Sverigedemokraterna har sedan införandet av reduktionsplikten varit öppet kritiska mot den. På eran hemsida skriver ni att både bränsledrivmedelsskatten och reduktionsplikten måste minska. Varför har just reduktionsplikten varit en så pass viktig fråga?

2. Sverigedemokraterna har antytt att reduktionsplikten varit ineffektivt både som politiskt styrmedel och för att minska utsläppen av CO2, kan du utveckla det?

3. Redan innan valet beskrev Sverigedemokraterna att svenska hushåll inte får påverkas för mycket av miljöpolitiken. I debatter har reduktionsplikten beskrivits som särskilt negativ för vanliga människor. Men i samband med klimatförändringar, som jag förstår det måste alla människor förändra sitt levnadsätt och konsumtionsvanor. Varför är det så att hushållen i Sverige inte får påverkas för mycket? Kan du utveckla det argumentet?

4. Om vi skulle låtsats oss att reduktionsplikten inte sänktes (antingen att den pausades, eller fortsatte höjas), föreställer du dig att Sverige skulle sett ut, hur hade det varit att leva och bo här?

Bilen

1. Vilka är SD Motor? När och hur grundades ni? På vilket sätt är ni organiserade, hur är det ni jobbar, var jobbar ni för?

2. Vad var din första uppfattning av organisationen? Varför gick du med?

3. Motorkultur (eller i alla fall vissa delar av den) har ibland haft ett dåligt rykte i Sverige historiskt, varför tror du att det har varit så? Är det något som du märker av idag?

4. Kan du beskriva på vilket sätt motorsport och SD passar ihop?

5. Jag läste en artikel från Fordonsproffs, SD var det enda politiska parti som deltog. Thomas Morell sa bland annat: 'Vi är det enda partiet i riksdagen som värnar bilen.' Varför tror du att det är så? Varför har inte andra partier samma inställning till bilen som SD?

6. Sverigedemokraterna lägger stor vikt på bilen i sin politik, den nämns bland annat på er hemsida och i er Valplattform. För vem är bilen viktig, varför är bilen viktig för er? Är bilen en möjliggörare (för vem) - på vilket sätt?

7. På Sverigedemokraternas officiella hemsida står det: "I takt med att otryggheten vuxit i städer och många drar sig för att åka kollektivt eller promenera under vissa tider på dygnet, är bilen dessutom ofta det färdsätt som upplevs som tryggast. Bilen är än idag en frihet som är värd att behålla.' Har du hört det här? Håller du med om det? Varför?

8. Sverige blev en bilnation väldigt snabbt och mobilitet har beskrivits som ett prominent drag för Sveriges efterkrigstid. Hur skulle du beskriva bilens roll i svensk välfärd historiskt? Vad har vi bilen att tacka för? Hur samhället vad utformat på den tiden?

9. På eran webbsida skriver ni: "Elektrifiering är framtiden för bilismen, men elektrifiering kräver å sin sida god tillgång på pålitlig, billig och miljövänlig el genom kärnkraft.' Ni vill även bygga ut vägar, är generellt emot att hastigheten sänks etcetera, hur föreställer ni er bilens roll i framtiden? Kommer den vara lika viktig som idag tror ni? Borde bilen vara lika viktigt som den är idag, borde bilen alltid vara en självklarhet? Vilka alternativa färdsätt skulle kunna vara aktuella för Sverigedemokraterna, vad måste krävas för att det ska verkliggöras? (Det spelar väl ingen roll om alla bilar skulle elektrifieras, bilanvändandet i sig måste ju minska?)