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Fuel for revolt – moral arguments as delegitimation practices in Swedish fuel protests

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ABSTRACT


This article examines the role of moral arguments in the delegitimation of transition policies. Previous research has highlighted attitudes and arguments that explain resistance against transition policies, including perceptions of unfairness; inefficiency and effectiveness; lack of trust; and ideology. This article provides further understanding of resistance to climate policies by zooming in on how social movements implicitly and explicitly use moral arguments to delegitimise low-carbon transition policies. Through a qualitative interview study with members of a Swedish social media movement against low-carbon transport policies, we analyse central arguments against policies; how moral considerations figure in them; and how these strengthen argumentative delegitimation practices against transition policies in the transport sector. We show how moral arguments serve to legitimise protests both by instilling an urgency in the cause and generalising the demands to delegitimise mainstream transition policies, and suggest that recognition of this may contribute to both better analysis and policies.

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1. Introduction

For the transition to a low-carbon future to succeed, policies must achieve sufficient social acceptance. In a democratic context, it is generally acknowledged that a certain level of social acceptability is a necessary (although not sufficient) condition for successful and sustainable implementation of transition policies (Batel 2020). It is also an imperative of justice; it can, for example, be understood as a kind of democratic proofing (Healy and Barry 2017). Demands for a more just, equitable, and socially inclusive low-carbon transition are often summarised

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in terms of a ‘just transition’ (Newell and Mulvaney 2013, Abram et al. 2022), which is also officially recognised in global, regional, and national climate transition plans alike (United Nations 2015, European Commission 2019, Government of Sweden 2023).

In recent years, however, as the effects of the transformative societal changes motivated by combatting climate change are increasingly felt, the aims and means of implementing the low-carbon transition are increasingly disputed, and support for it is wavering across many countries (Wanvik and Haarstad 2021). Although it is widely recognised and accepted that addressing climate change is an urgent problem that requires radical changes, many transition policies have sparked popular protests, resistance, and discontent, voiced both by established political parties, prominent leaders, and community groups (Marquardt and Lederer 2022). Recent literature has therefore turned its attention to the contestation and delegitimation of transition policies in what has been described as an international backlash against climate politics (Patterson 2023). Indeed, it seems that climate policies are being increasingly and more aggressively politicized on all fronts, both by those who want to see stronger action and those who want less. In the light of this, sustainability transitions need to be understood as ‘deeply conflictual processes’ (Wanvik and Haarstad 2021) ripe with ‘justice pitfalls’ (Wågsæther et al. 2022) that are bound to invite critique, contestation, and conflict (Brandstedt et al. 2022).

The aim of this article is to contribute to a deeper understanding of resistance to climate policies by zooming in on how social movements implicitly and explicitly use moral arguments to delegitimise the politics and policies of low-carbon transitions. We do so by studying resistance to policies aimed at transitioning the transport sector in Sweden. The case we investigate is the social media group *Bränsleupproret 2.0* (literal translation = ‘the Fuel Revolt 2.0’, henceforth ‘Fuel Revolt’ or ‘FR’), one of the several social movements that have been labelled as ‘populist’ in their resistance against policies that are seen as unjust and detrimental to the majority of the population. The Fuel Revolt is of relevance due to their impact on national policy discourse and on transport policies. By analysing the moral elements of the argumentative practice of this protest movement, we show how a social movement can transform a general sentiment that something is amiss in the mainstream climate agenda into a full-scale attack and delegitimation of it. This also shows how the ideals of a just transition can backfire. The analytic framework developed in this article can also be used to analyse similar resistance movements in other contexts.

The article is structured as follows: first, we review the literature on resistance against transition policies, with a focus on the transport sector. We then outline our analytical framework and method, after which the case and a contextualization of the Fuel Revolt are described. In section 5, our main findings are presented, followed by discussion and conclusions.

2. Resistance to transition policies

Organised resistance against low-carbon transition policies may delay or prevent changes required to combat climate change and so cannot be ignored. We review two strands of the literature related to the transport sector: survey-based research on attitudes toward transition policies and case studies on resistance movements against transition policies.

The literature on attitudes toward transition policies either seeks to understand factors that shape policy acceptance and support (cf. Jagers et al. 2019, Maestre-Andrés et al. 2019), or resistance against it (Carattini et al. 2018, Povitkina et al. 2021). Explanations offered in this literature often concern socio-psychological factors, such as perceptions of fairness and policy trust. The literature on resistance movements complements these studies with a focus on the socio-political dynamics behind resistance to transition policies. In the context of transport, the most well-known example is the Yellow Vests movement in France, which erupted over raised diesel taxes in 2018 (Martin and Islar 2021, Douenne and Fabre 2022). However, protests over fuel prices or transition policies can be found in other countries as well, including Germany's *Defenders of diesel* (Arning and Ziefle 2020), Norway's *People's action No to toll roads* (Wanvik and Haarstad 2021, Wågsæther et al. 2022), Sweden's *Fuel Revolt* (Ewald et al. 2022), and most recently protests against the expansions of ultra-low emissions zones in the UK (Mabbett 2023).

Combining insights from both attitude research and qualitative case studies, we identify four broad categories which are used to explain resistance against transition policies:

- (1) **Unfairness** is one of the most common topics to explain resistance against transition policies. The unfairness here relates primarily to the perception of unjust distributional impacts from carbon pricing (Maestre-Andrés et al. 2019). Such distributional impacts can be *economic*, in the forms of (too) high individual costs, especially for lower-income households (Carattini et al. 2018; Povitkina et al. 2021), *spatial*, in the form of lack of transport alternatives in rural areas (Arning and Ziefle 2020; Douenne and Fabre 2020) and *temporal*, as in the case of the Yellow vests' framing of their resistance as a tension between a focus on the local fight to reach 'the end of the month' vs. a universalistic fight against 'the end of the world' (Martin and Islar 2021; see also Hanusch and Meisch 2022, for a discussion of the 'temporal cleavage' in climate politics). In the case of the Yellow vests, dissent has surged among people who already experience a cost-of-living crisis and perceive that they are marginalised in policy decisions.

- (2) **Ineffectiveness and inefficiency** are together the second important factor for resistance based on a discourse that policies either do not have substantial impacts on combatting climate change (ineffective) or that they have a low input–output ratio (inefficient) (Carattini et al. 2018; Povitkina et al. 2021; Ewald et al. 2022). A central objection is that carbon taxes incur costs for households but have few effects on emissions, since people have to drive regardless of the fuel price. Hence, a common attitude is that carbon taxation damages the economy for no good reason.
- (3) **Lack of trust** in policymakers and political processes is a recurring component in resistance to transition policies, with a common attitude being a suspicion that governments will not use tax earnings from carbon taxations properly (Carattini et al. 2018; Jagers and Hammar 2009; Maestre-Andrés et al. 2019; Povitkina et al. 2021). Ewald et al. (2022) identify lack of trust in the government as the most distinguishing feature of the resistance movement against Swedish fuel policies. Similarly, the Norwegian ‘No to toll roads’ movement has opposed policies proposed to reach Norway’s zero growth of transport policy goal and reacted against what was perceived as an ‘elite capture’ of transition processes, i.e. that economic and social ‘elites’ are using transition policies to further their own interests at the expense of ‘ordinary’ people (Sovacool et al., 2019; Remme et al. 2022).
- (4) **Norms, identity, and ideological positioning** also condition individuals’ attitudes and behaviour toward instruments such as compensatory schemes and tax increases (Jagers et al. 2019; Ewald et al. 2022). For example, analysing the German ‘defenders of diesel’, Arning and Ziefle (2020) argue that the combination of a strong automobility culture and a ‘Zeitgeist of uncertainty’ fuels a desire to preserve existing structures and status formations, which translate to a resistance to transition policies. They also identify an ‘emotionalization’ of the diesel debate, with strong expressions of anger, humiliation, perceived threats to rights and freedoms, and a feeling of being fooled, which leads to ‘a self-perception as “David” in the archaic struggle against the superiority of politics and industry as “Goliath”’ (Arning and Ziefle 2020, p. 8).

These four central factors give structure to organised resistance to transition policies. However, to provide a deeper understanding of how these attitudes are channelled through social movements to politically potent attacks on the legitimacy of the transition, there is a need for another kind of analysis.

3. Analytical framework and method

3.1. *Theorizing the moral elements of delegitimation*

The reviewed literature points to a backlash for transition policies in (and beyond) the transport sector, which is partly a result of purposeful processes of delegitimation (Patterson 2023), i.e. the active lowering of legitimacy of a policy. Patterson proposes three categories of delegitimation practices: ‘argumentative’, ‘structural’ and ‘behavioural’. As the article analyses the role of moral arguments in social protest movements, we here focus on argumentative delegitimation practices which are defined as ‘claims about the unjustifiability of a policy considering shared beliefs of the political community’ (ibid., p. 80). Importantly, argumentative practices are not about beliefs in legitimacy held by individual citizens, but about shared conceptions among actors within the political community.

Our focus in this article is on the role of the social protest movements – through the case of the Swedish ‘Fuel Revolt’ – as collective agents in argumentative delegitimation processes that challenge the legitimacy and justifiability of climate policies and the sustainability transition more generally. More specifically, we analyse the role of the moral arguments that such social movements employ. Social protest movements are, by their nature, normative in their orientation and can be defined as ‘an organised effort by a significant number of people to change (or resist change in) some major aspect or aspects of society’ (Scott and Marshall 2009). They use a repertoire of political actions towards their social objective, from demonstrations to petitions, pamphlets, and social media messages. The Fuel Revolt is a good case for studying argumentative delegitimation practices. Whereas the Yellow Vests build strength from bodily presence in the streets and roundabouts of France, FR’s main logic is based on the production and dissemination of text by its members through social media. The group’s Facebook page is used to both gather and spread public opinions about fuel prices and transport policy, thereby functioning as a discursive prism that concentrates and radiates the emotions and opinions that legitimate opposition to various policies.

Arguments are part and parcel of the political action of social protest movements and often these arguments have moral elements. An argument can be considered moral by either explicitly referring to moral reasons or by implicitly being strengthened by evaluative and normative considerations. Either way, it can be seen as a kind of moral legitimation or an answer to the ‘why-question’: ‘why should we do this?’ (Van Leeuwen 2007). Answers to this question come in different forms: from explicit use of moral terminology (such as ‘it is unfair’, ‘it is morally wrong’), to use of evaluative adjectives (such as ‘normal’,

‘natural’, ‘healthy’), to the use of abstractions and analogies to associate one thing with another where the former is either recognised as inferior and problematic or superior and exemplary (*ibid.*). Moral arguments often mix with empirical arguments in complex and mutually supportive lines of arguments. They may also come in the form of arguments transposed to empirical or technical terminology such as about what ‘works’, is ‘cost effective’, ‘make sense’, is ‘relevant’ (where these matters are determined partly by evaluative and normative assumptions). These argumentative strategies can be either positive, to bolster conviction and lend normative flair, or negative, to challenge or question the justifiability of prevailing institutions and norms of beliefs.

For our purposes, the important features of moral arguments are their functional roles in argumentative delegitimation practices, in particular the following:

- (1) Moral considerations typically invoke stronger emotional responses than preferences in general (Brennan and Sayre-McCord 2016). It is felt to be much worse if someone is morally wronged than if they just do not get what they want.
- (2) Moral considerations do not figure in agents’ preference functions like other preferences, i.e. as a consideration speaking in favour or against an option. Instead, they typically constrain choices and make certain actions ‘unthinkable’. As such, moral considerations are stronger and may lead to a resistance to trade-offs and to accept compensation for losses.
- (3) Moral arguments refer to objective reasons, which give claims a different status and standing than if they are merely referring to subjective reasons. Through moral arguments, claimants can present their claims as things that everyone should be concerned about and thereby seek to position them as more politically relevant. They transform preferences into impersonal evaluations about how relevant institutions ought to be designed.
- (4) Finally, moral arguments have an ideological function in that they naturalise or ‘decontest’ opinions or worldviews (Freeden 2003).

Analysing the use of implicit and explicit moral arguments in argumentative delegitimation practices provides deeper insights into the complexity and salience of resistance to transition policies. Importantly, attention to moral legitimation and delegitimation may help explain how arguments that may ostensibly be easily countered by facts and counter arguments, or ones that may be materially detrimental to their proponents, can still carry much force.

4. Methodology

In line with the ‘argumentative turn’ in policy analysis (Fischer 2015), we believe that the construction and dissemination of arguments against policies are important points of departure for an analysis of how argumentative delegitimation works in practice and provide deeper understandings of the arguments that underpin and support the production of resistance. Crucially, our study seeks to adopt an ‘ethnographic sensibility’ (Bell et al. 2019) to the resistance against transition policies, where we primarily seek to understand arguments on their own terms, and to thereafter discuss their political implications.

The analysis was conducted in three steps following a set of questions:

- (1) What are the central arguments against transition policies raised by members of the Fuel Revolt?
- (2) How do moral considerations figure in these arguments?
- (3) How are the moral arguments used together with facts and other elements to produce complex lines of argumentation?

By answering these questions, we can analyse how argumentative practices function normatively to legitimise (one’s own) and delegitimise (one’s opponent’s) positions.

To analyse the arguments and moral rationale of delegitimation, we collected empirical data through semi-structured group interviews with members of the Fuel Revolt movement, with questions focusing on why people oppose various transport policies in Sweden. We chose interviews over analysis of posts on social media because interviews allow participants to elaborate on and deepen their reasonings and arguments, and for researchers to reach beyond superficial statements. We chose to conduct group interviews because the interviewees can reflect their responses in each other, going beyond the question-response dynamic. Group interviews also contributed by creating a sense of safety as the participants were not on their own when talking to us researchers.

Two initial interviews were conducted in April 2022 with three individuals holding key positions in the FR movement. We did this, firstly, to grasp how the people at the visible front of the movement reason and compare this with reasoning by fewer public members, and, secondly, to ask for help to recruit group interview participants from the wider membership of the movement. Assisted by the group moderators, we recruited participants through opportunistic sampling by posting a form in the movement’s Facebook group. Group interviews were carried out between May and September 2022. Since group members are spread throughout Sweden and are used to sharing opinions in front of the screen, we conducted online interviews which have several benefits, including reach, accessibility, representation, and cost-effectiveness (Archibald et al. 2019).

In total, we conducted seven interviews with 15 persons, 13 men, and two women. The gender balance among interviewees is notable. It is well established in the literature that there are gendered aspects vis-à-vis justifications of fossil fuel extraction and climate obstruction (Ekberg et al. 2023). It is also possible that masculine gender identities influence the strategies and arguments of the Fuel Revolt movement; while they have not been analysed in detail in this study, a majority of posts and comments on Facebook seem to come from accounts with male-gendered names. Also, in their survey of the FR movement, Ewald et al. (2022) found a strongly male-dominated sample. Further analysis of gender aspects connected to the FR would thus be valuable.

Each interview lasted around 90 minutes, all conversations were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and pseudonymised by the researchers. Following research ethics standards, all interviewees received written information about the project, and signed informed consent before interviews were conducted. All empirical material has been pseudonymised and is stored in accordance with data filing protocols. In the findings, quotes are assigned an 'R' followed by a number to differentiate between respondents. We then used Nvivo software to code the material. The coding included several analytical steps and following an abductive approach to the data analysis, moving between categories emerging from the empirical data and prior theorising (Pratt 2023). We began by coding each argument or grievance voiced. Second, we grouped these codes into common themes, which we then confronted with theoretical themes from existing literature (see Section 2). Having identified thematic arguments, we then identified how moral arguments figured in the material to analyse how these interact with other, non-moral, arguments.

5. The case: Swedish transition policy and the fuel revolt

An important contextual factor in the case of the Swedish fuel protests is national climate politics. As one of the first countries to adopt a general carbon tax in 1991 (Hildingsson and Knaggård 2022), economic climate policies are not new to the population of Sweden. In 2017, a climate-political framework was adopted, intended to support the political target of achieving net zero emissions by 2045, with milestone targets along the way (Karlsson 2021). Importantly for this case, a specific goal for domestic road transport was set with the target to decrease emissions from road transport by 70% compared to 2010 levels by 2030. To achieve this, a range of economic policies seeking to incentivise the purchase of renewable fuels and electric vehicles have been introduced, the most prominent being: raised fuel taxes, an emission reduction obligation requiring blend-in of renewables in the fuel mix and a bonus–malus tax system for new light vehicles.

At the same time as the climate change act and ambitious climate policies have been implemented, climate policy has been re-politicised over the last few

years and an increasingly partisan split has developed in several policy areas, including energy, industry, and transport. Movements criticising mainstream climate policies have developed on both sides of this growing divide: Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movement pushing for more radical reforms, and movements like the Fuel Revolt calling for lowering ambitions.

The Fuel Revolt 2.0 was formed in 2019 and was, as of 2022, the biggest Swedish Facebook group with 585 000 members, in a country with a population of 10 450 000. The group stands on two legs: a public social media community on Facebook where members share and comment on news, exchange ideas, and organise events, and a small non-profit association without political party affiliations conducting political lobbying. FR's main aim is 'a society where driving is not overtaxed and where all Swedish citizens feel free to live and work where they want without punitive taxation' (Bränsleupproret n.d.). As the name suggests, the original – and still central – focus of the movement was calling for lower fuel prices; however, as energy prices rose beginning in late 2021, lower energy prices were added to the movement's demands.

While FR was initially a marginal Facebook group started by one individual being frustrated about high fuel prices, a combination of factors provided the group with political saliency and what Johansson and Scaramuzzino (2023) call 'digital resource abundance'. First, in the years that the FR grew rapidly, so did fuel prices (a 25% increase on petrol and 60% on diesel between early 2019 and late 2022). Second, the Facebook group was taken over by new management that effectively managed to grow membership exponentially during the spring of 2019 (ibid.). And while FR has not been successful in turning online activism into street protests despite recurring calls to do so within the group, high fuel prices and living conditions in the Swedish countryside did become important topics in the political debates running up the national elections in 2022, with most political parties arranging meetings with the leaders of the group. Measures to lower fuel prices were also proposed by most major parties across the political spectrum, and fuel prices have been singled out as the issue that tilted the election outcome to the right (Mosesson 2022). After the completion of the study reported in this article, a right-wing government won power in 2022 after an election campaign in which lower fuel prices was a central message, and Swedish climate policy has been restructured in the direction of lowered ambitions.

FR has been surrounded by turmoil, with accusations of misuse of grass-root funding (Bergquist 2023) and attempts by right-wing funding organizations to co-opt the group's messaging (Hellerud and Ekström 2023), thus inviting comparisons with astroturf organisation (Ekberg et al. 2023, p. 54). While it is beyond the scope of this study to analyse such connections, the above critiques, coupled with harsh anti-centre-left messaging in the group and the group's public leader running for election for the conservative party

in 2022, FR is considered by many as right-wing populist. The growth of FR also coincides with a broader mobilisation around the climate debate from the Swedish right-wing alternative media (Vowles and Hultman 2021) and it is notable that many proponents of the FR (including those in our sample, as we shall see below) share sentiments characteristic of right-wing populist and climate obstructionist movements, such as lack of trust in environmental institutions and anti-elitist attitudes (Krange et al. 2021). However, when surveying attitudes to carbon taxation among Fuel Revolt members, Ewald et al. (2022) did not find a very strong right-wing political orientation among members. Compared to a national sample, however, FR supporters had a much more polarized view on policy instruments were significantly less likely to trust government or view climate change as a problem.

6. Findings: arguments in moral delegitimation of transition policies

In this section, we turn to the empirical findings. We begin by categorising the central arguments from the interviews, to then go beyond these categories to analyse their moral elements, and lastly analyse how moral and descriptive arguments are joined in lines of argumentation.

6.1. Arguments against transition policies

The arguments we identify in our data can be subsumed under the categories outlined in Section 2, that is, as having to do with *unfairness; inefficiency and ineffectiveness; lack of trust; and identity, norms, and ideology*. Below we provide illustrative examples of each category:

6.1.1. Unfairness

Many of the arguments point to the unfairness of Swedish policies in the transport sector, specifically raising issues related to *economic, spatial* as well as *temporal* distribution.

- **Economic unfairness.** Fuel taxes are considered unfair for the working class as they are regressive. The bonus–malus policy for electric vehicles is considered poor policy design, hitting those who ‘have the least resources the hardest’ (R1). One person describes it as ‘a reverse Robin Hood tax’ that leads to night working nurses driving old cars subsidising ‘Tesla owners in the inner-city’ (R8). The concern for the working class also manifests itself in the motivations to join the Fuel Revolt; while many participants do not consider themselves being directly affected by high fuel prices they state that they participate in the group to stand in sympathy with disadvantaged groups.

- **Spatial unfairness.** A recurring sentiment is that people living on the Swedish countryside are discriminated against by politicians living in the big cities: ‘everyone who lives outside the inner cities are discriminated. As soon as you go 4-5 km outside of a town you don’t have the same status as a person. [...] You don’t have access to anything’ (R15).
- **Temporal unfairness.** Although several respondents recognise that ‘we also have a responsibility’ for climate mitigation to protect future generations (R12), the pace at which the transition is being executed is questioned: ‘we can’t take the car from families today because we have something else tomorrow, we kind of need to run our cars to the ground, we who cannot afford to buy a Tesla’ (R8).

6.1.2. *Ineffectiveness and inefficiency*

Aside from being unfair, policies such as the ERO, higher fuel taxes, or the bonus–malus policy, are considered by most participants to have negligible effect on emissions. Within this category, we also find three related yet distinct aspects:

- **Sweden’s insignificance in the world.** The main argument is that Sweden’s contribution would be ineffective in addressing the global problem: ‘I feel that it is a sort of self-destructive behaviour for us to save the world and it doesn’t even show on a tenth of a percent if we would cease to exist entirely’ (R7). Countries like China, India and, to a lesser degree, the US, are seen as the main problem since they emit the most CO₂.
- **Policies address the wrong sectors.** This argument revolves around the claim that emissions from road transport are relatively small and that there are other emission sources that are more important to address. Participants mention, for example that to make a significant contribution to climate mitigation, policies should instead focus on the shipping industry or on restoring wetlands; the latter being ‘easy, it hurts no one, and it would compensate all emissions from the transport sector immediately’ (R1).
- **Prices have little impact on emissions.** Another common argument is that higher fuel prices do not make a difference for emission reductions, as expressed by one interviewee: ‘I know that the emissions from my car aren’t affected the least by the price ... the distance I drive because I have to doesn’t become one millimetre shorter because it gets more expensive [to drive]’ (R8).

6.1.3. *Lack of trust*

In interviews, we identify a recurring sentiment of lack of trust in politicians and policy processes, often expressed in scornful, upset, or disappointed

voices. This lack of trust seems to boil down to two aspects, (1) which groups and interests politicians represent (or do not), and (2) that politicians lack long sightedness.

- **Politicians represent the wrong interests.** A recurring opinion is that politicians ‘don’t know much about things in the real world’ (R9), which for the respondents means life outside the large cities, especially Sweden’s capital, Stockholm. Because of this, the transition has become ‘a hypocrisy that is going to be forced through at any price’ (R5). Politicians are seen to favour the European Union and capital interests over ‘ordinary people’s’ interests, and the emissions reduction obligation is dismissed by participants as a ‘way to make money’ (R4) that has nothing to do with transitioning away from fossil fuels.
- **Politicians lack long-sightedness.** There is also a perception that politicians lack competence to make decisions about climate or transport. Politicians are described as “worse than bouncing balls” in their fickleness (R9) and that they “waste tax money on short term things, they don’t see where the solutions may be, because they don’t understand how technology, technological development and industry works”(R8). Several participants instead favour decision-making by engineers over politicians, which they argue would lead to better and more stable policies.

6.1.4. *Identity, norms and ideology*

The final category of arguments revolves around **identity, norms, and ideology** and boils down to the perception that the car is both a necessary and valuable feature of modern life.

- In terms of **norms**, several interviewees highlight that they need a car to get to and from work, to visit family and friends and to access social services. As expressed by one person: ‘We live in a very long country. It’s cold and awful, it sometimes rains and snows and so on. We must have a car!’ (R10).
- Embedded in **ideology**, the car is associated by several interviewees with freedom and development, with cars being ‘one of the greatest tools for freedom that we have achieved as a civilization’ that provides ‘an immense freedom and opportunity to choose one’s life, where you want to work, how you want to live’ (R6).
- With regards to **identity**, ongoing transition policies are perceived as an attack on people’s way of life. One person bluntly state that ‘I won’t change to an electric car out of principle . . . I grew up in a car, [it] should be a combustion engine’ (R9). Another participant voice that rising fuel prices are perceived as ‘a threat to me, my family, our way of life – us who live on the countryside!’ (R8).

6.2. *Moral elements in the argumentation of the FR*

The arguments sorted under the first of these four categories above ('unfairness') are moral in the sense of being explicitly framed in a such a language, involving 'justice' and 'fairness'. Some additional examples can be given: one interviewee argues that Sweden's ambitious climate policies lead to unfair international competition (because other countries have more lax policies) (R14); another interviewee says that investments in high-speed trains benefit cities at the expense of the countryside and refers to this as a question of justice.

For other arguments, the moral elements are less explicit, but still there. This includes statements such as: that politicians and political decisions are 'corrupt' (R4) or 'cynical' (R1) and 'don't give a damn about anything' (R11); the whole debate around the transition is 'horribly wrong' and 'forces people into submission' (R4); climate policies are 'discriminatory' against ordinary people (R6); people are 'not respected as equal human beings and citizens' (R7); or that current politics prevent ordinary people from leading 'a good life' or having 'a functioning family life' (R8). Such arguments appeal to moral ideals, e.g. about how politicians ought to behave, or claims related to autonomy, recognition, and what is needed for a good life. The arguments can also become moral through arousing moral feelings by associations, as was explained in the analytic framework. This can be seen in arguments associating climate policies to a neglect of the countryside, or by connecting the combustion engine car to positive values, such as freedom, independence, progress, and equality.

Adopting this broader understanding of moral argumentation allows us to see that rather many of the arguments in the material are of the moral kind. However, some arguments are rather economic and technical arguments about what works and what is considered efficient. These should be separated from the moral arguments, but they too can be repurposed as moral arguments in at least two ways. First, if they are used selectively to further a political agenda (a kind of motivated reasoning). Secondly, when they are intertwined with moral arguments in complex lines of argumentation, such as when the argument from effectiveness becomes a justice argument: The CO₂-tax is first considered ineffective (either because of a global free riding problem or because people will have to drive irrespective of costs) and then unfair (because other countries or sectors are more responsible). It is thus considered unfair to have an ineffective policy.

6.3. *The functions of moral arguments in argumentative delegitimation practices*

Moral arguments can be said to have a plurality of functions in the argumentative practices we have studied, but two of them are

particularly important: (1) to legitimise the social protest movement and further its political demands, and (2) to delegitimise mainstream climate politics.

6.3.1. Legitimation of social protest

The use of moral arguments instils an urgency to the cause and makes demands more generally relevant. This can be seen most clearly in how many interviewees speak from, or for, a perspective of the most disadvantaged. For example, by arguing from the perspective of the night-working, commuting, nurse living on the countryside against the inner-city Tesla owner, or that FR represents ‘everyone but those living in big cities’ (R7). The feeling is that someone else makes the decisions and that the transition is biased in favour of decision-makers. The underdog position creates a sense of solidarity but also a clear opposition, an ‘us against them’-sentiment towards the ‘urban elite’. Although the critique is contextual and specific, the conclusions, however, are general: the respondents’ conclusions are not that specifically the night-working nurse needs support or compensation, but that the transition must be halted, and gasoline prices lowered.

6.3.2. Delegitimation of mainstream climate politics

Moral arguments target the foundation of climate policies and question their rationale and rightful place in politics. These arguments do not point to the need for reforms to patch and fix current climate policies, but rather suggest that the whole climate agenda, as it is currently organised, is misconceived and illegitimate. Politicians allegedly do not understand or appreciate the difficulties ordinary people face; they speak from their own privileged position. One interviewee said that politicians believe that ‘if we raise the price on fossil fuels, everyone will automatically buy an electric car’ (R11); another recalls a televised political debate in which the leader of the Green party turns to the camera and says, ‘if you cannot afford to fill up your car, buy an electric car instead!’ (R4). Such examples are used to convey the image of politicians being disconnected from the reality of ordinary people and obsessed by the transition which they are determined to follow through at any cost. Politicians are portrayed as ideological, elitist, and estranged from reality. Another delegitimising line of argument is that the carbon taxes are just a cash cow used to enrich the state and companies at the expense of ordinary people. In another rhetorical device, politicians are portrayed as indecisive and fickle, which is taken as a reason to doubt the legitimacy of the current direction of change. Thus, they cannot be trusted, their agenda is illegitimate, it is not supported by the people, and should be dismissed across the board.

7. Moral arguments in argumentative delegitimation practices: political implications

The Fuel Revolt helps people express their discontent in a politically viable terms and so mobilises a slumbering opposition. Through the existence of the group, it is no longer just a feeling that there is something wrong with high gasoline prices: there is now a moral explanation for why this is so, and demands can thus be formulated and pressed upon politicians.

Taken together, the arguments created by and channelled through the Fuel Revolt create headwinds for existing transition policies for the Swedish transport sector. Policy ambitions are attacked on all fronts: from problem formulations by challenging Sweden's climate leadership role and responsibilities, through the design of concrete policies such as the emissions reduction obligation or bonus–malus policy, and on to questioning the motives of the politicians driving these changes. There is thus a mismatch between the current political responses to the climate crisis and beliefs, feelings, and norms among the proponents of FR, who claim to have wide representation among Swedes. Issues with current policies are perceived to run deeper and be more extensive than what can be dealt with by tweaking individual policies; it is the legitimacy of the transition overall that is contested. As such, the FR's actions are a prime example of what Patterson (2023) term argumentative delegitimation practices.

The FR can be understood as a kind of 'popular think tank', which creates, sharpens, and supplements arguments against mainstream energy- and climate policies. While not all arguments were held by everyone in our interviews, there were consistent messages that speak to a coherency in the movement. This became most poignant in the invocation of Sweden's small share of emissions, which was reiterated as an argument for lowering Sweden's responsibility and ambitions in every interview. The FR thus provides a pool of knowledge for disseminating talking points among the group members and ideology production that shapes a common worldview among the participants, which can then serve to delegitimize the transition agenda and to justify the status quo (Goldsmith et al. 2013).

There is also a striking similarity in terms of shared attitudes and arguments with the right-wing climate denial wave that has swept over the world over in recent years (Lockwood 2018), including the lack of trust in politicians and environmental institutions, anti-elitist attitudes, and appeals to identities tied up with fossil fuel use (Krange et al. 2021). This raises the question of whether there is a deeper basis for the grievances and complaints expressed by the likes of the FR. Various potential explanations for hostility to the climate agenda are discussed in the literature, including structural factors such as change leading to economic hardship, ideological factors such as a nostalgic political ambition or anti-globalist values (see, e.g. Ekberg et al.

2023), or psycho-political factors such as notions of petro-masculinity (Daggett 2018) or resentment politics (Brown 1993). Our analysis does not provide clear support for any single explanation but makes a contribution to these discussions by laying bare how moral arguments function in delegitimation practices in a social protest movement. The moral arguments we have mapped point to some generally valid moral concerns, e.g. about the distribution of transitional costs and the lack of meaningful engagement in decision-making processes. But at the same time, it is clear that these are used for an ideological agenda set up to delegitimise climate politics without providing a realistic alternative. Regardless of the basis of the critique – whether it is, e.g. high fuel prices or a general lack of trust in politics – it is clear from our analysis that moral arguments are used, purposefully or unwittingly, to sow further doubt in political processes and thus make it even more difficult to implement large-scale changes, including phasing out of fossil fuels.

In articulating and translating grievances and discontent into moral arguments, something happens to their normative status. The fact that moral arguments legitimise subjective feelings and individual claims may be both good and bad, depending on what perspective on policy processes one takes. Perceptions of unfairness and feelings that something is amiss in the transition may indicate real problems and structural injustices. Perhaps it is correct that, as the Fuel Revolt argues, the transition of the transport sector has been biased in favour of city dwellers. For example, public transport in Sweden has become increasingly concentrated in inter- and intraurban areas, causing a growing divide between those who have access to sustainable mobility options, and those who do not (Portinson Hylander 2022). Once the feelings are expressed in moral terms, this is something that can be argued about, discussed, and criticised, thereby broadening inclusion of voices in democratic dialogues. This provides a difficulty for policymakers because resistance movements, such as FR may thus both function as deliberate obstruction and point to valid moral reasons for policy changes.

Decision-makers must thus be careful about which conclusions to draw from these moral arguments; there is a need to critically assess them. In populist political agendas this further step, however, is rarely taken, but instead skipped over as grievances are conceived as truth-claims. There is thus a risk that opposition to the low-carbon transition, once dressed up in this costume, gains access to the political arena and feeds into mainstream politics without critical interrogation. This is what we are seeing around the world today: morally super-charged arguments are levers for political influence. It is important to note that even in cases where these kinds of arguments refer to valid moral considerations – such as equality, justice, and democracy – they can be misused in that they are based on misunderstandings of what follows from general principles to the case at hand. For example,

from the fact that Swedish emissions are only a fraction of the world's total emissions does not follow that Sweden does not have a moral responsibility to reduce its national emissions (see, e.g. Gunnemyr 2019).

The interpretive room around moral considerations can also be exploited to protect the status quo. For example, while it is reasonable to demand that low-carbon transitions do not increase inequalities or to criticise policies with regressive distributive effects, this can be ideologically (mis)used to defend unequal privileges afforded by the current system. For example, Remme et al. (2022) point to that the resistance against anti-car measures, while employing the rhetoric of protecting a car dependent working class, may reinforce existing elites' positions, such as affluent car users. Similarly, arguments questioning the efficiency of transition policies can, on the one hand, point to real concerns with policy design, but, again, also be intentionally obstructive for example, by shifting the issue to other policy areas to legitimise car-dependent lifestyles.

8. Conclusions

In this paper, we have analysed argumentative delegitimation practices focusing on the use of moral arguments in the case of the Fuel Revolt in Sweden. The arguments from our interview material are categorised in terms of unfairness; inefficiency and ineffectiveness; trust; and ideology, norms, and identity, which resonate with findings from previous studies. We argue that the Fuel Revolt functions as a vehicle for articulating and verbalising the feeling that something is amiss with mainstream climate politics. It does so by identifying and producing a multiplicity of morally grounded arguments against the dominant approach to decarbonisation in the transport sector. This highlights the complexity of the resistance, which builds on but goes beyond subjective feelings and individual grievances. It is a political force that needs to be reckoned with and, as such, points to the need for more comprehensive political reform agendas. Going forward, policymaking needs to incorporate an understanding of moral consideration in what all too easily becomes an instrumentally rational approach to policymaking in search of the most effective policy tool. However, we also believe that at the same time as arguments put forward by diverse resistance movements need to be taken seriously, they also need to be scrutinised. Moral arguments can easily be incorporated in an ideological agenda aimed at deliberately obstructing change and undermining the trust needed to implement a just transition. We argue that recognition and analysis of the moral grounds on which arguments for resistance rest, provide a first step towards legitimising climate policy.

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