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Article

'Executed in Front of Your Children': Writing from the Body to Understand Victims of Nasty Politics

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Abstract: A far-right populist nativist party is currently holding tangible powers, dictating the ambitions, content and process of Swedish politics. Nasty politics including hate speech and hate crime is systematically used to radically change politics and governance. In acts of demonisation and dehumanisation, the prime minister and other top political leaders use hate speech to silence scientist, journalists and activists in the public debate on climate policy. Embodying and resonating with my personal experiences of far-right hate speech and hate crime, I qualitatively analyse testimonies of 50 victims of hate speech and hate crime to understand the nature of nasty rhetoric. To victims, nasty rhetoric is perceived as an asynchronous or coordinated *swarm of instants* that keep coming in a vertical temporality. It leaves many victims with fear of crime and anxiety from not knowing when life will go normal. They resign or stay silent in the public policy debate. Nasty rhetoric also ignites anger, a holy wrath, radicalising some victims. Not to turn violent, but to intensify peaceful protests to pursue their science-based argumentation for strong climate policy. Thus, nasty rhetoric victimisation can also be seen as a *traffic cone*. Some victims hide in the wide end and turn silent, others use it to speak louder to backfire on the perpetrators of nasty rhetoric.

Keywords: climate change; democracy; embodiment; feminism; hate crime; hate speech; politics; populism; vertical temporality; vulnerability; writing differently.

1. Something Is Rotten in the Kingdom of Sweden

Prologue

In an instant

I was a targeted foe

Hated and threatened

Studying the agency of policy entrepreneurs in the radical transformation of Swedish climate policy and governance, I found that the current right-wing government and its far-right populist supporters systematically use hate speech and related crimes targeting those that advocate strong climate policy (von Malmberg, 2024a). It is not only a tactic of the anonymous and climate change denying far-right extremist movement, but also of leading politicians, including the prime minister (PM), to use insults, accusations, intimidation and incitement to delegitimize and dehumanize left-liberal political opponents, climate activists, climate scientists and climate journalists in a polarized cultural war on climate politics (von Malmberg, 2025a).

In this paper, *climate scientists* refers to academic researchers studying the causes and effects of global warming, those developing technologies to mitigate and adapt to climate change, as well as those studying responses, actions, policies and measures (including political, economic, technological, social and behavioural) taken or that could or should be taken by politicians, business leaders, economists, public organisations, social organisations and people to mitigate and adapt to climate change. *Climate activists* refers to people who, organised in climate movements or unorganised, participate in the public debate advocating a need for urgent action to mitigate and

adapt to climate change. *Climate journalists* include journalists that report on climate change, climate science, climate action and climate politics in news media.

Hate speech and hate crime with racist, religious and misogynist motives is well-known (e.g. Yilmaz, 2012; Lutz, 2019; Peters, 2020; Hagerlid, 2021; Atak, 2022; Weeks & Allen, 2023; Svatoňová & Doerr, 2024; Ilse & Hagerlid, 2025), but such *nasty politics* with a *nasty rhetoric* (Zeitzoff, 2023) is a rather new phenomenon in climate politics. Most research on far-right populism and climate change has focused on climate change denialism (Edvardsson Björnberg et al., 2017; Vihma et al., 2021; Vowles & Hultman, 2021a; Ekberg & Pressfeldt, 2022), polarised policy framing (Eubanks, 2015; Sharman & Howarth, 2017; Bsumek et al. 2019; Nordensvärd & Ketola, 2022; Pandey, 2024), and links between climate change denial and antifeminism (Agius et al., 2021; Andersson, 2021; Vowles & Hultman, 2021b; White, 2022; Arce-García et al., 2023).

A leading Swedish newspaper recently described Swedish climate politics as “a musty rant with accusations of betrayal, sin and devil pacts”.¹ What happens is part of an ongoing process of far-right populist autocratisation in Sweden and other West European nations (Gustavsson, 2024; Silander, 2024; V-Dem Institute, 2024; von Malmberg, 2024b), also evident in US under President Donald J. Trump (Vargiu et al., 2024).

The intersection of four worrying themes that touch me deeply as a social scientist studying climate politics and democracy, as a social activist citizen, and as a father made me want to understand the nature of nasty rhetoric more in-depth:

- accelerating climate change and the climate emergency,
- democracy and the ongoing autocratisation of Sweden,
- the identification of systematic and strategic use of nasty rhetoric to deteriorate Swedish climate policy, and
- my personal experiences of being a victim to hate speech and hate crime.

Why and how is nasty rhetoric used? Why and how are victims harmed? Why and how is society and democracy harmed?

1.1. Use of a Double-Edged Sword in a Weird Kind of Sport

Analysing nasty rhetoric from the perspectives of perpetrators (von Malmberg, 2025a), I have described nasty rhetoric as a *double-edged sword* to those who initiate its use, often leading populist politicians. They aim at silencing opponents in the outgroup, but also at mobilising ingroup followers to expand hate speech and related crimes. Research in political psychology indicates that, compared to mainstream politicians, populist politicians score higher on Dark Triad personality traits, i.e. Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Visser et al., 2017; Nai & Maier, 2018, 2024; Nai & Martínez i Coma, 2019), and that they are more inclined to engage nasty rhetoric. To the following perpetrators mobilised, nasty rhetoric is a *weird kind of sport* (cf. Walther & Rice, 2025). They join in spreading hate and threats, often in social media, due to a combination of ideological reasons (Dellagiacoma et al., 2024), psychopathological factors like Dark Triad traits (Blais et al., 2021; Nai et al., 2023; Isom & Hubbard, 2024), neurobiological factors (Dunbar, 2022), and social gratification, including as entertainment and for having fun (Walther, 2025),

1.2. Victimisation and Harm

To understand the nature of nasty politics and nasty rhetoric, the victims' perspectives are important. Crime victim discourse is gaining greater prominence in political and public debates in areas such as racist, religious and misogynist hate speech and hate crime since it can affect traditional legal principles such as rationales for punishment, equality before the law, and other legal safeguards (Tham et al., 2011; Hagerlid, 2021; Atak, 2022; Glad et al., 2024). Analysing crime victim discourse in

¹ Article in independent conservative newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, 21 December 2023,

<https://www.svd.se/a/3EneLP/torehammar-svek-och-djavulspakter-i-klimatpolitiken> I

the field of climate politics, i.e. the harms on victims, I found that climate activists are victimised twice, first from insults, accusations, intimidations and incitement, second from physical, economic and legal violence by state repression with harassment by police officers, prosecution for allegedly more and more severe criminal acts (von Malmberg, 2025b). Sometimes, they are convicted to fines or imprisonment. In contrast, climate scientists and climate journalists are victimised from hate speech and hate crime, often intimidations and incitement of physical violence and even murder. Many climate activists desensitise and are not deterred, rather radicalised. To cope with fear of violence and being chased, leading to anxiety and depression, scientists and journalists change job or withdraw from the public debate (von Malmberg, 2025b).

1.3. *Embodying Emotions to Understand of Nasty Rhetoric*

Politics has become increasingly emotional (Shah, 2024) and emotions are now a legitimate subject of political study (Beattie et al., 2019). Nasty rhetoric is emotional—nasty emotional. But the above studies, including my own, follow traditional norms of academic writing with stultifying formats resulting in rather dry and soulless presentation of political hate speech and hate crimes (see Vergari et al., 2024, for a review of the research). Victims, emotionally harmed, are represented as dots, lines and digits in graphs and tables (cf. Tham et al., 2011; Hagerlid, 2021). These traditional norms have been increasingly criticised for being “restrictive, inhibit the development of knowledge and excise much of what it is to be human from our learning, teaching and research” (Gilmore et al., 2019; p. 3).

Adding more human perspectives to the understanding of nasty politics and rhetoric, this paper digs deep down along the slope of what touches me deeply and let the victims talk with their own words and stories (cf. Glad et al., 2024). Nasty rhetoric aims at evocating feelings and emotionally hurt its targets, making people afraid (Chang, 2019; Olson, 2020). It aims at demonising and dehumanising people (Cassese, 2021; Wahlström et al., 2021), making them change behaviour, silence and disappear from the political conversation. Loosening myself from the binds of traditional academic writing that elision the author from the text (Gilmore et al., 2019), this paper is written differently, from the body, to engage emotions and behavioural responses of different victims, including my own. The aim is to explore victims of nasty rhetoric in a way that affectively engages and absorbs the readers so that learning about nasty rhetoric and what it makes to its victims happens almost unknowingly through emotions (cf. Parker, 2014; Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014; Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2016; Page, 2017; Beavan, 2019). Serving a “living dish” (Dubois, 2025, p. 1), I hope that readers could feel, or at least imagine, the pain, fear, angst and anger that comes with being a victim of nasty rhetoric—being dehumanised, losing human dignity and equality.

The paper is outlined as follows. Setting the scene, section two presents nasty politics and nasty rhetoric from a theoretical perspective, while section three presents the case of nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics. Section four reflects theoretically on the role of emotions in science and styles of academic writing that could enhance the understanding of nasty rhetoric. I also outline the method and material used, including my choice of writing style. Then, section five embodies my own emotions and acknowledges vulnerabilities from being a victim of nasty rhetoric, while section six let my experiences resonate with emotional and behavioural responses of other victims. Section seven reflects on the testimonies, analyses and interprets the nature of nasty rhetoric—suggesting it appears to victims as *a swarm of instants*, leading to contradictory feelings that in turn lead to behaviours that metaphorically can be seen as a *traffic cone* to either hide in and be silent, or to use as a megaphone to backfire on perpetrators of nasty rhetoric. Finally, section eight discusses what social science and politics can learn from writing differently.

2. Theory of Nasty Rhetoric

Some aspects of the phenomenon of hate and threat rhetoric targeting oppositional politicians, scientists, journalists and activists in Swedish climate politics are traditionally understood as hate speech and hate crime (Vergani et al., 2024). But when used strategically by politicians to change

policy and governance, social science literature more recently refers to it as nasty politics and nasty rhetoric. *Nasty politics* is an “umbrella term for a set of tactics that politicians can use to insult, accuse, denigrate, threaten and in rare cases physically harm their domestic opponents” (Zeitzoff, 2023, p. 6). *Nasty rhetoric*, central to nasty politics, is characterized by divisive and contentious rhetoric with insults and threats containing elements of hatred and aggression that entrenches polarization and ‘us vs. them’ narratives, designed to denigrate, deprecate, delegitimize, dehumanize and hurt their target(s) to make them silent (Kalmoe et al., 2018). Zeitzoff (2023) has proposed a typology of nasty rhetoric, to which economic and legal violence, e.g. repression, has been added since it is increasingly used against climate activists in Europe (Table 1).

Table 1. Typology of nasty rhetoric.

Type of Nasty Rhetoric	Description	Level of Aggression
Insults	Name-calling that influences how people make judgement and interpret situations and could sometimes include dehumanising and enmity rhetoric.	Hate
Accusations	Blaming opponents of doing something illegal or shady, or promulgating conspiracy theories about opponents.	Hate
Intimidations	Veiled threats advocating economic or legal action against an opponent, e.g., that they should get fired, be investigated or sent to prison.	Threat
Incitements	The most aggressive rhetoric includes people threatening or encouraging sometimes fatal violence against opponents. If the statement is followed, which happens, it implies physical harm to, or in the worst case, death of opponents.	Threat
Economic/legal violence (repression)	Denunciation, detention	Violence
Physical violence	Assault, beating, rape, murder.	Violence

Modified from Zeitzoff (2023).

Social psychology research on hate, described as a strong, intense, enduring, and destructive emotional experience intended to harm or eliminate its targets physically, socially, or symbolically (Opotow & McClelland, 2007; Martínez et al., 2022a), finds a causal relationship between hate and aggression in terms of aggressive tendencies and hurting behavior experienced towards specific individuals and entire out-groups (Martínez et al., 2022b). What starts with different expressions of hate soon escalates to different forms of threats, one more aggressive than the other. Thus, hate speech can be a type of terrorism or trigger event of terrorism, i.e. any intentional act directed against life or related entities causing a common danger (Chetty & Alathur, 2018; Piazza, 2020a).

2.1. *Nasty Rhetoric and Far-Right Populism*

Populist parties have increased their votes in every election to national parliaments in Europe since the 1980s and autocratization is increasing (Mudde, 2004, 2021; V-Dem Institute, 2024). Recently, far-right populists Donald J. Trump was installed as the 47th President of the US. The “insulter in chief” (Valcore et al., 2023) is a well-known for his use of nasty politics and nasty rhetoric,

promoting hatred and violence. He is not the only world leader accused of publicly denigrating people based on their racial, ethnic or religious backgrounds (Piazza, 2020b), but he violates numerous democratic norms in delivery and content of his speeches (e.g. Jamieson & Taussig, 2017; Ross & Rivers, 2020). To reach their political aims, populists disseminate conspiracy theories about the state of society and use incivil and nasty rhetoric with coarse, rude, and disrespectful language (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013; Moffitt, 2016; Lührmann et al., 2020; Mudde, 2021; Zeitzoff, 2023).

Narratives of ‘disaster’ or ‘anxiety’ are important for the success of far-right populists (Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022). These refer to a fictional fantasy of a constant crisis, rather than an actual crisis of the nation, caused by long-term mismanagement by a corrupt ‘elite’ (Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022; Ketola & Odmalm, 2023; Abraham, 2024). Entrenching an ‘us vs. them’ narrative, far-right populists refer to a homogeneous ‘people’, the popular (the ingroup), as a counterpoint to the ‘elite’ (the outgroup). They portray themselves as the saviour of the nation and the people, and the ‘elite’ should be punished for their crimes against the ‘people’. While sometimes talking the language of the ‘people’, populists are not responsive to popular will. Their ideology is based on a unitary and non-pluralist vision of society’s public interest, and they themselves are rightful interpreters of what is in the public interest—a putative will of the ‘people’ (Bitonti, 2017; Caramani, 2017). They act on their own will and invite their audience to identify with them (White, 2023).

To spread this unitary vision, populists build their own ecosystem of digital media news sites, blogs, video channels and anonymous troll accounts in social media, which does not have to relate to the rules of press ethics (Vowles & Hultman, 2021b). Established media is accused of belonging to a ‘left-liberal conspiracy’, and journalists are targets of hate speech and hate crime, aiming to discredit individual journalists, newspapers, television and radio channels, but also to undermine the deliberative function of online user forums (Björkenfeldt & Gustafsson, 2023; Schulz-Tomančok & Woschnagg, 2024).

2.2. *Nasty Rhetoric and Emotions*

Based on the work of Mouffe (2013), Chang (2019) and Olson (2020) show that nasty rhetoric is not only about what is conveyed explicitly by use of language. Political sentiments are often emotional and affective, determined by viscerally experienced sentiments and a physically imagined sense of rightness or wrongness. Political persuaders, particularly populists, use language or images to affect emotions, perceptions of knowledge, belief, value, and action (Shah, 2024). This aligns with notions of persuasion that stress pathos as an equally important part of rhetoric as logos and ethos respectively (Olson, 2020). Populist rhetoric operates in a world where it is not required for “every statement be logically defensible” (McBath & Fisher, 1969, p. 17).

Populism is based on emotional appeals to the ‘people’ as the ingroup, anti-elitism, and the exclusion of outgroups who are routinely blamed and scapegoated for perceived grievances and social ills (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2016). Emotions are central in nasty rhetoric, thus in the structural and affective changes that underlie populist mobilisation and the polarisation of everyday insecurities in general (Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022). Such emotional governance “affords individuals with a sense of what is regarded as appropriate and inappropriate behavior” (Crawford, 2014, p. 536). Emotional rhetoric is central in reproduction of structural power and power relations between ‘us’ and ‘them’ as it pays attention to collective emotions as patterns of relationships and belonging (Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022), thus central in cultural-institutional as well as structural policy entrepreneurship aimed at changing other actors’ beliefs and perceptions and enhancing governance influence by altering the distribution of formal authority (Boasson & Huitema, 2017). By affecting emotions, populists aim at changing (political) behaviour of members in the ingroup and outgroup. Emotions are modes of relating to the environment: states of readiness for engaging, or not engaging, in interaction with that environment (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994; Keltner et al., 2014). Emotions are likely to influence action tendencies because they inform an individual about a situation and prepare the body for a certain course of action (Frijda, 1986).

3. Nasty Rhetoric in Swedish Climate Politics

3.1. A Far-Right Populist Takeover

Sweden has been considered a bastion of strong liberal democracy since the end of World War II, able to develop and maintain a green and equitable welfare state (Boese et al., 2022; Silander, 2024). However, the 2022 elections to the Swedish parliament (Riksdag) marks a shift. Then, far-right nativist populist Sweden Democrats (SD) won 20.5 % of the votes and 73 out of 349 seats, becoming the second largest party in the Riksdag after the Social Democrats (S). This progress made SD gain formal powers in the Riksdag, holding the chairs in the committees of justice, labour market, foreign affairs and industry, and having direct influence over the government in most policy areas.

Bargaining on who was to form a government for the 2022–2026 term resulted in the *Tidö Agreement* (Tidö parties, 2022) between SD and a liberal-conservative troika of the Moderates (M), the Christian Democrats (KD) and the Liberals (L). SD supports the Tidö government, under the condition that SD takes part in decisions in six policy areas to undergo a rapid paradigm shift: climate and energy, criminality, economic growth and household economy, education, migration and integration, and public health, of which criminality, migration and climate change are deemed the most important (Rothstein, 2023). SD holds no seats in the cabinet but has political staff in the PM's Office within the Government Offices of Sweden. In that sense, SD holds tangible powers but is not accountable for the government's decisions. In all, the Tidö quartet holds majority with 176 of 349 seats in the Riksdag, while the opposition, consisting of S, the Centre Party (C), the Green Party (MP), and the Left Party (V), holds 173 seats.

When formed in 1988, SD was extremist and violent rooted in neo-fascism, but with the election of current party leader Jimmie Åkesson in 2005, SD tried to distance itself from its neo-fascist past and show a more respectable façade to gain legitimacy (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2016; Widfeldt, 2023). However, SD has continued to combine populism, anti-pluralism and authoritarianism with nativism—the longing for a homogenous nation state—and propose populist and illiberal policies in many areas, primarily migration but also social, justice and environmental policy (Hellström, 2023). SD hails Victor Orbán's Hungary, the worst example of autocratisation in the world (Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2021; Mudde, 2021; Boese et al., 2022; Silander, 2024; V-Dem Institute, 2024), as a role model of democratic governance. Due to the success of SD, Sweden is currently one of the strongholds of far-right populists in the EU (Widfeldt, 2023). To understand SD political agency, they “sacralize their core ideas and predominantly employ virtue ethical justification strategies, positioning themselves as morally superior to other parties” (Vahter & Jakobson, 2023, p. 1). They assign essentialist value to their key political concepts, a stance that sharply contrasts with the moral composition of the rest of the political spectrum adhering to liberal or deliberative perspectives on democracy.

Accusing Swedish established media of belonging to a “left-liberal conspiracy”, SD and other nationalist right-wing groups built their own ecosystem of digital media news sites, blogs, video channels and anonymous troll accounts in social media, which did not have to relate to the rules of press ethics (Vowles & Hultman, 2021b). Normalising knowledge resistance and using nasty rhetoric were central to their strategy of structural policy entrepreneurship (von Malmberg, 2024a).

Nasty rhetoric is an outspoken tactic of SD to entrench the ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ and the ‘people vs. elite’ narratives. It was recently revealed by Swedish news media that SD's communications office, inspired by Donald Trump and directed by party leader Åkesson, runs a ‘troll factory’. Using anonymous ‘troll accounts’ in social media, SD has deliberately and systematically spread misinformation and conspiracy theories to shape opinion, manipulate voters and incite outgroups by

spreading insults, hate and threats.² SD Party leader Åkesson has confirmed that SD, representing the ‘people’, use and will continue to use ‘troll accounts’, particularly on TikTok, to avoid getting public accounts reported and closed due to their frequent use of hate and threats:

To you in the Cry...we are not ashamed. It is not us who have destroyed Sweden... It is you who are to blame for it.

3.2. From Climate Policy Role Model to International Scapegoat

Sweden used to be considered an international role model in climate policy (Matti et al., 2021), advocating high ambitions in global and EU climate governance as well as nationally. In 2017, the Swedish Riksdag adopted with support of all parties but SD a new climate policy framework, including:

1. A target that Sweden should have net-zero emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs) by 2045;
2. A Climate Act, stating among other things that the government shall present to the Riksdag a Climate Action Plan (CAP) with policies and measures to reach the targets, at the latest the calendar year after national elections; and
3. Establishment of the *Swedish Climate Policy Council* (SCPC), an independent and interdisciplinary body of climate scientists, to evaluate the alignment of the government’s policies with the 2045 climate target.

Sweden’s GHG emissions in total decreased by approximately 37% from 1990 to 2022 and a decoupling of emissions and economic growth began in 1992, when Sweden introduced carbon dioxide taxation. This long-term trend of emissions reductions made a U-turn when the Tidö government supported by SD entered office. They advocated a radical change of Swedish climate policy and governance. SD has long since been vocal as a climate change denier (Jylhä et al., 2020; Vihma et al., 2021), wanting to abort national climate targets and climate policies. SD is culturally and cognitively motivated by conflicting ‘evil’ beliefs of previous governments for decades, both S-led and M-led. Like other European far-right populist parties,³ SD is mobilising a ‘cultural war’ on climate change, making climate policy less ambitious (Hultman et al., 2019; Buzogány & Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2022; Marquardt et al., 2022; Cunningham et al., 2024). Climate policy was purposefully included in the Tidö Agreement by SD, opening a window of opportunity for SD to dictate and veto the government’s climate policy. Bargaining on finalising the Tidö CAP in 2023, SD now accepts the 2045 target but managed to reduce overall climate policy ambitions by deleting short- and medium-term targets and actions important for reaching long-term targets. The Tidö quartet focuses entirely on emission reductions by 2045, ignoring climate science saying that reducing every ton of GHG emitted from now to 2045 is what counts (Lahn, 2021).

Tidö climate policy can be characterised as anti-climate action with increased GHG emissions. The CAP was welcomed by the *Confederation of Swedish Enterprise* (CSE) and its libertarian thinktank *Timbro*, but heavily criticised domestically by the political opposition, climate scientists, economists, government authorities, the environmental and social justice movement, business associations other than CSE, citizens and editorial writers in leading national newspapers, for its lack of short- and medium-term domestic action, manipulation of information, and a large focus on new nuclear power

² See e.g. article in leftist newspaper *Dagens ETC*, 26 August 2022, <https://www.etc.se/inrikes/haer-aer-sd-s-hemliga-trollarme-faar-order-av-aakesson>, and undercover journalistic TV programme in national TV4, 7 May 2024, <https://www.tv4play.se/program/cd339dace9a80bb132d9/kalla-fakta-undercover-i-trollfabriken>

³ Briefing in *CarbonBrief*, 28 January 2025, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/daily-brief/lets-kill-the-green-deal-together-far-right-leader-urges-eus-conservatives/>

and climate compensation in other countries.⁴ SCPC (2024) and Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (2024) claimed that Tidö policies lead to increases of annual GHG emissions, corresponding to more than 10 % of Sweden's total annual emissions, and that the CAP will not suffice for Sweden to reach the target on climate neutrality by 2045, nor Sweden's responsibilities in relation to EU's 2030 climate target.

In critique of Tidö climate policy, three out of four parties in the Riksdag opposition (C, MP and V) tabled a motion of non-confidence, calling for the setting aside of climate minister Romina Pourmokhtari (L) for failing to deliver policies that reduce GHG emissions. The critique towards Pourmokhtari also refers to the fact that she herself promised to resign if Sweden does not meet Swedish and EU climate targets—which it will not. In addition, more than 1 350 critical L-politicians from local and regional levels demanded the resignation of Pourmokhtari because she and L gave way to SD's influence over the CAP, implying crossing several red lines of L's party program and ideology. However, when the Riksdag voted, the critics did not gather enough support to set Pourmokhtari aside.

Besides domestic criticism, Tidö climate policies were criticised also internationally, claiming that Sweden is losing its role as climate policy frontrunner and risk dragging the EU down with it.⁵ Due to the Tidö climate policies, Sweden dropped from number one to number eleven between 2021 and 2024 in the Climate Change Performance Index (Burck et al., 2024). The European Commission has rejected Sweden's application for SEK 40 billion funding from the EU Recovery Fund since Sweden will meet neither national nor EU climate targets for 2030.⁶ In March 2025, the international Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development mentioned in its review of Sweden's environmental policies that "recent policy shifts, particularly in the transport sector, have put into question Sweden's ability to meet EU and domestic climate targets, with emissions projected to increase" (OECD, 2025).

3.3. Nasty Rhetoric in Swedish Climate Politics

In a related study, von Malmberg (2025a) found that nasty rhetoric is widely used by party leaders and cabinet ministers, including the prime minister (PM) to target oppositional politicians, climate scientists, climate activists and climate journalists. It is also used by neoliberal, libertarian and far-right influencers and climate sceptics, applauding the weakening of Swedish climate policy. The political opposition in the Riksdag, and to a lesser extent scientists and activists as well as critical journalists, all advocating stronger climate policy based on climate science, also use it but in less

⁴ See for instance article in *Dagens Nyheter* (Sweden's largest newspaper, independent liberal), <https://www.dn.se/sverige/ulf-kristersson-om-klimatet-karnkraft-viktigaste-atgarden/>; interview with the chair of the SCPC in *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/a/VPV2A1/klimatpolitiska-radet-klimatplanen-otillracklig>; statement on X/Twitter by Prof. Johan Rockström, director of *Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research*, <https://twitter.com/jrockstrom/status/1737888256149057692>; statement on Facebook by Dr. Mikael Karlsson, Associate professor in Climate leadership, <https://www.facebook.com/mikael.karlsson.3158/posts/pfbid02xuBEHVir9pH3zT9kmysSeD7EAUodsGkwLNREQKhZbP7KPKd4b3CdBjgsRmUVAZZ3l>; statement by *Swedish Association of Nature Conservation*, <https://www.naturskyddsforeningen.se/artiklar/en-klimathandlingsplan-utan-handling/>; editorial in *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/ledare/regeringen-maste-ta-klimatkrisen-pa-samma-allvar-som-krigshotet/>; statement by Swedish leading green think tank *2030-Sekretariat*, <https://www.2030sekretariatet.se/2030-sekretariatet-klimathandlingsplanen-en-gor-det-sjalv-julklapp/>

⁵ Articles in French newspaper *Le Monde*, 27 January 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/01/27/sweden-is-moving-backward-on-climate-policy_6470373_4.html, and pan-European newspaper *Euractive*, 30 March 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/swedish-right-wing-government-puts-country-on-wrong-climate-path/>

⁶ Article in green liberal newspaper *Syre*, 22 July 2024, <https://tidningensyre.se/2024/22-juli-2024/sverige-enda-land-som-inte-sokt-pengar-fran-eus-aterhamtningsfond/>

aggressive forms. While Tidö parties and climate sceptics use all types of nasty rhetoric, from insults to incitements and physical violence, oppositional politicians and climate advocates only use insults and accusations.

That high-level politicians in the government and the Riksdag utter insults, accusations and intimidations towards climate scientists, journalists and particularly activists can be considered an important reason for the increase in threats (von Malmborg, 2025a). Nasty rhetoric has become normalised and collectivised (cf. Peters, 2020) when the PM and other cabinet ministers and people with leading positions in the Riksdag use it, calling the climate justice movement “totalitarian”, “security threats”, “terrorists”, “saboteurs” and “a threat to Swedish climate governance and Swedish democracy” that should be “sent to prison” and “executed”. In addition, they accuse climate science of being “just an opinion”. Green politicians are “strawmen” that should be “killed”, and female climate journalists are a “left pack” and “moron hags” that “will be raped”. Insults, accusations, intimidations and incitements are made openly, mainly in social media from official accounts of ministers and other politicians. Intimidations targeting climate activists are also made in national radio, on the streets, and in political debates in the Riksdag.

The reason nasty rhetoric is used in climate politics is found to be a combination of anti-establishment rhetoric, knowledge resistance and emotional communication of doubt, industrial masculinities and ethnonationalism (Hultman et al., 2019; Jylhä et al., 2020; Agius et al., 2021; Vihma; et al., 2021; Vowles & Hultman, 2021b). Far-right populists look back to a great national past during the oil-fuelled record years of the 1950s and 60s, when men had lifelong jobs in industry and sole access to society’s positions of power (Vowles & Hultman, 2021b). Climate change denialism is paired with antifeminist, anti-equality and anti-diversity discourses of the far-right, all lumped together as ‘left-liberal conspiracies’ (cf. Mudde, 2021). A similar trend, going even faster than in Sweden, can be seen in spring 2025 in the US with President Trump’s slew of actions and executive orders to deteriorate US climate policy⁷ and dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts at the federal level as well as in private companies.⁸

Swedish politicians rarely humiliate or denigrate other politicians in person, but other political parties. Swedish politics is not as person fixated as, for example, American politics. It is rather far-right extremist persons that target politicians in person. Except for the hate on Greta Thunberg, the same holds true for nasty rhetoric of politicians targeting climate activists or scientists. It is primarily the organizations, not the persons, who are targeted (von Malmborg, 2025b). In contrast, hate and threats sent by anonymous offenders are often targeting individual climate activists, scientists, journalists and other outgroups, orchestrated by SD and far-right extremist Alternative for Sweden (AfS),⁹ who display names, photos, addresses and phone numbers of the ‘enemies’ in far-right extremist web forums, i.e. doxxing¹⁰.

Hate speech in Swedish climate politics has resulted in hate crime in terms of physical violence, but also to increased legal and economic repression of climate activists. In spring 2022, *Extinction Rebellion* (XR) reported that five masked people attacked a climate action, and that one activist had

⁷ Presidential executive order, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/putting-america-first-in-international-environmental-agreements/>

⁸ Presidential executive order, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing/>

⁹ AfS was formed by far-right extremists when SD’s youth organisation was expelled from the mother party.

¹⁰ Doxxing means to map and disseminate via the internet (i) private information, and (ii) information that can identify a specific person or organisation.

been assaulted, following infiltration and doxxing organized by AfS.¹¹ Since 2020, 310 climate activists have been prosecuted in Swedish district courts for different crimes related to civil disobedience, some of them several times. Of these, 200 persons were convicted, mainly to fines or suspended sentence. In 2022, leading SD politician now chair of the industry committee in the Riksdag, and the former M spokesperson on legal policy issues, now minister of migration, accused climate activists performing traffic blockades at demonstrations of being “saboteurs”, and that they should be charged for “sabotage” instead of “disobedience to law enforcement”.¹² This change was later supported by the current minister of justice, saying that the actions of climate activists must be seen as sabotage so that they can be “sentenced to prison”.¹³ In 2022, without change of legislation, prosecutors around Sweden suddenly began to charge climate activists performing roadblocks at demonstrations for sabotage. Between summers 2022 and 2023, 25 persons were convicted for sabotage, some of which were sentenced to prison, but most were later acquitted in the Court of Appeal.¹⁴

In 2024, a person engaged in *Mother Rebellion* was fired from her job at the Swedish Energy Agency due to accusations and intimidations of her predecessor, right-wing and far-right media and minister for civil defence that she was a threat to Swedish national security. In 2023, a scientist engaged in *Scientist Rebellion* was arrested for alleged sabotage of an airport. The action took place outside the airport and the scientist activist held a banner. The court case, which includes several lies from the airport manager, is still ongoing, but the activist recently got her application for Swedish citizenship rejected with the motivation that “[s]ince you are suspected of a crime, you have not shown that you meet the requirement of an honest way of life”.¹⁵

4. Emotions in Science and Academic Writing

4.1. Emotional Science

A widely held view in the discourse of science is that science can proceed only when emotions are excluded, that emotions are seen as incompatible with rationality and objectivity of science (Barbalet, 2002). This trend has changed progressively, and emotions are slowly finding their way into our understanding of what science is. Sociology and philosophy of science is increasingly considering tight contact between emotions and scientific reasoning, e.g. for scientific motivation, scientific evaluations, scientific explanations, scientific understanding, scientific imagination, and coherence in science (Kozlov, 2023). Emotions are values that contribute to both epistemic and humanistic dimensions of science. Science is a social process like any other human activity (Latour & Woolgar, 1986).

The importance of connecting emotions and scientific reasoning is prominent in science education research, where Zembylas (2004) highlight the significance of ‘emotion metaphors’ and the performance of ‘emotional labour’ in the reality of being a science teacher. Partly because of the changing conditions of new media environments, the tight connection between emotions and science

¹¹ News article in *Syre*, 13 June 2022. <https://tidningensyre.se/2022/13-juni-2022/hogerextrem-infiltrationskampanj-mot-klimataktivister/>

¹² Article in far-right populist online newspaper *Fria Tider*, 29 August 2022, <https://www.friatider.se/klimataktivister-stoppar-ambulanser>

¹³ Interview with Swedish minister of justice, *Altinget*, 10 November 2023. <https://www.altinget.se/civilsamhalle/artikel/strommer-m-vill-se-haardare-domar-mot-klimataktivister>

¹⁴ News article, *Dagens Arena*, 23 August 2023, <https://www.dagensarena.se/innehall/200-klimataktivister-domda-25-sabotage/>

¹⁵ Article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 5 February 2025, <https://www.dn.se/sverige/protesterade-mot-privatflyg-far-inte-bli-svensk-medborgare/>

is also addressed under three themes in the field of science communication (Taddicken & Reif, 2020): (i) emotions of science communicators, (ii) emotional(ised) content, and (iii) emotions of science communication audiences. This is topic of particular interest in science communication about politicised risks, such as climate change, where some argue that researchers should express more emotions to emphasize the seriousness of the climate issue and persuade the public to act (Lidskog et al., 2020; Gregersen & Bye, 2023). Such scientific storytelling, with normative orientation and emotional appeals, can provide meaning and motivate and guide action. However, this attachment to emotions needs to be done reflexively to counteract a post-truth society where passionate imperatives go against scientific knowledge (Lidskog et al., 2020). The latter is indeed what climate sceptics in general and far-right populist climate sceptics in particular are doing.

4.2. Writing Differently

Letting forward emotions in teaching and communicating science is important. How we approach academic writing is also important. A groundswell of resistance towards traditional norms of academic writing in critical management and organization studies claims that these norms are “restrictive, inhibit the development of knowledge and excise much of what it is to be human from our learning, teaching and research” (Gilmore et al., 2019; p. 3). Livholts (2012) claims that just like academics think of which method to employ in our research, we should also think of what form of writing the research demands.

Polish-Swedish organizational sociologist Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges (1995) was a pioneer in experimental forms of academic writing, using novels and poems to critically understand organizations and management to reach beyond the often stultifying formats inculcated by ‘scientific’ norms, to engage and absorb the readers so that learning happens almost unknowingly through emotions (Parker, 2014; Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2016). In a similar vein, Dubois (2022, 2025) use and analyse poetry to imagine means of action and dialogue on a community’s political organization and its relationship to the world. Linking science and art help us expand meanings and understandings of who matters (Riaz, 2023). It “broadens your affective capabilities, when you experience a broadening of your world, when it makes you know things emotionally and bodily, rather than cognitively” (Burø, 2021, pp. 692-693). While some scholars advocate *writing differently* to communicate less abstractly (Grey & Sinclair, 2006), others suggest that creativity might follow if academics were loosened from the binds of traditional academic writing that elision the author from the text (Gilmore et al., 2019).

Drawing on the works of French literary scholar Hélène Cixous (1976), writing differently acknowledges the value of incorporating the voice and material presence of the author (Höpfl, 2007), aiming to provide a mode of writing that develops a distinct, affective feminist politics for research seeking to effect concrete changes in challenging gendered structures (Åhäll, 2018; Vachhani, 2019). Some scholars write *of* their body, where the body has the potential to become a site of power and change, while others write *from* the body, embodying and giving voice to the writer’s emotions, unlocking her vulnerabilities (e.g. Pullen & Rhodes, 2008; Helin, 2019). Embodying the writer’s emotions, often fear, angst or anger, is the most common approach to writing differently in management and organization studies (see e.g. Beavan, 2019; Boncori & Smith, 2019; Helin, 2023).

Writing from the body does not seek to escape from academic rigour. The aim is to deepen and broaden our understanding of different phenomena in society, organizations and politics through research and theorizing in which the writing itself contributes to research and theory. It is not trying to replace academic writing with art forms such as poetry, novels, autobiographies, music and painting. Doing so would be to abandon the riches that academic research offers. Rather, writing differently aims to enrich knowledge through maintaining academic rigour while slipping the surly bonds of stultifying writing bound to a comforting but empty, homogenous and horizontal, masculine temporality following the chronological time from the past to the future (Fjelkestam, 2018). Like Surrealists wanted to liberate human creativity from the constraints of rationality to find a truer reality—a *sur réalité* (Breton, 1924), writing differently, from the body, moves towards a vertical,

feminine temporality that shifts focus from counting to content, and to a cognitive process that leads to problematizing instead of harmonizing, contextualizing instead of neutralizing, and specifying instead of generalizing (cf. Bränström Öhman, 2012).

As proposed by French philosopher of science and phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard (1934), who inspired André Breton’s manifesto of surrealism (Caws, 1966), a vertical temporality is multidimensional and connected to sensing simultaneities, a time of complexity and multitude, a time of the body that can host contradictory feelings, a time of heights and depths. It is a time of the instant that will always die and make every moment unique. Contrary to the aim of traditional academic writing based on horizontal temporality to fill gaps, writing differently based on a vertical temporality aims at creating gaps by thought-provoking research and academic texts on instants that take us by surprise (Helin, 2023). Writing differently aims at “broadening, widening and deepening knowledge and understanding by giving our ideas space in which they can flourish, create new meanings, help us learn and become human” (Gilmore et al., 2019, p. 4). Writing differently, embodying emotions of the author, is a concrete example of how emotions can enhance scientific explanations, scientific understanding, scientific imagination (cf. Barbalet, 2002; Kozlov, 2023).

4.3. Writing from the Body to Understand Victims of Nasty Rhetoric

Following the course of scholars in critical management and organization studies, I write this paper differently but still adhering to norms of academic rigour. Writing from the body, as part of my method, adds a human dimension to the otherwise soulless presentation of language and pictures of ideologically based hatred and threats. My own emotions of fear, angst and anger and related behavioural responses, evocated by being personally hit by ideological hate and threat campaigns, provides a central set of material for my interpretative analysis of the nature of nasty rhetoric. Adding to my own testimony, my analysis draws on 25 self-reported testimonies of victims of hate speech and hate crime provided in an open call for an end to nasty rhetoric to safeguard Swedish democracy.¹⁶ Yet additional data was gathered from interviews with another 25 victims (Table 2): six climate scientists, four of which are also climate activists, one climate journalist and 18 climate activists, the latter representing *Extinction Rebellion Sweden* (XR), and its subgroups *Mothers Rebellion* (MR) *Fathers Rebellion* (FR), *Scientist Rebellion* (SR), *Restore Wetlands* (RW) and *Take back the Future* (TBF). Several activists are members of more than one organization. Six people were interviewed in person, while 19 were interviewed in two focus groups. Interviewees talked about their experiences of hate speech and different kinds of threats, the emotional impacts thereof, and how they reacted behaviourally.

Table 2. Victims interviewed.

Victim Group	Role	Gender	Cross-Group Membership	Type of Interview
Scientists	Professor climate and geopolitics	Male	-	Personal
	Associate professor environmental science	Male	-	Personal
	PhD sustainable forestry	Female	MR, SR	Personal
	PhD psychology	Female	XR, SR, RW	Focus group
	PhD psychology	Male	XR, SR	Focus group
	PhD psychology	Male	XR	Focus group

¹⁶ Dagens Nyheter, 22 September 2024, <https://www.dn.se/kultur/upprop-detta-maste-fa-ett-slut-for-demokratins-framtid/>

Journalists	Sweden’s first climate journalist, 20+ years of experience from the field	Female	-	Personal
Activists	Member of RW	Male	XR	Personal
	Member of MR	Female	-	Personal
	16 members of XR, MR, FR, SR, RW, TBF	Female, male, non-binary		Focus groups

I reflect upon, interpret and analyse qualitatively my own emotional and behavioural experiences (see section 5) and those of other victims (section 6) as instants in a vertical temporality, a time of heights and depths and a body that can host contradictory feelings simultaneously (cf. Bachelard, 1934). In this sense, “this is how we can go deep in the sense of associating with that which is most important to us as well as finding ways to fly high and be connected to something bigger through writing” (Helin, 2023, p. 382).

5. Embodying Emotions and Vulnerabilities

Referencing freedom of speech, the Swedish police force permitted the Nordic Resistance Movement (NMR), a violent neo-Nazi organization recently classified by the US government as a terrorist organization, to demonstrate at the Almedalen week in 2018. The Almedalen week is the main Swedish and the world’s largest forum for democratic dialogue between politicians, private sector actors, civil society organizations and concerned citizens. Legal and democracy experts claimed that this decision could lead to violence and that there were legal grounds not to permitting the NMR demonstration. To me, as an academic scholar and civil servant of democracy, a point was reached where I had to react. Permitting a violent, extremist and outspoken antidemocratic organization to demonstrate and hate at the hallmark of Swedish democratic dialogue on loose legal grounds was an ‘in-your-face’ provocation to Swedish democracy and to me. I commented in social media that the police were cowards.

My comment sparked the worst months in my life. A well-known far-right influencer claimed that I was a scam criticizing the Swedish police force. This was followed by months of accusations, intimidations and incitement by a few public and hundreds of anonymous accounts on Twitter, Facebook and phone calls. I was displayed as an enemy to the ‘people’ with my name, photo, home address and telephone number posted on far-right extremist internet forums. I should be sacked from my jobs. A man claiming to be a police officer stalked me from different anonymous phone numbers for two months, claiming that I had to come to court to defend myself or else I would be sentenced to prison. My bones should be broken. I should be killed. It was not only me that was threatened. My family and everyone working with me should have their bones broken.

I had been threatened before, by drunkards in the night streets of Stockholm, but not me as a person and not related to my political opinions. I was just a random man that got bullied. Those instants ended after me keeping calm. In this new situation I was attacked as a person, because my political opinion was different from others and me being me. My kids were threatened because they were my kids. It left me with anger about how wicked and evil some people and the political climate had become, and with fear and anxiety about what was going to happen next. I couldn’t control or influence the inflow of evil other than closing my Twitter account, changing name on my Facebook account and turn off my mobile. The only way to handle the situation was through disappearance.

But why must I disappear for using my constitutional right? I had to go to work, get my kids from school, answer the phone, run, shop for food, meet with friends and family. But leaving home every morning was associated with fear and angst, as was getting home. Fear of being followed or

chased. Who would wait for me and my family outside the entrance of our house? Will there be someone following me to physically harm or kill me? The anxiety exacerbated by not knowing when the inflow of hatred and threats would end, when life would turn normal. Would it continue for a week, a couple of weeks, a month, several months or longer? At some points fear and angst created darkness and depression. I lost my self-esteem and intrinsic value as a human being. Who am I? Why was I bereft of my voice? Yet, I am a white privileged man. I could hardly imagine what would have happened and how I would have responded if I would have been a woman, a transgender person, gay, a person of indigenous background, a person of colour, a Jew or a Muslim.

The offenders succeeded in their tactics, partially. I fell silent for more than five years. I self-censored my posts on social media. I stopped commenting Swedish politics. But when the use of hate speech and hate crime increased in the subject area of my own research, I felt that enough is enough. I had to resist and tell the world what is happening. I became radicalised.

6. Reason and Resonance of Emotions Embodied

Do my experiences as a victim of nasty rhetoric mean something to people beyond me, my family, my friends and colleagues? Do they mean something for understanding nasty politics and nasty rhetoric? I believe so. My experiences confirm previous studies, reporting that victims of hate speech and hate crime react emotionally with fear, unrest, discomfort, frustration, angst and sometimes anger (Lazarus, 1991; Calvert, 1997; Lang et al., 2000; Wagner & Morisi, 2019; Cowan & Hodge, 2022; Renström et al., 2023; Glad et al., 2024). Fear and angst, in turn, evoke posttraumatic stress disorder and depression symptoms, as well as feelings of distrust, suspicion and insecurity (Hagerlid, 2021; Allwood et al., 2022; Wachs et al., 2022; Glad et al., 2024; Wypych & Bilewicz, 2024). But a key lesson from more critical research is that victims of racist, misogynist or political hate speech and hate crime respond differently, depending upon several factors, such as personal identity, political ideology, social embeddedness, victimisation as a person or as member of a group, victimisation in their occupation or as private persons, support of management (see e.g. Hagerlid, 2021; Atak, 2022; Glad et al., 2024; Ilse & Hagerlid, 2025; von Malmberg, 2025b).

Complementing my own testimony, this section let my experiences reason and resonate with emotional and behavioural responses in testimonies of 50 other victims of nasty rhetoric in climate politics. Some reinforce the narrative in my story, others may contradict it or provide other insights.

6.1. Emotional Responses

6.1.1. Fear, Insecurity and Angst

Being targeted, I initially became scared and felt discomfort. This grew into fear. Fear of what would come. Fear of being physically harmed or even killed. Fear of my children being physically harmed. It made me insecure, imagining how I was followed or chased to and from work. Not knowing when the next attack would appear or if they would ever stop so life could get normal made me anxious. Similar emotional responses were mentioned by climate scientists and climate journalists severely threatened, getting afraid from the content in the hateful and threatening messages targeting them in person.

I remember laughing at the first threat that came. It was so banal, such blatant lies. There were five individuals/organizations that over a period of nine months wrote 'articles' with lies, several a day. Each article was followed by harassments and threats from their followers. The phone rang non-stop, the e-mail inbox was filled up, all social media accounts were sabotaged. It wasn't really the content that tired me, but the amount... After a couple of months, a death threat came that was so cold and uncomfortably worded that I was really scared, and after that it was hard to stop being afraid. As if something had shifted inside me. (journalist A)

In some periods, the threats have made me afraid and insecure—for me and my family. Of course, you keep in mind that there may be people who go from words to action. When it's been at its worst, I have

become a little paranoid — who is it that sends the hate and threats? Is there anyone close to me? (journalist B)

Like me, they also reacted emotionally to the inflow of hate and threat messages sent online, getting anxious and depressed by the insecurity and not knowing if and when life would get normal. As recently reported, victims of online hate speech exhibit a more pronounced feeling of insecurity outside the Internet, while victims of offline hate speech did not show the same sense of insecurity (Dreißigacker et al., 2024). Their research indicates that insecurity rise from the uncontrollable spread of hatred on the Internet reaching its victims even in protected private spheres.

To constantly be exposed to hate and threats that are likely to be orchestrated is tiring... I am forced to have a protected identity with the problems in everyday life that it entails. I have felt burnt out, had trouble sleeping and become a little paranoid. (journalist B)

As mentioned, victims being severely threatened perceive heightened risks of being followed or chased. Journalists working in public service and large media houses often seek and get support from the security departments, but also from the police. Some journalist testify:

I have camera surveillance outside the door, security door and security glass. Have a note in my wallet with a direct number to a security company, contact to Swedish Security Service. Constantly informing relatives what you are doing and encouragement to everyone to be attentive. Life has changed completely. (journalist C)

At times I am almost paranoid. Perhaps not so strange when the police informed me that I should never leave home with headphones in my ears, always look around and look for unknown people, and not leave home at the same time every day. In the evenings, I don't always dare to turn on the light because I think that someone might stand outside in the dark and see me through the window. (journalist D)

In comparison, scientists witness that they get little help from security departments of the universities. At best they get help to censor future e-mails, reducing the inflow of hate and threats, but not other measure to increase personal security, e.g. related to a risk of being followed or chased:

The security department was involved, I got a crash course in safety and was taught, among other things, that if I was physically attacked, I would run in zigzags. That instruction has stubbornly lingered in the back of my mind. (scientist A)

Unlike to journalists and scientists, climate activists take offense to hate and threats but they are not scared or afraid. They are more afraid of and anxious about the climate emergency, and they get scared by the PM's accusation that they are totalitarian and an antidemocratic security threat. Not from the content of the accusations, but from the message it sends to followers in society that it is normal and legitimate to use nasty rhetoric. Climate activists support each other in the movements and have learned that the orchestrated hate speech and hate crime targeting them are not about them as people, but climate activism as a political movement.

6.1.2. Anger

Anger about political and business leaders lack of action to handle the climate emergency made some people become climate activists in the first instance. All activists interviewed mentioned that they have balanced pros and cons of active climate activism, taking part in civil disobedience actions, and found that it is worth taking the risk of being prosecuted and sentenced. Rather than getting scared, climate activists find nasty rhetoric part of a larger manoeuvre orchestrated by right-wing and far-right politicians to polarise and break down society and democracy, to safeguard economic growth and male dominance. They get angry and are strengthened in their conviction that they are ideologically right, and the perpetrators of hate speech are wrong. To them, the fight for a just climate transition is so important that they largely set aside or stand above negative emotional reactions from hate speech.

The lack of fear, and rather angry reaction of climate activists is well described by a female climate activist that got fired from her job because of her engagement in climate activism, which is a kind of secondary victimisation.

When the campaign started, of course, it felt terrible, and I thought at first that it was me who had done something wrong. So then, I didn't feel well. I really liked the Swedish Energy Agency and was absolutely horrified that I might have done something that damaged the agency's reputation, which I absolutely did not want. But then I saw how it was all staged and understood that it wasn't my fault. /.../ I also got a new job very quickly, so I got over the bad feeling. This is of course a very serious story. The serious thing is that it shows that society is heading in an undemocratic direction, and that this is part of a tougher climate that affects a lot of people, and also our climate transition work. (activist A)

Such anger is also felt by journalists.

I'm very rarely scared—but I'm damn pissed off! Angry because the whole society has slowly adapted to a new norm where this form of everyday terror has been accepted. And angry for the ineptitude that has spread all the way up to the highest decision-makers. (journalist C)

Bilewicz and Soral (2020) argue that through basic psychological dynamics, societies become more accepting of derogatory language and less accepting of religious, ethnic, sexual and political minorities groups.

6.1.3. Surrealism

As part of the nasty rhetoric of Swedish right-wing and far-right politicians, climate activists are witnessing a secondary victimisation from expanding state repression, being fired from their jobs, denied citizenship and prosecuted and sentenced for sabotage. They witness that they worry more about lawsuits than emotional and physical harm from climate sceptics and far-right extremists. Even though they have learned, desensitised, not to be touched emotionally by online hate and threats, at least not negatively, police interventions and lawsuits following climate actions, with face-to-face threats from officers of the judicial system of tougher suspicions of crime and potential imprisonment lead to some emotional reactions among climate activists. Initially, they worry about penalties, potentially imprisonment and its implications economically and professionally. Will they get a new job if fired? Later, they worry more about practical things such as how things will go at work and with the family while they are on trial and whether they will be sentenced to prison. They also witness about a sense of surrealism and schizophrenia leading to physical illness and depression. A climate activist engaged in several climate justice organizations has participated in numerous climate actions, also being prosecuted and sentenced more than once:

Sometimes the present feels extremely surreal. I alternate between correcting exams and discussing, with both the father of my youngest and my boss, upcoming (one week) absence due to climate lawsuit. At the same time as the planet alternately burns up, sometimes drowns. Difficult to navigate. (activist B)

6.2. Behavioural Responses

As a consequence of my fear from being targeted by hate and threats, I withdrew from the public discussion on political issues for several years. I fell silent, avoided or censored posts on social media. In addition to such withdrawal, my previous analysis of victims of nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics identified resistance as a behavioural response (von Malmberg, 2025b). In all, this equals the basic flighting or fighting behavioural reactions to negative emotions (Izard, 2010; Lebel, 2016). But I didn't remain silent forever. The increasing use of nasty rhetoric and the anti-democratic behaviour of the current Swedish government made me resistant and radicalised. I became a social scientist social activist. I analyse and write publicly in academic papers, op-eds and essays and participate in podcasts and open seminars on hate speech, hate crime and nasty politics with nasty rhetoric.

6.2.1. Silence

Silence seems to come in two forms: (i) professional, and (ii) political. Professional silence means changing job, e.g. quitting work as a journalist or changing research focus, withdrawing from research in areas that have become politically contested. A long-since female climate journalist testifies how the hate and threats affected her, emotionally and behaviourally:

While carrying out my assignment as a climate journalist, I have been in a storm of hatred, threats and insults. Lies about my person and alleged political affiliation have been glued to me. My feeling of powerlessness has been paralyzing at times. I have, to use an old-fashioned word, felt dishonoured. Therefore, I have now resigned as a journalist. (journalist E)

Many researchers being attacked that continue doing research in areas questioned withdraw from communicating their research results to the public to avoid further hate and threats. Like me, they self-censor. Three climate scientists testifies:

I've received hate and threats for long. Being criticised in substance is part of being a researcher, that is what brings science forward. But being criticised in person, often related to conspiracy theories, is detrimental. Once, haters threatened to send a death squad to the university. The hatred and threats drain me of energy and to avoid it, I refrain from participating in the public discussion on climate policy. (scientist A)

I felt the fear coming when I was at home, why did I live on the first floor? Did I need to move? The security at home disappeared. I was worried that my children would have unpleasant conversations. The price for me and my family risked being too high if I continued to express myself publicly. Insecurity and fear eat you from within. (scientist B)

The hatred that pours in makes me feel constantly persecuted by evil. I get more and more quiet. Hesitating for every text or performance. It's like a mountain to climb over. Can I really handle all the shit again? (scientist C)

Some climate activists do also withdraw from the political conversation. They step back from civil disobedience protests like road blocks or disturbing TV shows to more friendly actions like song sit-ins, or withdraw and remain silent after being subjected to hate and threats, often people with families being worried.

6.2.2. Resistance

Threats to a person's safety or resources are seen as realistic threats (Stephan & Stephan, 2017). In comparison to symbolic threats to a person's worldview, that elicit emotions of hate, realistic threats give rise to anger and dislike. While hate is a destructive force, anger is a constructive force, which makes a person wanting to change the offender, not hurt or eliminate it (cf. Martínez et al., 2022a, 2022b).

As mentioned, I withdrew and fell silent. An important factor for this response was the seriousness of the threats I received—physical violence and murder. In addition, my kids were threatened, indirectly. Several climate scientists, not receiving death threats but being insulted and accused, were more offended and felt anger from the insults about climate science as “just an opinion”. Few climate scientists were invited to the government's national climate meeting in June 2023, and those invited were not allowed to speak. In response, they insulted the government, calling the government's climate meeting a “joke”, a “play for the galleries” and a “spectacle” in order to delegitimise it (von Malmberg, 2025a).

Climate activists targeted, usually as a group, also reacted with anger. When the climate minister cancelled a meeting because an attendant was engaged in XR and the PM claimed that XR is “a threat

to Swedish democracy and just pretend to care for the climate”, spokespersons of Greenpeace and XR commented sharply in social media and newspapers:¹⁷

We need to talk about democracy, Ulf Kristersson. (Greenpeace)

It's really, really bad that PM accuses XR of being a security threat instead of taking the climate threat seriously. (XR)

Members of the Swedish climate justice organization *Take Back the Future* also got angry about the PM's statement. In a press release, they clarified:

We are a truly peaceful movement. When the PM lied about his own policies during his open after-works, we felt a need to protest in the way we could. The fact that the PM is now portraying peaceful children and young people as a security threat is undemocratic.

Reacting with anger, climate activists and their organizations are sometimes responding to hate speech with insults and accusations themselves—with a humoristic twist. Adhering to norms of deliberative democracy, sacralising the good argument, hate and threats have little or no place in the repertoire of climate activists. Previous research portrays climate activists as ‘radically kind’ that use humour in digital activism to transform democracy (Pickard et al., 2020; Sloam et al., 2022; Chiew et al., 2024). For instance, Greta Thunberg turned insults of then Brazilian president José Bolsonaro and then US president Donald Trump into humour, adding the Portuguese word “pirralha” (Eng. brat) and “A very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future” to her X/Twitter profile (Vowles & Hultman, 2021a; White, 2022). This humoristic turn to nasty rhetoric was evident in Greta Thunberg's insulting response to an intimidation by a leading SD politician outside the entrance of the Riksdag—a laughter, saying that the perpetrator is a loser.¹⁸ In a similar vein, Greenpeace and FFF organised a demonstration outside the government's national climate meeting in June 2023, to which they were not invited. The invitation to the demonstration referred to the government's “climate meeting” with presence of “civil society organisations”. Adding quotation marks they wanted to insult the government in a subtle way insinuated that the meeting was not a real climate meeting and that civil society organizations were not properly represented.¹⁹

Exposure to derogatory language can also lead to political radicalisation and deteriorates intergroup relations (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020; Schäfer et al., 2022). The increased presence of hate speech in one's environment creates a sense of a descriptive norm that allows outgroup derogation, which leads to polarisation and the erosion of existing anti-discriminatory norms. Renström et al. (2023) found that individuals reacting to threats with anger and hate or more aggressive emotions, are more prone to affective polarisation and intergroup differentiation with increased reliance on stereotypes.

This is evident in the case of nasty politics in Swedish climate politics. The government uses nasty politics and nasty rhetoric to polarise the political landscape along a Manichean line. And climate activists implicitly enhance this detrimental journey by responding to its critics as an enemy outgroup, i.e. anti-democratic and climate sceptic politicians using nasty rhetoric. Climate activists, particularly those in the core groups organising civil disobedience actions, are more afraid and anxious about the climate emergency and that politicians and business leaders are not acting appropriately fast and ambitious given the severe situation. They are strengthened in their conviction that they are right, and the perpetrators are wrong. Based on climate science and deliberative

¹⁷ News article in *Aftonbladet*, 6 October 2023. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/O89GxO/pourmokhtari-stallde-in-mote-greenpeace-ilska>

¹⁸ Video on YouTube showing a leading SD politician intimidating Greta Thunberg and other climate activists, but also how G. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlBy2uc6JuU&t=2s>

¹⁹ Invitation to demonstration. <https://www.greenpeace.org/sweden/pressmeddelanden/klimat/pressinbjudan-demonstration-utanfor-regeringens-klimatmote-16-juni/>

democracy, critical to the hegemonic norm of liberal democracy, neoliberal economics and economic growth, they are fighting for the sake of the climate, human rights of current and future generations and democracy. They get angry and want to make things clear in a constructive way, make perpetrators understand that they are wrong and that they are the real threat to democracy.

Instead of being deterred and silenced by accusations, intimidations and secondary victimisation, activists convicted of crime take their punishment, usually fines, sometimes imprisonment and they are rather radicalised. Nasty rhetoric ignites anger, a holy wrath, that radicalises some. Not to turn violent, but to intensify peaceful actions of civil disobedience over and over again to pursue their science-based argumentation for strong climate policy and degrowth. One example is Greta Thunberg, who has been prosecuted and sentenced to fines several times.

7. Interpreting Nasty Rhetoric

7.1. Nasty Rhetoric as a Swarm of Instants

No matter if the offender aims to emotionally hurt the target or use nasty rhetoric to socially fit in, each insult, accusation, intimidation or incitement is an emotional instant to the victim. Even if each case comes into being after a process of thinking and preparation from the sender, sometimes carefully elaborated for timing to set the stage in a political debate, it appears suddenly to the victim. To Bachelard (1934), every instant is suspended between two voids. An instant will always die, making every moment unique, with no history or future (Helin, 2023). Victims of nasty rhetoric, reacting with fear, angst or anger (Lazarus, 1991; Cowan & Hodge, 2022; Renström et al., 2023), would wish that an accusation or incitement has no future or history—that it would die. But they keep coming, in new shapes, in new forms, from new offenders, sometimes asynchronously (Lee-Won et al., 2019), sometimes in a coordinated manner as ‘networked harassment’ (Marwick, 2021). Not in a continuous flow in a horizontal temporality, but haphazardly as new instants in a vertical temporality. Each time, the victim hopes that the instant dies, but each new instant from multiple sources adds to a swarm of instants with no clear beginning and end, magnifying the effects on the victims in terms of emotional, behavioural and relational harm (cf. Lee-Won et al., 2019). The victim becomes lost in the void with contradictory feelings—afraid, anxious and angry.

7.2. Nasty Rhetoric as a Traffic Cone

Nasty rhetoric appears to victims as a *swarm of instants* in a vertical temporality, leading to contradictory feelings and different behaviours. The different behaviours used by victims to cope with hate speech and hate crime—fleeing or fighting—also makes me think metaphorically of nasty rhetoric as a *traffic cone*. While some victims flee, hide under the wide end and turn silent, others fight and use it as a megaphone to speak louder to mobilise followers and backfire on the perpetrators of nasty rhetoric. The traffic cone is illustrative since it is normally used to block traffic in the roads, and climate activists’ use of road blocks is what ignited the escalation of leading politicians’ nasty rhetoric against advocates of strong climate policy.

8. Learning from Writing Differently

Traditional norms of academic writing is criticised for excising much of what it is to be human from our research and learning. Writing differently about dehumanizing nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics, openly embodying my own emotions and vulnerabilities and resonating with testimonies of other victims and previous research, the fear and anxiety related to individual human beings hit by hate and threats, adds a new, emotional and vulnerable dimension to the otherwise soulless presentation of words and pictures of political hate speech and hate crime.

Writing differently can be seen as “earthquakes that shift the tectonic plates of management learning to usher in something new” (Gilmore et al., 2019, p. 9). The same would be true for political science or social sciences in general. I hope that I, through vertical writing, drawing from surrealism

and phenomenology (Caws, 1966), can touch vulnerable flesh and help the reader and the critical policy studies community to understand and learn more engaged about the nature of nasty rhetoric as a phenomenon targeting humans and invoke new political and ethical practices to delegitimize nasty politics and nasty rhetoric in climate politics and in general (cf. Henderson & Black, 2017; Gilmore et al., 2019; Helin, 2019, 2023). I'm not speaking for, but in solidarity with victims and knowledge producers inside and outside of academic institutions. Writing differently, from my body, could provide an opportunity for the possibilities of wonder, disgust and imagination in critical policy studies revealing the true nature of nasty rhetoric (cf. Carlsen & Sandelands, 2015). Even the smallest vertical movement to engagement with non-linear forms of temporality, addressing the instant, might help in moving toward such a vulnerable understanding (Page, 2017).

This bears resemblance to critical studies of arts-activism in management and organisation research, that researchers should not only write about the arts, but also doing the arts (Riaz, 2023). As mentioned by Thomas Burø, a Danish anarchist punk rock kid in academia, in a meditation on the entanglement of punk rock arts and activism with organisation studies (2021, p. 689):

The premise was to write songs that could express a state of crisis. We did not want to write statement songs about crisis, we wanted to write from the point of view of crisis: how does it feel to live in a failing socio-economic and ecological system.

Like living arts, writing from the body is an important space open to critical scholars, to be what we are and for our activism against oppressive systems. In this vein, recognizing that activism often requires artistic expression of various types, Riaz (2023) argues we should interpret the call for more activist academic lives (Gray, 2023) as also a call for doing art and being ourselves through art. While Bourdieu (2008) encourages us to “organize a more effective resistance” (p. 152), the reverse—enhancing our conversation and engagement with the ourselves—could also rescue us and defend our freedom from the encroachment of current oppressive systems on ourselves and our worldviews (cf. Riaz, 2023).

Epilogue

As a victim of nasty rhetoric, fear and anxiety indeed made me silent for many years, but I also reacted with anger, which is a constructive force. I had a desire to talk about the decline of Swedish democracy and the nasty aspects of Swedish climate politics. Not in a traditional way, because nasty politics is not traditional politics. Echoing the words of Sylvia Plath (1975), I had a desire to write differently, vulnerably, embodying my emotions to ease my mind and to let people know:

I write only because

There is a voice within me

That will not be still.

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