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'The Climate Has Always Been Changing': Sarah Palin, Climate Change Denialism, and American Conservatism

Abstract

Celebrity politician Sarah Palin diffused climate denialism, while advocating a version of social and political conservatism. This article scrutinises her rhetoric and argues that she crafted and performed a brand or *ethos* that resonated with common-sense conservatism, while at the same time reinforcing and popularising this doctrine. The article discerns the epistemological and ontological premises of Palin's ideological position and probes how she used her image as an anti-intellectual, frontier individual to speak common sense and to advocate free-market ideology and climate denialism. The article, then, contributes to our understanding of how celebrity politicians craft and use *ethos* to promote anti-environmental agendas and ideological positions. It also highlights the embeddedness of climate denialism in the political conviction that Palin espoused.

Keywords: climate denialism, conservatism, common sense, *ethos*, rhetoric, celebrity politics

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Introduction

The *celebritisation* of climate change advocacy is well-observed (A. Anderson 2011; Brockington 2009; Boykoff and Goodman 2009). In their introduction to a special issue in this journal, Goodman and Littler (2013) observe that to speak about 'celebrity ecologies' is to think about the imbrication between celebrity culture and 'nature', as well as the forms, or ecologies, such relationships take. The relevant scholarship is divided on the impact of the celebritisation trend. On the one hand, its is argued that 'star-powered' advocacy can be instrumental in mobilising and building social-movement infrastructure, as it helps raise visibility of environmental issues, shape the public's perception of environmental crises, and orient human relation to the natural environment (Alexander 2013; Anderson 2013; Thrall et al. 2008). On the other, increased attention to environmentalisms that are mediated and embodied by celebrities functions as a distraction that displaces experts, relegates citizens to fans, and results in the creation of a public incapable of forming judgment (Weiskel 2005). As Goodman et al (2016) show, such *spectacular environmentalisms* forge individualised responses to problems that indeed require collective and structural solutions, thus raising questions on the actual effectiveness of celebrity advocacy. Invariably, though, this diverse scholarship concurs that celebrity voices shape meaning, values, and knowledge around environmental issues.

This article shows how this impact is constituted by attending to a topic that has received less attention: the role of celebrities in the advocacy of denialism.[1] A prominent contribution in this particular topic is Boykoff and Olson (2013) who examine celebrity contrarian voices—public intellectuals who used increased media coverage to denounce the credibility of climate science and scientists. Evidently, 'the denial machine' has systematically employed

celebrities to promote anti-regulatory discourses and ideas, as well as to attack the scientific

underpinnings of climate change policy (Begley 2007; Dunlap and McCright 2011). Along

with books and other publications funded by conservative think tanks and advocacy groups,

messages disseminated by politicians (such as Inhofe's 'climate change is the greatest hoax

ever perpetrated on the American people'), and views expressed by commentators on

platforms such as *Fox News* and *Washington Post*, celebrity deniers created a constant flow of

arguments against the reality of climate change. The rise of right-wing populism has

intensified public attention to climate deniers such as Trump; however, this is far from a new

phenomenon.

In this article explores the thread of climate denialism that runs through American

conservatism by scrutinising how celebrity politician Sarah Palin advanced denialism in the

years that this doctrine was not represented institutionally at the White House (2008-2016). [2]

Although her rise and fall in national politics were quick, she earned the loyalty of Tea Party

supporters (Wheeler 2013). Yet, her unconventional public character granted her the status of

celebrity as she became the front face of the American conservative movement. Ultimately,

Palin was instrumental in diffusing common-sense conservatism, a peculiar political

conviction that speaks to ideas that appeal to the conservative middle class, such as freedom

of markets, social conservatism, and environmental anti-regulation. The article probes how

Palin systematically made the case against climate science and the anthropogenic causes of

climate change by exploiting her celebrity capital (Driessens 2013). Palin appealed to

conservative common sense attempting to channel and reinforce Tea Party supporters'

mistrust of science and rejection of the anthropogenic causes of climate change (Hamilton

and Saito 2015).

In their discussion of the link between political conservatism and climate denialism,

Boykoff and Olson (2013, 278) suggest that 'labels of contrarianism must be cautiously

derived by evaluating the *content* of the claims themselves, rather than the attributes of claim-makers or their funding sources'; otherwise, 'analyses run the risk of dismissing legitimate and potentially useful critiques out of hand by dismissing the individual rather than the arguments put forward'. This is a legitimate concern that calls attention to the importance of analysing arguments or what in rhetoric is called *logos*, rather than merely to *who* speaks. Yet, *ethos*—the speaker's character—is an indispensable component of communication; the fact that celebrities enjoy enhanced visibility further strengthens the case for placing their *ethos* under systematic scrutiny. At the same time, the study of 'celebrity ecologies' brings into spotlight 'the larger assemblages and systems within and around which celebrity is enmeshed' (Goodman and Littler 2013, 270), a concern shared also by those who study *ethos*.

This article, then, brings together rhetorical scholarship and celebrity studies, offering an analytical framework for studying how celebrities shape social meaning. The study of *ethos* brings attention to discourse, its agent, and the context within which the speaker's character emerges, thus corresponding to the task outlined above by Boykoff and Olson and Goodman and Littler. Aristotle (2001, 74–75) observed that *ethos* is an artistic component of communication; it is constructed within and produced through speech itself, rather than deduced from the audience's prior knowledge of the speaker's character. Building on this point, the article probes Palin's *ethos*, and so the denialist discourse that she offered and the social and political context within which she operated. The analysis draws on a set of primary (speeches, articles penned by Palin, broadcasted interviews, videos uploaded in social media) and secondary sources from scholarship and beyond.

The first section offers a brief overview of common-sense conservatism and its connection to denialism, providing thus context for the analysis that follows. The second section discusses how Palin achieved the status of celebrity politician and was perceived as

personifying the 'girl of conservative's dreams' (Baxter 2008). The analysis identifies two elements that ground common-sense conservatism: ontological dualism and epistemological populism. Palin crafted, embodied, and performed an *ethos* infused by these two *topoi* and projected in the form of frontier authenticity and anti-intellectualism. The third and fourth sections analyse a series of instances in which Palin exploited these elements to promote climate denialism. The article, then, sketches Palin's place in 'the denial machine'; it also illustrates the link between common-sense conservatism and climate denialism. More broadly, the analysis shows a way of approaching the role of celebrities in the production of common sense and is thus of interest to those who study how social meaning is created and disseminated. Rather than functioning merely as a tank that celebrities tap into to enhance their popularity, the discussion demonstrates how celebritires constitute and perform common sense through their *ethos*.

Common-sense Conservatism and Climate Denialism

There is a strong association between the conservative movement and the persistent grip of climate denialism on American public culture (Jacques et al 2008). Since the 1970s the neoconservative and Christian right perceived environmentalism and the introduction of environmental regulation policies as a threat to the neoliberal project (Antonio and Brulle 2011). Scientific evidence on climate change and the need for environmental regulation became the target of a well-orchestrated campaign of the fossil-fuel industry, conservative think tanks, front groups, politicians, and contrarian scientists. This campaign sought to discredit climate science, challenge the need for environmental regulation, and promote— even manufacture—climate denialism, with the support of Murdoch's media outlets (McCright and Dunlap 2003; Oreskes and Conway 2010). One of these outlets, *Fox News,* played a pivotal role in covering the activities of the Tea Party, one of the latest

manifestations of the 'anti-establishment conservatism' that appeared in American public life since the 1960s and became the new establishment thanks to the powerful influence of the new Christian right (Horowitz 2013). Far from merely a political group, the Tea Party was also 'a vital cultural force' (Skocpol and Williamson 2016, 136). Palin along with Glenn Beck, Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, and their ilk widely diffused a version of conservatism branded as common-sense which was particularly appealing to those who favoured Tea Party (Beck 2009).

Scepticism and even outright denial of climate change were 'among the articles of faith' of the Tea Party movement (Broder 2010). For some of its members denialism is linked to religious conviction; for others it is driven by distrust of those they call 'the elites'. In the era under scrutiny, Tea Party supporters were less likely than other conservatives to trust scientists for environmental information, to think that environmental rules have a positive effect, or that it is important to conserve natural resources for the future (Hamilton and Saito 2015). The percentage of Tea Party members who believed that climate change was happening was significantly lower compared to that of supporters of other parties: 50 percent of Tea Party members believed that climate change is naturally caused, 21 percent that it is not happening at all (Leiserowitz et al. 2011). Despite the variety of reasons for which they rejected climate science (religion, distrust for intellectual elites, conspiracy), Tea Party supporters—who in 2010 accounted for a fifth of voting-age Americans—fervently dismissed environmental regulation. Among these supporters climate denialism was common sense: environmental regulation entailed enhanced central government control, including taxation, and obstruction to the function and freedom of the market (Beck 2009; Lee Ray 1994).

Polarisation is linked with ideological orientation. Individuals segregate into political parties that align with their beliefs, therefore elite cues supported by media coverage, decisively shape public concern about environmental issues (Brulle et al 2012). Media often

turn to climate contrarians for alternative views on climate change for example, during the Copenhagen Climate Summit in 2009 *Fox News* interviewed Palin to juxtapose her view to that of Al Gore's (Boykoff 2011). The fact that media framed Palin as the leader of the Tea Party enhanced her credibility and visibility, enabling her to become an eminent clog in 'the denial machine'. At the same time, as party leader she had to perform values and ideas supported by her audience, embodying its common sense, while shaping it through mediated performances disseminated by 'the denial machine'.

Crafting Sarah Palin

Street (2004, 437–38) distinguishes between celebrity *politician* and *celebrity* politician, with the former being the 'politician or candidate who uses the forms and associations of the celebrity to enhance their image and communicate their message'. Although Palin (2009a, 300) explicitly rejected the significance of celebrity endorsements for the promotion of public policy, she became a celebrity herself. Her celebritisation was the outcome both of her own rhetorical labour and of the media that reproduced and amplified it. In 2008 crafting an appealing *ethos* was a high stake for Palin and her campaigning team, since at the time of her nomination as McCain's running mate she was holding the post of the Governor of Alaska and therefore her recognisability was limited. A day after McCain announced her nomination, polls showed that the majority of Americans had never heard of Sarah Palin (Newport 2008). Ultimately, she earned the status of *celebritician* (Sullivan 2014).

This was achieved thanks to journalistic practices such as hyper-personalisation, meta-coverage, and the fusion of entertainment and news (Young 2011). Media focused on her physical appearance and Palin, who is also a former beauty-pageant, was branded as 'sexy celebrity', providing inspiration for a series of artefacts, such as Alaskan license plates that read 'Alaska; o-mama! where the air is cold, and the governor is hot!' (Anderson 2011).

Scholars define her pattern of speech as *argutainment*: it is 'passionate, simple and entertaining'. This ultimately helped 'establishing the political preferences and views privileged' by the hosts of the programs that she appeared and the audiences exposed to this mode of communication (Saurette et al. 2011). These mediated choices enabled her to project a familiar and approachable *ethos* and to be framed by media and audiences as 'authentic' and 'sincere'. Palin was never among the most powerful women in American politics, but she was certainly one of the most recognisable.

The 'Palin effect' has left its imprint on American conservatism. As the first woman to be nominated for the Republican national ticket, Palin was credited with attracting to politics those frequently depicted as apathetic or apolitical, and was framed as prompting 'an outburst of women's activism unusual among conservatives' (Vogel 2010). In 2009 she founded SarahPAC (terminated in late 2016), a political action committee 'dedicated to building America's future by supporting fresh ideas and candidates who share our vision for reform and innovation.' Palin had a strong record electing conservatives that she endorsed, with candidates and organisations paying as much as $100,000 to receive her public endorsement (Bullock and Hood 2012). Her support was particularly influential in areas where Obama was unpopular; veteran strategist Ron Bonjean observed that 'Palin's endorsement adds a boost of nitroglycerin' (Sullivan 2014). Her 2010 Tea Party Convention Speech was received as a party leader speech and her media visibility energised the conservative base of the Republican Party which was particularly attracted to her pro-life profile (Klein 2010; Vogel 2010; Dombrink 2015, 38). Additionally, as Ferguson (2009, 3) observes, 'Palin serves as a potent relay point in a conservative ideological apparatus'. She was received as embodying the principles of 'anti-establishment conservatism' and she crafted a personal brand around these principles. She then utilised this brand to mold public sentiments and attitudes on issues from abortion to climate change, earning a long-lasting presence in American public life that

extends well beyond the period of her candidacy for the Vice Presidency.

Palin didn't merely embody conservative principles; she also shaped the values and common sense of her audience. Through her public appearances, she disseminated common-sense conservatism, forging this ideological position and establishing it as a calculable ideological force in American politics, while fixing climate denialism firmly in public discourse. She became the frontwoman of common-sense conservatism by embodying and performing an *ethos* that reflected the values of a constituent part of the American conservative base; her media visibility entailed that this *ethos* was also widely reproduced.

A rhetorical tool that is particularly useful in the hands of those who seek to influence political judgment whilst striving to construct their *ethos* is commonplaces, or *topoi. Topoi* represent common lines of socially situated argument, shared patterns of reasoning, or prevailing argumentative practices that are pertinent to the task of political actors who advance ideological positions (Sovacool 2008, 344). Celebrities are particularly well-positioned to shape common sense by reproducing these familiar lines of argument and demonstrating their importance for the community; by doing so, they attune themselves to particular audiences, thus enhancing their *ethos*.

Palin defined and shaped common-sense conservatism in a series of rhetorical events. The media visibility that she gained amplified her opportunities to disseminate the ideas of common-sense conservatism that appealed to Tea Party supporters (Tyrrell Emmett 2013). The following section identifies and analyses two *topoi* that function as organising sources for Palin's *ethos*: frontier authenticity and anti-intellectualism. These *topoi* are then linked to the ontological and epistemological premises of Palin's (anti-)environmental position, as well as of her common-sense conservatism. The analysis shows how Palin's systematic reliance on these two *topoi* elevated her to a central public figure of the strand of American conservatism that favours climate denialism.

A frontier individual

Palin propagated her version of conservatism in her biography, *Going Rogue*, where she referred to her common-sense sentiment, ideas, and political agenda as the distinct element that infused her political conviction, but also her ability to resolve practical problems effectively. She described common-sense conservatism as a social and political stance that affirms the fallibility of human nature, as well as the human ability to create, improve, and innovative; the limited, protective—rather than perfecting, as she calls it—role of government; and the constraining character of the market's rules (Palin 2010a, 385–87, 2009b). Because her worldview was based on common sense, she argued, she was in position to be both pro-development and pro-environment (Palin 2010a, 273). She thus justified her (anti)environmental stance by appealing to a marker of free market ideology: the possibility to advance economic development *while* protecting the natural environment.

This line of arguing is congruent with Cartesian dualism, an ontological position that has marked modernity. This logic affirms humans and nature as components of a binary: humans are separate from and dominant over nature. This perspective finds expression in the vision of progress as a linear (economic) project fueled by resources extracted from the natural environment. It perceives nature as a set of resources available for humans to exploit, enjoy, but also conserve in order for the cycle of exploitation to be sustained and progress to continue. Ontological dualism is not the intellectual property of conservatism; it infuses other ideological positions, too. Yet, it is the ontological stance that characterised the Holocene, the geological era of relative geological stability that enabled human civilizations to thrive. What makes it especially relevant here is that it is imbricated in denialist arguments against environmentalism, which was early on perceived as a growing threat to the idea of progress, the American way of life, and the principles associated with it, particularly individual

freedom and common sense (Ray and Guzzo 1993; Tocqueville 1966, 228). With the arrival of the Anthropocene—the new geological era that is characterised by the recognition of humanity as a geological force that profoundly shapes Earth systems (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000)—the dualistic ontological framework of the Holocene is out of step with the new physical reality.

Palin exemplified this ontological stance through the performance of the *ethos* of frontier individual. Frontier authenticity is congruent with a narrative familiar to Americans and associated with the story of pioneers who inventively transformed vast, 'empty' spaces into resources available to fuel human progress (Cronon 1991). Palin used this particular *topos* to craft the image of ordinary, self-relying individual from a remote yet familial area, rather than the buzzing and supercilious DC. Reinforced with pictures in which she was enjoying activities in nature, the *ethos* of frontier authenticity cultivated and projected by Palin and media was structured around the exaggeration of her small-town background. She was framed as someone who had direct experience of the natural environment, as every 'ordinary American' who lives in a rural area. To enhance the appeal of this *ethos*, Palin featured in photoshoots carrying firearms, hunting wild animals, and bearing fishing and military equipment. In her nomination acceptance speech, she abstractly celebrated the 'small town' as the place inhabited by honest and dignified people, a place she knew first-hand, because she 'grew up with those people', 'the ones who do some of the hardest work in America… fight our wars …and they're always proud of America'(Palin 2008). These are the people that Palin aspired to attract with her appraisal of the small-town identity.[3] By identifying herself as the mayor of such a place, Palin sought to enhance her *ethos* as an authentic but pragmatic politician who dealt with actual political problems. Indeed, the role of the mayor is one that her audience could probably better grasp and affirm as counting towards actual political experience. She was not just some 'community organiser'—a subtle yet well-targeted

comment against Obama and his previous political experience; she was an engaged politician who understood people's real problems.

The use of lay language further enhanced Palin's *ethos* of frontier authenticity and distinguished her from the 'educated elite'. Her colloquial casual speech pattern helped her connect with people and sound ordinary, authentic, and unpretentious. Palin was a frequent user of demonstratives (this, that, those) and first-person indexicals (we, us, our), which create a sense of proximity and collectivity between the speaker and hearer (Acton and Potts 2014). She consistently employed remarkably informal patterns of speech that aimed at enhancing her authenticity and used euphemisms such as 'darn' and 'hern' to sound ordinary yet distinct (Purnell et al 2009). Palin mastered the *ethos* of authenticity by appearing and sounding authentic.

Palin's performance of a particular version of motherhood also complemented her *ethos* of authentic individual. During her acceptance speech she proclaimed herself 'an average hockey mom', thus claiming the identity of an ordinary individual, a hard-working mum with a demanding job and common-sense values. Advocating the idea of motherhood as norm, Palin alluded to the powerful image of the native in North America grizzly bear to turn motherhood into a collective political identity (Rodino-Colocina 2012, 81). Ultimately, she achieved to gather around her a dynamic base of conservative women, who would form a particularly popular section of the Tea Party movement: Mama Grizzlies. When she identified members of the audience of a speech in 2010 as 'Mama Grizzlies' for the first time, Palin constituted rhetorically a unique political identity of mums 'who are rising up' in the way that 'the mama grizzly bears rise up on their hind legs when somebody's coming to attack their cubs, to do something adverse toward their cubs'; these women, who 'you don't want to mess with… are banding together, rising up, saying no: this isn't right for our kids and for our grandkids' (Palin 2010b). By performing the identity of common-sense

conservative, Palin sought to fuse motherhood and masculinist traits, the caring mama grizzly and the frontier individual who masters her natural environment in a masculinist way in order to survive. As a result, media coverage of the 2008 campaign frequently used adjectives such as 'energetic', 'tough', 'ambitious', 'determined', 'pragmatic' and 'strong' to refer to Palin, contributing to the construction of a brand that appealed to male and female conservative voters (Wasburn and Wasburn 2011).

An anti-intellectual politician

Palin's reliance on personal experience for the formation of political judgment is a manifestation of the stance that can be called epistemological populism. The distinct element of this peculiar epistemological framework is that it grounds social and political judgment on personal experience (Saurette et al. 2011, 196). This framework valorises certain types of experience as reliable sources of legitimate knowledge and extends this form of knowledge to unrelated issues while dismissing academic and scientific knowledge as elitist. Epistemological populism finds expression in anti-intellectualism and renders common sense the ultimate point of reference for reliable knowledge. Anti-intellectualism also undergirds climate denialism by displacing the notion of expertise and asserting the primacy of personal experience and practical, local knowledge in the formation of judgment.

Palin alluded to her personal experience of local natural environment to claim political knowledge. She affirmed political agency through her active lifestyle, which allowed her to have informed insight into animal behavior, a type of knowledge that then gave her access to an instinctive understanding of the world. She used this anti-intellectual line of thought, which also essentialises gender identity, to explain how 'Mama Grizzlies' were drawn to politics by their instinctual understanding of danger, their natural impulse to protect their children from political decisions taken for them by 'immoral, unethical' political elites in

Washington. In contrast to common-sense conservative *ethos*, these elites keep 'spending endlessly and running up dangerously unsustainable debt and deficits' which they expect that children will pay in the future. 'Mama Grizzlies' understand politics because their embodied experience of motherhood gives them access to a special kind of knowledge.

Palin used the marker of anti-intellectualism to juxtapose her *ethos* with what she referred to as 'the Washington elites'. She employed her image as frontier, rogue politician to discredit the *ethos* of the political establishment, thus reaching out to voters whose anti-intellectual sentiment would turn them away from politicos. Unlike them, she joined politics as a member of the Parents and Teachers Association because she wanted to make her 'kid's public education better' (Palin 2008). Entering politics does not require any form of expertise—Palin boasted she 'didn't need focus groups and voters' profiles'—but rather a value-driven understanding of public issues; anyone can join professional politics, as long as they hold values such as wishing a better education for their kids. Palin's anti-intellectualism valorised the knowledge of 'ordinary people' and grounded political skill on everyday experience. The next section discusses more specifically how this epistemological populism infused her climate denialism.

Her resignation from Alaska's governorship in July 2009 enhanced her profile as a political 'outsider'. With her frontier authenticity and anti-intellectualism, Palin was the average mum who could understand and empathise with the life of ordinary Americans (Beail and Longworth 2013). She was a practical politician, an outsider to the political establishment, who disrupted politics-as-usual in DC and the Republican Party. Her multiple capacity as an outsider—mum, average citizen, maverick reformer—allowed her to stand out as an anti-elitist political figure and to feature as the front woman of common-sense conservatism and the Tea Party movement. Palin's enduring presence in media platforms since 2008 facilitated the streaming of ideas, values, fears, and expectations shared among

some segments of the conservative population, defining them as a political community and contributing to the perception of Palin's *ethos* and ideas as common sense. As a *celebritician*, she also became a clog in 'the denial machine' that advanced a culture of distrust of experts and promoted climate denialism.

'Drill, baby, drill'

As one of the Tea Party's front faces, Palin was awarded airtime and press coverage to express her views, thus playing an important role in molding and advancing denialist perceptions of climate change. Her exhortations for drilling in the Arctic echoed and amplified the voices of conservatives who affiliated with the Tea Party; these conservatives typically viewed environmental regulation as a factor that could hinder economic growth and cost jobs (Leiserowitz et al. 2011). Her views also resonated with evangelicals who supported a pro-business approach to environmental issues and objected to federal or international regulation (Prelli et al. 2009). Palin's link of environmental issues with the protection of jobs in the coal and oil industry sounded common sense to these audiences.

Denialism was not always the defining element in Palin's environmental track-record. As Alaska's Governor, in 2007 she established the Alaska Climate Change Sub-Cabinet to implement policy in order 'to identify and mitigate potential impacts of climate change and to guide efforts in evaluating and addressing known or suspected causes of climate change' (State of Alaska 2007). The document, signed by Palin, employed the narrative of science-driven policy, explicitly appealing to the authority of climate scientists to justify the need for taking action and framing climate change as a multidimensional issue. It stated that 'scientific evidence shows many areas of Alaska are experiencing a warming trend. Many experts predict that Alaska [...] will continue to warm at a faster pace than any other state, and the warming will continue for decades. Climate change is not just an environmental issue. It is

also a social, cultural, and economic issue important to all Alaskans' (State of Alaska 2007). Nonetheless, this statement reveals Palin's ontological dualism and her extractive beliefs as it advocates that 'commercialising Alaska's great natural gas reserves through a new pipeline will improve the nation's energy security while providing a clean, low carbon fuel to help the nation reduce its overall greenhouse gas emissions'. Palin herself was a fervent supporter of the project for a pipeline that would enable the extraction of natural gas from Alaska's North Slope.

The ontological dualism that infuses Palin's worldview also underscored her rhetoric during the Vice-Presidential Debate in October 2008. Palin advanced her Holocene views reinstating *topoi* that would sound commonsensical to her conservative audience. During the debate she linked environmental protection to energy independence and she framed the latter as an economic and national security issue, thus framing as 'nonsensical' the choice to leave national energy resources unexploited, particularly considering the existing 'domestic supplies of energy' (Palin and Biden 2008). She presented her proposal for energy independence as common sense, as it would be the solution not just to the country's economic problems, but also to global climate change: an energy independent US could rely less 'on countries that don't care as much about the climate' as the US does. She used the euphemism 'clean, green' energy to refer to natural gas that would be extracted through a process of 'safe, environmentally-friendly drilling offshore', a new technology 'with tiny footprints even on land' (Palin and Biden 2008). Exhorting an imaginary environmental record of the US (consistently the second largest global emitter after China since 2005) vis-à-vis other countries, but also talking comfortably about extraction methods, Palin amplified her authority as a pro-environmental, knowledgeable public figure who cares both about the natural world and the American economy and security. Palin proclaimed publicly her ontological position by reinforcing a marker of free-market ideology: economic growth and

environmental protection are intertwined. Her reference to domestic energy as a source to be 'tapped into' illuminates the function of epistemological populism. The analogy of US energy sources as 'taps' and therefore as a familiar, everyday use object that audience could easily visualise and relate to, transformed an ambiguous, dangerous process—oil and natural gas extraction—into a seemingly ordinary, straightforward, and uncomplicated process. Palin argued that it was not a surprise that 'drill, baby, drill' became a national chant: it resonated with laypeople's 'hunger' for exploiting domestic energy.

A few months later Palin penned an op-ed for *Washington Post* in which she framed Obama's proposed cap-and-trade energy plan as 'an enormous threat to American economy', since it would 'undermine its recovery' from the global financial crisis (Palin 2009c). In a series of arguments infused by epistemological populism, she appealed to her frontier experience as an Alaskan to talk about 'the inherent link between energy and prosperity, energy and opportunity, and energy and security', thus linking energy with three commonplaces particularly appealing to conservatives and to proponents of free market ideology. Appealing to epistemological populism, she amplified her personal experience elevating it to common knowledge among people in Alaska, who understand better than 'Washington bureaucrats' the importance of transporting 'clean, natural gas to hungry markets around America'. At the same time, her ontological position was evidenced in the view that 'meeting energy needs and environmental challenges' at the same time is possible, while she forged this argument as a common-sense alternative to job losses, rising cost of transportation and business, and skyrocketing energy bills. Although Palin didn't explain how these repercussions would result from the cap-and-tax plan proposed by Obama, she justified the possibility of bridging economic growth and energy independence by invoking a commonplace that would resonate particularly well with the ontological commitments of the conservative base: religious faith. Invoking Biblical tenets, she explained that 'if we

responsibly tap the resources that God created right underfoot on American soil' it is possible to have economic growth, energy independence, and environmental protection. Hence, she justified the exploitation of natural resources while simultaneously attempting to win over the religious conservative base and reinforcing free-market ideology by appealing to a higher moral order.

In December 2009, as world leaders gathered in Copenhagen to discuss pathways to climate change mitigation in the context of a high-profile UN summit, the *Washington Post* published another article—which was reproduced by other media in the US and the UK—authored by Palin who this time explicitly endorsed climate denialism. Considering her link to the ultra-conservative advocacy group *Americans for Prosperit*y, funded by Koch Industries, Palin's outright denial of the reality of climate change at this point is not unjustified. Formed in 2008, the group embarked on an aggressive campaign aimed at electing lawmakers who would block cap-and-trade legislation protecting the interest of the fossil fuel industry (Davenport and Lipton 2017; Skocpol and Williamson 2016, 104–6). At the core of Palin's narrativewas Climategate, a then-unfolding case of hacking that brought into publicity emails exchanged between climate scientists at the University of East Anglia. According to Palin (2009d), Climategate demonstrated that climate science is politicised and therefore those 'so-called climate experts' were untrustworthy, since they had 'deliberately destroyed records, manipulated data to hide the decline in global temperatures and to silence their critics'. She then linked this case with the Climate Summit by pointing to the role that this 'highly politicised scientific circle' plays in informing 'efforts at the Copenhagen climate change conference'. By alluding to a scandal that had drawn the attention of the international media, Palin attempted to discredit one of the most anticipated climate summits by associating it to 'fraudulent scientific practices'. She took the opportunity to reinstate her support for 'responsible development' and 'common-sense policies' and urged Obama to

'boycott Copenhagen', arguing that 'good environmental policymaking is about weighing real-world costs and benefits—not pursuing a political agenda'.

Her *ethos* as common-sense conservative proved to be a valuable source for inventing arguments for climate denialism on this occasion. Palin drew on her experience as the governor of 'the only Arctic state' who 'took a stand against politicised science' when she 'sued the federal government over its decision to list the polar bear as an endangered species' and who created 'a sub-cabinet to deal specifically with… changing weather patterns'. Although she did not deny the fact of climate change *per se*, she challenged the scientific consensus on its anthropogenic causes and capitalised on the uncertainty that is inherent— and so vital—to the scientific enterprise, to attack its credibility and discredit its authority. Additionally, the adoption of a cost-benefit perspective to discuss emissions reduction policies further evidenced her commitment to an approach to environmental problems that placed her in line with free market conservatives and indeed with some of the most ambiguous figures of the climate denial movement (Oreskes and Conway 2010, 84). Performing her frontier *ethos*, she drew on epistemological populism to argue that she was in position to have direct knowledge of changing weather patterns and therefore to interpret climate change as an occurrence of 'natural, cyclical environmental trends'. She also stated that 'we can't say with assurance that man's activities cause weather changes'. Her personal experience of a local environment was elevated to legitimate knowledge of the global Earth system. Her practical knowledge of the Arctic innately enabled Palin to create rhetorical links between a series of concepts, which however have no apparent or inherent relation: 'energy independence' with 'national security', 'domestic drilling' with 'responsible development', and 'environmental regulation' with 'economic stagnation'. Palin embodied and performed the extractive ideology that affirms nature as a local set of resources dominated by a single agent—humanity—rather than as a global, complex, and dynamic system of interactive

agents.

'The Climate Has Always Been Changing'

The attack on climate science and its experts reached new highs when Palin's popularity soared as the front face of the Tea Party and conservative advocacy groups such as *Americans for Prosperity*. In February 2010 during a speech she delivered before a logging conference in California she associated again environmental regulation with lower levels of economic growth, arguing that the State's regulatory environment hinders the success of businesses and 'shuts down development' (CBS News 2010). Furthermore, she exploited the rhetorical occasion—addressing an audience that is historically hostile to regulation—to brand climate science as 'a bunch of snake oil science'. The lack of press coverage of the specific event does not allow us to gain full insight into Palin's rhetoric. However, she repeated those attacks against climate science in 2014, only a few days before the publication of the Fifth IPCC Assessment Report, which would set the scene for the climate negotiations in the COP21 in Paris.

'Junk science' is a term invented by deniers to degrade scientific results that certain industries disapprove of (Oreskes and Conway 2010). Palin used this term to discredit climate science in a short video which she uploaded on her personal YouTube channel in 2014 and which functions as an instance of the epistemological and ontological stance represented and performed by Palin. In the video, she set herself the task of explaining to her audience the nature of climate science and its place in the system of scientific knowledge. Aiming to direct blame and channel grievance towards the environmental movement and liberal politicians ('the elite'), Palin argued that cutting emissions translates to 'losing jobs, wrecking the coal industry, and dramatically hurting [US] economy'. By reproducing the familiar argument replicated by deniers—environmental regulation is a threat to the national

economy—and particularly by linking regulation with effects that the lay-person could associate with such as unemployment, Palin defended free market ideology and its fundamental tenet that markets can guarantee the protection of the environment. Employing the folksy style that made her popular, Palin attempted to defend her ideological and ontological position and to garner support for the conservative movement and its anti-regulatory theses.

Palin appealed to her role as Alaska's former governor to explain to her audience what she called 'the con job' of the climate change agenda. In a manifestation of epistemological populism, she claimed that her local knowledge and experience of Alaska's climate allowed her to have informed opinion on weather changes. Therefore, she was a credible source to assess these changes and to identify them as 'cyclical patterns of climate' rather than as an indication of a larger change. Her experiential evidence was asserted as a credible source of knowledge that was far more reliable and relatable than knowledge produced by elitist science discourses.

What epistemological populism misses, though, is the fact that the production of scientific knowledge depends on collective labour and consensus accumulated over the years between those who study sets of facts and phenomena, rather than on the experience of a single person or common sense. Although observation is essential in producing scientific knowledge, the scientific enterprise requires the collection of evidence on a scale much larger and more precise than a single individual can perform. Despite that the authority of one scientist or of someone with local knowledge can function as a credible source in the process of knowledge production, this is not the case with climate science, the complexity and scope of which well surpasses—despite encompassing—local knowledges and individual experience. Palin's valorisation of local knowledge as superior to scientific knowledge denoted a lack of understanding of the reality of climate science in the best case and a deliberate spread of

misinformation in the worst.

Palin also attacked the uncertainty inherent to climate science. In her typical colloquial style, she argued that since 'those computer models' that 'just can't get the right answers' are unable to predict next month's weather, it follows that they cannot be relied upon to predict long-term changes in climate. This enthymeme alludes to a bogus synecdoche that conflates weather forecast with climate science and therefore collapses the latter into only one of its components. In an ambiguous claim Palin argued that 'there is no convincing scientific evidence for man-made climate change', refuting well-established scientific consensus on the matter and intentionally diffusing denialism. Her attack on climate science included equating it to eugenics and therefore not only refuting its existence as a credible scientific discipline, but also questioning its moral validity. Climate experts, she argued, cannot be classified as scientists: if they were scientists, they would be able to produce accurate facts, rather than 'imperceptible' predictions. Palin's reasoning reproduced one of the most widely used epistemological arguments against climate science: it is unable to deal with uncertainty, therefore it is not 'true science'. This line of thinking reveals a distorted understanding of the task of science and demands from it to abandon its most fundamental premise: by its very nature it results to only provisional findings that remain open to peer review by the scientific community.

Palin identified the economically weakest strands of society as those most affected by environmental regulation. This claim is in contrast to extensive research that evidences that environmental risks are unequally distributed in societies, with class and race being the dominant factors in this distribution (Mohai et al 2009). However, this rhetorical maneuver enabled her both to add an emotional element to her argument and to appeal to the religious conservative base. She argued that 'climate change hysteria' hurts the poorest in American society, because it limits their access to prosperity, which can come only from 'affordable

and reliable energy sources'. The solution to this inequality, Palin suggested, could come through 'responsible energy development', defined as development that 'protects the Earth while still allowing us to utilise our God-given resources… put here for mankind to responsibly use'. This statement further reveals the ontological premises that infuse Palin's worldview and sheds light on the impact of religiosity on her understanding of the relationship of humans to the natural world.

Palin's views reflected and enhanced those of her audience, since the Tea Party was overwhelmingly supported by Americans who supported the conservative Christian movement or the religious Right (Pew Research Center 2011). By appropriating and reproducing the familiar religion-based argument that presents nature as a set of resources available to humans, Palin was further enhancing her potential for continuing to be recognised as the movement's leader, while diffusing climate denialism as a legitimate point of view. As a frontier individual, Palin affirmed changes in weather patterns as a natural phenomenon; since the 'climate has always been changing', there is no legitimate basis on which to resort on extraordinary measures by changing the way Americans live their lives. In accordance with her ontological position, she affirmed nature as an assemblage of natural resources to be exploited and extracted by humans. As an evangelical Christian, she justified this by appealing to a divine plan that sets nature at the service of human needs. Her common-sense reasoning bridged her extractive ideology with her religiosity, an association that reproduced established conservative worldviews.

Palin's anti-intellectualism also resonated well with the spirit that prevailed in 2016 during the US Presidential campaign. Despite the fact that other than delivering an endorsement speech for Trump she did not play any significant role in the election, the celebrity status that she enjoyed allowed her to actively participate in numerous public events, including one that explicitly promoted climate change denial. The event had the form of a panel discussion for

the promotion of the film *Climate Hustle*, an anti-climate change documentary, which claims to 'debunk outrageous claims about temperatures' and "expose the increasingly shrill calls to 'act immediately before it's too late'" (Rogers 2016).[4] The fact that Palin was invited to participate in this event further evidences her eminent position among celebrity climate deniers. During an interview given before the event Palin said that she was 'very passionate about this issue' and she continued her attacks to climate scientists, this time branding them as 'fearmongers' who claim that 'global warming is due to man's activities, whereas this [film] presents strong arguments against that in a very relatable way'. On this occasion Palin took her argument against climate science to another level, claiming that climate change has been made into a campaign issue by 'people who do not believe in American exceptionalism' (McNary 2016). Pro-environment campaigners are no more just enemies of free markets, the word of God, or common sense, but also of the country. Continuing along the lines of conspiracy thinking, she referred to 'those who… are controlling the narrative right now on changes in the weather' and noted that 'there is definitely a political agenda behind all of this'. Ironically, she even stated that 'the science is kind of getting thrown out of the window in discussions about changes in the weather… it leads us to believe that so many things then coming from the scientists could be bogus. If this is bogus, what else are they trying to tell us and control us around?' Palin's rhetoric was frequently seen as chaotic; her climate change denialism proved it also misleading and dangerous.

Conclusion

The election of a climate denier as the 45th US President and the consequent emergence of deniers in key political posts evidenced in the starkest way that climate denialism is an acceptable force in American public life, particularly among the conservative movement. The contribution of celebrities such as Palin to this result should not be neglected: her

participation in 'the denial machine' contributed to the diffusion of contrarian views, keeping them alive in the hearts and minds of those inclined to accept them. As this article demonstrated, speaking common sense is a particular useful way to capture the imagination of ideologically positioned audiences. In line with the scholarship on 'spectacular environmentalisms', this article showed that celebrity contrarian voices contribute significantly to the production of social meaning and shared values.

More specifically, the article analysed how Palin used her *ethos* to contribute to the political polarisation on climate change and to advance anti-environmental agendas, while presenting them as common sense. The analysis demonstrated how familiar ideological commonplaces—in this instance frontier authenticity and anti-intellectualism—function as resources for the creation of celebrity capital and the advance of political causes. With the support of 'the denial machine' Palin registered denialism in public discourse, fixating the challenge of climate science as common sense for those who shared her conservative worldview. Ultimately, she contributed to the popularisation of common-sense conservatism, a political conviction that is informed by the *topoi* of ontological dualism and anti-intellectualism and that advances climate denialism. The contribution of this article, then, is double. On the level of scholarly discussion, it offers an analytical framework that bridges the study of discourse, public character, and socio-political context. On a broader level, it shows how *celebreticians* and their ideological conviction can fit in 'the denial machine'; as an exemplar of the *celebritisation* of political life, Palin's case functions as an instance of the ramifications of this trend.

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Notes

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[1] 'Scepticism', 'denialism," and 'contrarianism' are used by scholars to characterise the stream of thought that denies the authenticity of environmental problems, typically by rejecting climate science and opposing environmental regulation policies, see Jacques (2006, 2008). I have opted for the terms 'deniers' and 'denialism' rather than 'sceptics' and 'scepticism'. This is because 'scepticism' denotes a careful, balanced cross-examination of evidence and facts and is indeed an inherent trait of science. In contrast, and especially in view of the indisputable scientific consensus on the reality, causes, and impact of anthropogenic climate change, attempts to discredit the authority of the scientific enterprise are malicious and toxic. See Dunlap (2013).

[2] The George W. Bush administration (2001-2008) pursued anti-regulation policies. With the election of Donald Trump denialism returned to the White House; his cabinet included well-known climate deniers Scott Pruitt (Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency), Ryan Zinke (Secretary of the Interior), and Rex Tillerson (Secretary of State).

[3] Melling (2013) observes that Palin's hometown, which she served as a councillor and mayor, is not a small town, but an exurb, part of a larger metropolitan network. However, by using a broad and fairly abstract definition of "small town" that could encompass farming and factory towns, Palin addressed those who are attracted to the idea of the idyllic small-town experience.

[4] The production of the film was funded by the *Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow*, a non-profit organisation associated with 'the denial machine' and fossil fuel industry.