

Concept Paper

# Explaining the Populist Right in the Neoliberal West

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**Abstract:** With the 2016 double shock of Brexit and Trump, the populist right has become a game-changing force on both sides of the North Atlantic. A proper explanation needs to combine political, economic, and cultural elements. Qua populism, the populist right addresses a political condition, which is neoliberalism's endemic democracy deficit. However, the illiberal democracy that populists advocate is not a cure for it. Cleavage theory in the Lipset–Rokkan tradition sheds light on the rightist orientation and the nationalist content of this populism. The main explanatory challenge remains the combination of economic and cultural factors in the rise of populism. In economic respect, middle-class decline under a neoliberal order seems to be the root cause of populism. However, its agenda is culture-focused, amounting to a nationalist opposition to immigration and cosmopolitanism. This “cultural deflection” is a persistent puzzle. The minimum to conclude is that one-sided accounts of populism in exclusively economic or cultural terms are unconvincing.

**Keywords:** populism; nationalism; neoliberalism; Western Europe; United States

## 1. Introduction

Political neoliberalism, which arrived in the West in the late 1970s and has picked up speed and spread since the demise of communism a decade later, has broken apart the post-WWII “shotgun marriage” [1] between capitalism and democracy, in favor of a capitalism largely released of democratic constraints. Accordingly, the friendliest reading of contemporary populism is to resurrect democracy, which has been badly battered under neoliberal rule. In one such reading, which however does not specify the neoliberal context, “populisms have a legitimate place in liberal and social democracies. One could even say that they are inevitable given the likelihood of entropy inherent in these regimes” [2] (p. 80). The plural form in this formulation points to the variety of populisms in past and present. A classic discussion even wondered whether populism is a “unitary concept” or “simply a word wrongly used in completely heterogeneous contexts”, in effect leaning toward the latter [3] (p. 3).

The least to agree on is that there are left- and right-wing forms of populism—which still leaves “populism” itself undefined. Various alternatives are on offer. Some argue that populism is “ideology” [4], others that it is political “strategy” [5], and a third group that it is rhetoric or “style” [6]. In the canonical definition by Cas Mudde, populism is a “thin-centered ideology”, in which a “pure people” opposes a “corrupt elite” and favors a politics that is “expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” [4] (p. 543). This implies that, qua “thin-centered”, the populist ideology needs to be complemented by something thicker, most often nationalism, but also socialism. Without this complement, the right/left distinction could not be made.

A critic of the “myth of global populism”, who otherwise prefers a more differentiated vocabulary for the “disparate phenomena” packed under it, is still convinced that Mudde’s definition “cannot (be) improve(d) upon” [7] (pp. 1, 10). This is also my point of departure. The normatively loaded people/elite dichotomy is the minimal content of all known expressions of populism, left and right, in past and present. Rivalling approaches, for whom populism is more form than content, cannot do without this minimal ideational input, and they are in this sense derivative. After all, the root word of populism is the Latin *populus*,



**Citation:** Joppke, C. Explaining the Populist Right in the Neoliberal West. *Societies* **2023**, *13*, 110. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13050110>

Academic Editor: Gregor Wolbring

Received: 23 February 2023

Revised: 5 April 2023

Accepted: 7 April 2023

Published: 25 April 2023



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the people (*demos* in Greek), who nominally rule in a democracy. Populism is nothing less than “a shadow cast by democracy itself”, as Margaret Canovan [8] argued, articulating democracy’s “redemptive” face that mostly remains hidden behind its “pragmatic” realities.

The populism to be examined in this paper is the one that had its apex in the *annus horribilis*, 2016, marked by the double shock of the Brexit referendum that led the UK to leave the European Union, and the victory of Donald Trump in the US presidential elections later that year. Both events have been widely interpreted as the breakthrough of populism in the West, and of a populism that is distinctly right-wing and nationalist, and in the Trumpist version at least toxic to democracy [9]. It is true, the Brexit and Trump upheavals, when looked at closely, feed on widely different sources, including a chronic unhappiness about Europe in the UK and a diminishing white majority in the US. However, a conspicuous commonality of both is that they happened in the two Anglo-Saxon pioneer countries of neoliberalism, where the latter has also gone to bigger extremes than elsewhere. Promptly, the Brexit/Trump tandem has been taken by many as expression of a deep crisis, if not the end, of liberalism and the liberal order, both domestically and internationally [10–13].

Much of this crisis talk has been hyperbole. The populist juggernaut tottered as early as 2017, when Brexit and Trump were not followed by populist victories in the Netherlands and France, contrary to what many had feared. Post-Brexit Britain likes to fashion itself as “truly Global”<sup>1</sup>, and Trump went down in 2020 (if narrowly). In Europe, with the exception of Italy where populists have governed twice since 2018, populism-in-power is mainly limited to its eastern half, where the late arrival of liberal democracy post-1989 made these societies extra-vulnerable to illiberal challenges<sup>2</sup>. A recent study of “right-wing populist parties” in 16 European countries, west *and* east, found an average vote share of just 16 percent in 2021, up from 12.6 percent in 2001 [14] (p. 13, fn. 22). This is significant but hardly ground for alarm. Most importantly, Larry Bartels attributes this moderate growth “not to increased demand for right-wing populism among ordinary Europeans, but to the increased ability and willingness of populist entrepreneurs to mobilize and cater to that demand” [14] (p. 150). Judged by their (often inept) leadership, these parties are limited by a “clown ceiling”, with “a rapid ascent, a noisy thud against the ceiling and a swift retreat”<sup>3</sup>.

The populist right still represents the “single most successful” new political party family in post-war Europe [16] (p. 12). Its gradual ascent coincides with the rise of political neoliberalism since the 1980s, while gaining momentum with the onset of globalization post-1989. Pace Brubaker [17] (p. 357), populism seems to be not just a “moment” but a permanent feature of the neoliberal order. The populism-neoliberalism connection thus requires a closer examination.

While there has been left-wing populism after the 2008 Financial Crisis in the south of Europe and in the US, the right-wing variant has been predominant in the rest of Europe and in the US as well. This fact tells us something important about the neoliberal context in which this populism arises. Considering that populism is inherently counter-establishment and counter-elite, while claiming to bring back-in the neglected people element, a populism that is on the political right *must* visualize its opponent in leftist colors. This attests to a shift of political neoliberalism, from being dominated by the right, as under Thatcher and Reagan in the early 1980s, to being dominated by the left—a left that has reformed itself as the “Third Way”, from Clinton and Blair in the 1990s on. In Gary Gerstle’s [18] seminal account of neoliberalism’s “rise and fall” in the United States, neoliberalism matures from “movement” into “political order” precisely once the left has agreed to its principles. This is a first answer to the question, to be further pursued below, why populism in a neoliberal context is mainly of the political right. In one account [19] (p. 418), the populist right is entirely a response to “phase two” leftist neoliberalism, which consists of “neoliberal social policies based on the recognition of the rights of women, minorities, migrants and the poor”.

This suggests a change in the meaning of right, which had already greatly fluctuated since its first appearance in the French Revolution [20]. At its earliest, “right” was simply

a spatial notion for the monarchic forces seated on the right side of the new Republican parliament. With the rise and consolidation of capitalism, right became the name of its defenders against the socialist critics, and it has never lost this association—the continuity being that right is always conservative. Accordingly, the earliest incarnation of many populist right parties in Europe was as free market musketeers against bureaucratically bloated states (see the pioneering study by Hans-Georg Betz [21]). Another early analysis of these parties identified as their “winning formula” the combination of “free market” and “authoritarian” orientations. It tellingly labelled the result “right-authoritarian”, the “right” standing for “neoliberal economic policies”, while “authoritarian” referred to “nationalist, particularist sociocultural policies” [22] (p. 275).

Today we are used to considering populism and neoliberalism as natural antagonists. However, this was not so initially. Some even attached the adjective “populist” to neoliberalism’s earliest political mainstream articulations in the West. Stuart Hall [23] famously did this for Thatcher, calling her brand of politics “authoritarian populism”. One can drive this to the point that neoliberal doctrine itself bears populist possibilities. An example is Milton Friedman’s self-fashioning as “leading a revolt of the poor against the rich” and defending the cause of “the ordinary worker and the ordinary consumer”, who for Friedman were the true winners of “less government” [24] (pp. 71, 78).

Over time, the populist right shed its neoliberal roots and embraced “centrist economic” [25] (p. 411) and pro-welfare positions, yet only for natives—so-called “welfare chauvinism” [26]. This was a strategic choice, to cater to the working-class defectors of leftist parties that had adopted Third-Way neoliberalism. In the process, right-wing populist parties became “a new type of working-class party” [27] (p. 350). Daniel Oesch found that the support for these parties by “production workers” exceeded their average support by a factor of 1.3 in Switzerland, 1.4 in France, 1.6 in Austria, 1.7 in Belgium, and 1.9 in Norway [27] (p. 356). At the same time, he found that the main concern of working-class voters was not with “economic grievances” but with “questions of community and identity”, especially surrounding immigration, opposition to which became their preferred parties’ signature as well [27] (p. 349). Colin Crouch [28] (p. 97) has a simple explanation for the relative absence of economic concerns in the populist right: “Since by definition the political right is anti-egalitarian, rightist populism has to define its enemies in terms other than wealth and power”. To avoid the apparent circularity, we need to place the populist right in the larger context of political and social transformation<sup>4</sup>.

This is what I try to do in this paper. In the next section, I argue that the “right” element of populist right becomes especially plausible in the light of cleavage theory in the Lipset–Rokkan tradition (2). I then return to the “populist” element in right-wing populism, which is the advocacy of illiberal democracy (3). I argue that this is not a solution to neoliberalism’s chronic democracy deficit but, on the contrary, further aggravates it. Having clarified the meaning of right and of populist in populist right, the main part of the paper tackles the crucial relationship between economic and cultural factors in explaining its rise<sup>5</sup>. The economic backdrop of populism is massively increased inequality and economic insecurity as a result of neoliberal globalization, and the concomitant decline of the middle class, especially its lower segment (4). However, less economic stress than cultural change, in particular that brought by immigration and cosmopolitanism, has set the agenda of the populist right (5). I map the ethnic nationalism that drives the populist right, but show, along the example of welfare chauvinism, that it has had only limited policy impact.

The spirit of this paper is synthetic, to distillate out of a multitude of sector- and area-specific but also broadly comparative political science and sociological analyses, most of them Large-N and quantitative, a holistic picture of populism in the Western neoliberal order, which is at the same time attentive to the complexity of its causes and expressions.

## 2. Cleavage Theory

Why is the populist right “right”? While we already argued that the neoliberal context is key to an answer, considering two rounds of change that helped establish this context, sheds further light on this. The first round of change actually preceded the rise of neoliberalism. For the generation growing up in the late 1960s to 1970s, especially its more affluent parts, Ronald Inglehart [31] diagnosed a “silent revolution” in the personal values held by its young members, from “materialist” to “post-materialist”. The political expression was the new social movements and green parties of the 1970s and 1980s. In return, one can look at the emergent populist *right* as a late “silent counter-revolution” [32] on that same new values dimension, which is more about cultural than economic issues, a right that sought a “non-materialistic answer” to the leftist agenda of the “New Politics” [32] (p. 19). This was a “late” counter-revolution because it kicked in only once the materialists saw their size and numbers dwindling due to generational change. Accordingly, the shrinking and aging materialists responded to the New Politics of the left with a rightist program of “law and order enforcement” and “immigration control” [32] (p. 25).

The concern about “immigration control” fully materialized only in a second round of change, which was brought by post-1980s globalization. Qua signifying a “denationalization”, that is, a set of border- and boundary-transcending and -relativizing movements, globalization has fundamentally transformed the national political space. It has divided “winners” and “losers” on a new “integration-demarcation” cleavage that is superimposed on the established left-right cleavage [33]. Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan [34] had argued that mid-20th century European party systems were the “frozen” product of the two late-19th to early-20th century national and industrial revolutions, generating four cleavages: center/periphery and state/church as a result of the national revolution; and rural/urban and capital/labor as result of the industrial revolution. In principle, political party formation *could* have revolved around all four cleavages and their corresponding interests and identities, depending on the circumstances. In reality, the two cleavages connected to the national revolution, which in some places were expressed in oppositional territorial and religious identities, cooled down, at least in most places. This left only the capital/labor cleavage as the fulcrum of party formation and political conflict (landed interests, and thus the rural/urban cleavage, disappeared with the shrinking of the agrarian sector). This is the origin of the economic left-right distinction in politics as we knew it—until the arrival of neoliberalism. Prior to this arrival, the left stood for social protection and market regulation, and the right for competition and free markets. Globalization, which is but the spatial expression of neoliberalism, amounts to a reopening of the national cleavage type, which is in essence cultural and identity-related.

The globalization-focused update to Lipset-Rokkan’s cleavage theory, by Hanspeter Kriesi et al. [33], refutes a widespread view that globalization has “added” a new dimension to political space (most recently [35] (p. 79))<sup>6</sup>. Instead, they argue, correctly in my view, that political space *always* was two-dimensional, economic and cultural, at least if one follows the Lipset–Rokkan model (which has no real competitor for explaining long-term party-system change). Globalization’s new cleavage, which divides the proponents of (international) “integration” from the partisans of (national) “demarcation”, is thus not added to but “embedded” into the pre-existing two-dimensional basic structure. Because its cultural dimension was already reshaped by the value changes brought by the post-materialist “silent revolution” and its new social movements, globalization amounted to “transforming it *once again*” [33] (p. 13; emphasis supplied). This means that the previously intra-domestic defense of traditional values, mostly around moral and lifestyle issues, turned ethnic and nationalist, bringing to full bloom the combination of opposition to the European Union and to immigration that is the trademark of today’s populist right in Europe [36] (pp. 977–978, 983).

Importantly, the mainstream (conservative vs. social democratic) political parties, which once had taken opposite positions on the economic left/right cleavage, have come to “view . . . economic denationalization both as inevitable and beneficial”, and thus they

“converged on moderately pro-integration positions” [33] (pp. 15–16). This alludes to the Third Way transformation of the left and its adoption of neoliberalism. In principle, the all-party neoliberal consensus could have provided an opening for a new opposition force with a strong economic focus on redistribution. However, this did not happen<sup>7</sup>.

Instead, the action has all been on the cultural front, where the “driving force” is the new populist right parties assembling the “losers” of globalization [33] (p. 19). Their focus on culture, while downplaying the fact that “losing” from globalization has a very material meaning (see Section 4), is not accidental. This is because the new “integration-demarcation” cleavage, “transnational” in brief [37], is “at its core a cultural conflict”, pitting “libertarian, universalistic values against the defense of nationalism and particularism” [37] (p. 123). Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marx point out that this new cleavage has “greater salience” [37] (p. 127) for new parties that are undivided on its issues and thus take more extreme positions on them. These are, next to the populist right parties, green and new left parties on the other end of the political spectrum. By contrast, mainstream parties face internal division in this respect: conservative parties are globalist in economic but not cultural respect, and vice versa for (traditional) social democrats, who are culturally liberal but economically pro-statist and welfarist. Accordingly, the result of globalization is the fragmentation of (non-majoritarian) party systems in Europe, due to the arrival of new parties on the new cleavage axis. This fragmentation shows in the fact that the average voting share of the three traditional party families: social democratic, conservative, and liberal, has steadily decreased, from 75 percent in 2000 to 64 percent in 2017 [37] (p. 127), and the trend continues.

### 3. Illiberal Democracy

In its 2016 program, the populist *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) presented itself as a party of “liberals and conservatives”, “free citizens of our country”, and “convinced democrats” [38] (preamble). The AfD wants to be “an alternative to what the political class believes it can impose on us as ‘without alternative’ (*alternativlos*)”. It opposes the “political class of professional politicians”, which primarily cares about itself and constitutes a “political cartel” [38] (p. 8). Only the “state people” (*Staatsvolk*) of the Federal Republic could “put an end to this illegitimate situation”.

This AfD statement not only confirms Cas Mudde’s [4] “ideational” definition of populism, that is, the pure people/corrupt elite binary. It also replicates, down to the word, Richard Katz and Peter Mair’s [39] “cartel party” theory, which argues that parties no longer represent civil society but have become colluding and self-serving parts of the state apparatus. Confirming its neoliberal roots that would be shortly shed in favor of *völkisch* nationalism, the 2016 AfD program curiously favors the privatization of state institutions [38] (p. 9), and even makes a brainy reference to Friedrich Hayek’s views on the imperfectability of human knowledge and political action [38] (p. 10). Apart from these neoliberal vestiges, the critique of an atrophied political process dominated by a “small and powerful political clique within the parties” [38] (p. 8) closely resembles leading academic critiques, not only of “cartel party” but also of “post-democracy” [28]. In this vein, Takis Pappas [40] understands populism entirely as endogenous response to a “democratic representation crisis” [40] (p. 124), or to “liberal decay” [40] (p. 262), which is likewise not far from the AfD’s 2016 views: “Increased bureaucratization and institutional rigidity in politics, the recycling of political elites and the rise of technocracy, the entrenchment of interest groups, the lack of transparency, widespread corruption, and spreading cynicism” [40] (p. 262). This is what populists rail against, in their own as much as in the views of their scholarly observers.

However, Pappas [40] (p. 190) also concludes, on the basis of in-depth case studies of populists in power, that “in the long run and almost without fail, populism is calamitous for liberal democracy”: “It decimates old established institutions, generates intense social polarization, and produces economic and political crisis; sometimes, it even morphs into autocracy”. In line with most recent key contributions [4,41–45], Pappas argues that

populism, while “always democratic” (which distinguishes it from fascism or communism), is “never liberal” [40] (p. 35). In short, populism is “democratic illiberalism” [40] (p. 33). Merely inverting the words, Mudde [4] (p. 561) speaks of “illiberal democracy”, because populism “rejects all limitations on the expression of the general will, most notably the constitutional protection of minorities and the independence . . . of key state institutions”.

In particular, pluralism and constitutionalism, and thus the two pillars of the “liberal” in liberal democracy, meet the ire of populists. Pluralism is repudiated because it dilutes the direct and unmediated expression of the general will, which is a dangerous hoax to pluralists; constitutionalism is not liked because it puts a brake on the general will’s real-world approximation, the majority will. Opinions are divided on whether democracy minus the liberal element is still democracy. On the yes-side is Yascha Mounk [43] (ch. 1), who finds “democratic energy” in populism. To Mounk, this makes its contemporary incarnations distinct from “older far-right movements”: “today’s populists claim . . . to deepen the democratic elements of our current system. That matters”. On the no-side, Jan-Werner Müller argues, convincingly in my view, that “democracy can only exist on a liberal basis” (quoted in [46] (p. 263)). This is because without pluralism and constitutionalism, the “institutionalized uncertainty” that “real democracy” requires cannot be obtained [47] (p. 71). From this follows that “illiberal democracy” is an oxymoron.

Populism fails the democratic test because it is not what it claims to be, a return to the classic idea of direct democracy. Instead, populism is a “new form of representative government, but a disfigured one”, one that entails “direct representation” [44] (p. 4). Nadia Urbinati’s characterization of populism as “direct representation” is a deliberate contradiction in terms, to capture the fact that populism requires a leader and thus is itself a “representative form of politics” [44] (p. 115). However, it is a peculiar form of representation, not “mandate representation” as in party government, which is replaceable; instead, it is “representation as embodiment”, which is not replaceable. This “creates an irresponsible leader”, and “jeopardizes pluralism by principle” [44] (p. 116). Moreover, true representative democracy is “diarchic”, consisting not just of “will” (expressed in elections and decision-making) but also of “opinion” (the pluralist element), both “remain(ing) independent” [44] (p. 7). Populist direct representation tilts the pluralist element. The result is “illiberal democracy”, which is “not democracy at all” [44] (p. 10). The populist leader faces the dilemma that he (it is rarely a she) “must become an insider”, if he succeeds, “without ever appearing to be one” [44] (p. 156). This is why populists in power are in permanent campaign mode (as one knows from Donald Trump, 2017–2021): they “must be able to collapse the difference between movement and power, and between inside and outside” [44] (p. 156).

Nadia Urbinati’s convincing case for populism as threat to democracy is on the assumption that populism is less “ideology and style” than “strategic movement to remake political authority” [45] (p. 115). Such populism thus requires to be in power for releasing its poisonous quality. However, Urbinati also makes a compelling argument why already qua “ideology and style”, populism cannot be the fix to democracy’s deficits that it claims to be. This is because its claim to represent the “people” as a whole is false to begin with, and thus the claim to express the “general will”. In reality, populism “is a phenomenology that involves replacing the whole with one of its parts” [44] (p. 13). This is also entailed by but not reflected in Mudde’s pure-people/corrupt-elite binary [4]. In populist imaginary, the people are always qualified by an adjective: “pure”, “real”<sup>8</sup>, etc. But this makes them less than the whole, already because the elite is not included (who, technically speaking, must be part of the people, unless it is imagined as of foreign origins). Even more clearly in form of the majority, typically the silent one that populists claim to be or speak for, “the part erases the whole and makes politics a question of partiality” [44] (p. 37).

In a nutshell, real-existing populism means factionalism and polarization. Of course, representative democracy, in its classic party government form, also implies the majority principle. Nevertheless, its logic is *pars pro toto*, the assumption being that who constitutes the majority can—even must—change over time. By contrast, in populism, the logic shifts

to *pars pro parte* [44] (p. 15), the majority being fixed and always the same. As a result, the “majority principle” morphs into “majority rule”, or from “procedure” into “a force” [44] (p.95). Populism rests on a “possessive conception of politics”, as Urbinati puts it to the point [44] (p. 14). It seeks a “regime of rather than by the majority” [45] (p. 123).

Another way of putting the matter is that populist politics is “like a war rather than a game, a matter of winners and losers, with no fiction of universalism” [44] (p. 192). Reviewing the “grand dichotomy of the 20th century”, which is the left-right division that has structured this century’s politics, Steven Lukes [49] notes that this dichotomy embodies the “principle of parity”. According to it, “political alternatives are legitimately equal contenders” [49] (pp. 606–607). The arrival of identity politics, in which the opponent is demonized as illegitimate and to be overcome or even erased, and of which right-wing populism is only one variant, falls short of Lukes’ parity principle. This is why populism “cannot answer the problems that populists are reacting against” [44] (p. 207).

#### 4. Inequality and Middle-Class Decline

##### 4.1. Inequality from the Top

A 2019 OECD report found that the middle class in rich societies is “under pressure”<sup>9</sup>, even “squeezed”, as its members “have seen their standard of living stagnate or decline, while higher income groups have continued to accumulate income and wealth” [50] (p. 3). At that time, the top ten percent in the income distribution held almost half of total wealth, while the bottom 40 percent held just three percent. Accordingly, the report says, there is the need for a “new growth narrative that puts people’s wellbeing at the centre” [50]. This is a flippant conclusion because symbolic change (“new narrative”) is unlikely to fix the structural dissipation of the middle of society, judged by the report’s own findings. The share of middle-income households fell from 64 percent to 61 percent between the mid-1980s and the mid-2010s. This sounds small. The amount of the shrinkage is readier to see in generational terms: 70 percent of baby boomers (born between 1943 and 1964) were middle-income (and thus middle-class) in their 20s, while only 60 percent of millennials (born between 1983 and 2002) today are. Moreover, over the past three decades, median incomes increased one-third less than the average income of the richest ten percent—and they would pale even further if the top one percent was the benchmark. At the same time, house prices grew three times faster than household median income in the past 20 years, while education costs also grew much faster than income, in particular in the UK and the US. As a result, home ownership and college, the two pillars of middle-class aspiration, are increasingly out of reach or they come at the price of crushing individual debt.

Despite these sobering data, no less than two-thirds of OECD populations stubbornly “think of themselves as part of the middle class” [50] (p. 18). This is a hangover from the vision and reality of democratically flattened capitalism, ca. 1950 to 1975, which has taken a bad beating in neoliberal times. The alarm bell is rampant pessimism about the future: 60 percent of parents in 21 OECD countries list the risk that their children will not achieve the same “level of status and comfort” as one of their top-three concerns [50] (p. 26). In the face of similar Pew data for 2015, Adam Przeworski, not known for exaggeration, found the “collapse of the deeply ingrained belief in intergenerational progress . . . a phenomenon at a civilizational scale” [51] (p. 107). His pessimism is well-founded. In the US, 80 percent of those born in the 1970s into an average-income household would achieve a higher income than their parents; for those born in the 1980s, this chance has shrunk to 50 percent [52] (p. 213). Moreover, what Richard Baldwin [52] called the “globotics upheaval”, which is job loss due to automation and artificial intelligence, stretches well into professional categories.

Western middle-class decline is uniquely visualized on Branko Milanovic’s famous “elephant curve” [53]. Depicting the evolution of the global income distribution since the late 1980s, the graph shows income stagnation or even decline around the 85th to 90th percentiles. The people in this bracket are globally rich but among the middle-incomers in OECD societies. They are the proverbial losers of globalization. By contrast, the two winners are, first, the people in the 40th to 60th percentiles of the global income distribution,

which are mainly the emergent (though nominally much poorer) middle classes in China and India; and, secondly, or rather first, the top one percent of global incomers. Kicking off the debate over the richest one percent in the US, economist Joseph Stiglitz [54] noted that the upper one percent now takes one-fourth of national income every year while controlling forty percent of wealth, up from 12 percent and 33 percent, respectively, 25 years earlier. Over the same period, men with only a high-school degree, once sufficient for a job that was both blue collar and middle class, saw their incomes fall by twelve percent. “All the growth in recent decades”, Stiglitz concludes, “has gone to those at the top”.

US Congressional Budget Office data are even more drastic [55] (p. 122). They show that between 1979 and 2007, the top one percent of earners more than doubled their income (after taxes and transfers); the next 19 percent kept their share (36 percent of the total); but all others, the bottom 80 percent, lost. After the Great Recession 2008, which might have been the doom moment of finance capitalism, the wealthiest one percent of households had 225 times the wealth of the typical American household—which is almost double the ratio as in 1962 or 1983 [56] (p. 8). Refuting the myth of “trickle-down economics”, Stiglitz argues that “the riches accruing to the top have come at the expense of those down below”, and that in the process the “middle class is being hollowed out” [56] (p. 7). Importantly, this is not the result of anonymous market logic, but of “government policy” and successful “rent-seeking” by the rich [56] (p. 8). For instance, the top marginal tax rate decreased from 70 percent under Jimmy Carter in the mid-1970s to merely 35 percent under George Bush Jr. in the early 2000s; in 2007, the average tax rate in the top 400 households was as low as 16.6 percent, whereas taxpayers in general had to pay an average of 20.4 percent [56] (p. 72).

As a result, the middle class no longer forms a continuum with the rich, the standard movement being upwards. Instead, middle and rich now live in separate worlds, and the continuum is between the middle and the lower ranks of society, with the standard movement being downwards. Fear of falling is the new normal. As Daniel Markovits [57] (p. 105) notes for the US, the “poor/middle-class income gap” has narrowed by 25 percent since the mid-20th century, whereas the “middle-class/rich income gap” has nearly doubled. Meritocracy is the main justification for the widening gap between the rich and the rest. Note that even Markovits, a fierce critic of the “meritocracy trap”, holds that for the rich today, unlike for the rich in the past, “work has become the dominant path to wealth” [57] (p. 13). French economist Thomas Piketty [58], in a longitudinal analysis of tax returns in the US and Europe, has called this a lie, in showing that it is the nature of capitalism, with a short mid-20th century exception, to be “patrimonial”, with the rate of return on capital exceeding the rate of growth of output and income [58] (p. 25). This means that “inherited wealth grows faster than output and income” [58] (p. 26). Put more simply, growth feeds wealth inequality. This “undermine(s) the meritocratic values on which democratic societies are based” [58] (p. 1)<sup>10</sup>.

The connection between mounting inequality, particularly from the top, and the rise of the populist right is incontrovertible. Sheri Berman [60] (p. 75) detects a “clear connection between the divisive and destabilizing economic trends of the last decades and rising support for populism”. More concretely, an analysis of European voting data has shown that “shocks from trade and migration”, which are the usual triggers of the national sovereignty and cultural preservation agenda of the populist right, “elicit populist opposition only where the top one percent have gained the most” [61] (p. 495). This suggests that “top-heavy inequality” is at least indirectly related to the “persistence of public support for antiglobalization parties, especially those on the Right” [61] (p. 495).

#### 4.2. The Educational Rift

Thomas Flaherty and Ronald Rogowski [61] (p. 496) further notice a fact of great importance: education, or rather the lack of it, more than low or precarious occupational status, predicts support for antiglobalization parties. Education, especially the possession of a college degree, also figured centrally when trying to distinguish the “winners” from



the “losers” of globalization [33]. Statistics for the US show that education has emerged as “the differentiator between economic precarity and success”<sup>11</sup>. Americans with a college degree now have real wages that are 86 percent higher than those without a college degree. Furthermore, not having a college degree means little to no real wage increase since 1979.

Not holding a four-year college degree is the main cause of the epidemic surge of “deaths of despair” [62] in the American white working-class. Anne Case and Angus Deaton [62] (p. 3) have shockingly revealed that the life expectancy of American whites without a bachelor degree has decreased by 25 percent over the past decades, the three main causes of “death of despair” being suicide, drug overdose (doctor-prescribed pain-killing opioids), and alcoholic liver disease. Importantly, white “death of despair” afflicts “not the poorest group in the United States” [62] (p. 8). Worse than wage decline is the outsourcing of low-education work to business-service firms that “do not bring the sense of pride”—one is “no longer invited to the holiday party” [62] (p. 8) and is likely to remain stuck down low. Key to the deaths of despair is “a long-term and slowly unfolding loss of a way of life for the white, less-educated, working class” [62] (p. 146). Not having a college degree has also been the gateway for voting for Trump in 2016: 72 percent of white non-college males and 62 percent of white non-college women did so<sup>12</sup>.

The same rift by education, down to the numbers, has marked the Brexit vote earlier that year: 73 percent of British voters without a college degree voted for leaving the European Union, while 75 percent with a degree voted for staying<sup>13</sup>. Accordingly, two British political scientists see Brexit as the outcome of a long-brooding struggle between “two politically conscious opposing tribes” [63] (p. 11): “identity liberals”, assembling “graduates”, on one side, and “identity conservatives”, drawing disproportionately on “school leavers”, on the other side. Both tribes are locked in a “pure identity conflict, pushing the old economic class conflict into the background” [63] (p. 11). As Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford further point out, this is also a rift between generations: post-secondary education in the UK expanded not before the 1990s, when the 1992 Education Act transformed polytechnics into universities. As a result, university attendance has skyrocketed, from barely 15 percent in 1988 to 40 percent by the mid-2010s [63] (ch. 2). This makes for an education divide between people born before and people born after the 1970s. The tragic of Brexit is not really that the non-educated prevailed over the educated, but that the old and dwindling prevailed over the young and growing who might have looked for opportunity on the European continent.

Beyond the Trump and Brexit examples, the importance of education for understanding changing political cleavages in Western democracies, and for right-wing populism therein, has been demonstrated by French economist Thomas Piketty and collaborators [64]. For the 1950s and 1960, they identify a “class-based” pattern of voting, in which the combination of education and income—“two strongly correlated measures of socioeconomic status” [64] (p. 42)—made people vote either left (with a low level of both) or right (with a high level of both). From then on, however, there has been a continuous trend of the highly educated to vote left, while high-incomers continue to vote right. This trend is “accelerated”, not caused, by the rise of green and radical right parties, which concentrate the high- and low-educated, respectively [64] (p. 1). The authors call the new pattern “multiple elites”, because the educated now vote for the left (dubbed “Brahmin Left”), while the rich continue voting for the right (“Merchant Right”). In a nutshell, the educated and the rich are no longer united in their preference for the right. At the same time, the voting turnout of the bottom 50 percent least educated and poorest “has fallen sharply” [64] (p. 5). The political system simply does not speak for them any longer. Instead, “political systems . . . increasingly oppose two coalitions embodying the interests of two kinds of elites” [64] (p. 42).

The multiple-elite structure helps explain why massively increased inequality over the past few decades did not lead to calls for redistribution: the educated, while mostly not rich, are well-endowed materially, so they care little about getting more. Indeed, the “reversal of the education cleavage” is “tightly associated” with the rise of a “new sociocultural axis of

political conflict" [64] (p. 42), on which the educated and the less-educated, or rather their preferred parties (left-green and right-populist, respectively), occupy the opposite ends. A parallel analysis of party manifestos, in addition to that of voter demographics, reveals that polarization on economic issues has "remained remarkably stable", while polarization on sociocultural issues "has dramatically risen since the 1970s" [64] (p. 30). While the data do not allow the authors to establish the direction of causality, one important factor on the political demand side is "growing educational attainment"<sup>14</sup>. Whereas in the 1950s less than 10 percent of voters in Europe and the US had a college degree, the number of college-degree holders has more than tripled today. This makes catering to educated voters, "who often put living in a liberal society above lowering their tax bills"<sup>15</sup>, inevitable. Thus described, who but leftist parties would take the educated in?

#### 4.3. Class and Occupational Specifications

It is incontrovertible that a low level of education, and thus to be on the losing end of globalization and technological change, is a major support factor for right-wing populism. In addition, one can make more fine-grained class and occupational specifications. Daniel Oesch and Line Rennwald found that "class voting" is "very much alive and kicking" in a West European party system that, due to the revival of the cultural conflict axis, has moved from "bipolar" to "tripolar": in addition to "left" and "centre right", the two antagonists on the established economic conflict axis, there is now the "radical right", which forms one pole on the new cultural axis [65] (p. 784). With respect to the classes and occupational groups that these party families compete for, Oesch and Rennwald distinguish between "preserves", "contested strongholds", and sites of "open competition". Notably, the only "preserves", where there is basically no competition, are the highly educated, who either, as "sociocultural professionals", vote for the left (green parties included); or, as "managers" (also liberal professionals and employers), vote centre-right [65] (p. 787). The radical right, as the newest of the three party families, by definition needs to fish in other ponds. However, it acquired "strongholds", if "contested" ones, the first being the "working class" (in competition with the left), the second being "small business owners" (now in competition with the center right). A third site, "open competition", is the fishing ground for all parties, and it consists of (lower-) middle class "clerks" and "technical specialists". Overall, the radical-right electorate is the one with the "strongest working-class bias of the three-party poles" [65] (p. 800).

The picture of an "increasing proletarianisation" [65] (p. 801) of the populist right electorate must not ignore its significant middle-class component. Importantly, the latter kicks in qua "squeezed" or "declining middle", though more through its members "fearing" than actually "experiencing" economic adversity [66] (p. 1800). Therefore, this middle-class component of the populist right is often taken as argument against the view that populists assemble the losers of globalization. But this would entail a rather narrow understanding of "losing". Thomas Kurer showed that "semiskilled routine workers" in the lower middle class have a strong propensity for voting radical right. "Routine work" is performed by 25 to 30 percent of the workforce in the examined countries (Germany, Britain, and Switzerland), the main examples being blue-collar jobs in industry and basic white-collar work in administration. Being "codifiable", routine work is replaceable by automation<sup>16</sup>, thus constituting a particularly "vulnerable occupational environment" [66] (pp. 1801, 1804). Nevertheless, this old "central pillar of the lower middle class" [66] (p. 1804) is shrinking mainly indirectly, not through being fired but through not being replaced when retiring—"natural turnover" [67] (p. 3)<sup>17</sup>. Accordingly, routine workers experience only "relative economic decline", not real "impoverishment" [66] (p. 1798). Kurer calls them "survivors". Unlike job losers, who interestingly turn left or abstain from voting, survivors vote right, especially populist right: "(A) perception of relative societal decline and concerns about one's position in the social hierarchy—not unemployment or acute material hardship—... drives support for right-wing populist parties" [66] (p. 1800).

The surviving but declining middle is marked by “status anxiety”, “with an emphasis on the values and virtues of an idealized past” [66] (p. 1805).

#### 4.4. Sociotropic Concerns

The importance of “status anxiety” and of “nostalgia” or “societal pessimism”, all of which mix economic and cultural motives and in all of which direct personal concern is submerged to or embedded in larger societal concern, has been affirmed in many studies of the populist right in Western Europe and the United States<sup>18</sup>. The Brexit vote can be explained in these terms, as expression of the “social malaise of intermediate classes” [74]. So can the Trump vote, with a racial inflection, as driven by dominant-status “white Americans . . . under siege” [75] (p. 4330). The sociotropic motivation revealed in these analyses lends itself to geographic extension. One study of the US and Europe argued that not the “individual” but “community” is the proper unit for studying populism, because “populist support is strongest in communities that experienced long-term economic and social decline” [76] (p. 464). Another study with an even broader geographic scope found populism less a matter of “interpersonal inequality”, as Thomas Piketty would have it, but “revenge of the ‘places that don’t matter’”, in developing countries as much as in the developed world [77].

To the degree that status anxiety is plaguing the declining middle, they espouse an “identity politics” that cannot be alleviated by “more welfare” and “financial support from governments”; instead, they “want their perceived relative decline in the social hierarchy addressed” [66] (p. 1826). As Kurer concludes, “right-wing populist parties have long realized this” [66] (p. 1826). It is therefore important to take a closer look at the non-material, cultural motives that are driving the populist right and its supporters.

### 5. Cultural Deflection

The notion of cultural deflection addresses the crucial fact that the economic root causes of populism, identified here as inequality and middle-class decline, find little direct expression in the preferences and programs of the populist right, which nevertheless is the main electoral haven for the losers of these processes. What Cas Mudde stated in 2007: that “the economic program is a secondary feature in the ideologies of populist right parties” [78] (p. 119), and “also secondary to their electorates” [78] (p. 120), remains true today [48].

The “economics versus culture question” [68] in the explanation of the populist right requires a composite answer, one that eschews a simplistic either-or as much as settling on only *one* mechanism when combining the two. A strikingly simple bridge from economic root causes to cultural deflection builds on the fact that populist right parties draw support from two rather heterogeneous occupational groups, “blue-collar workers” and “owners of small businesses” [79]. Their economic interests are diametrically opposed, pro-state-interventionist the workers’ and anti-interventionist the small owners’. This raises the paradox that the two groups that give “disproportionate” support to the populist right are also the ones that are “the most divided” on economic issues [79] (p. 489). Hence, as Elisabeth Ivarsflaten showed along detailed case studies of the French Front National and the Danish People’s Party, the need to bridge the economic differences by “issues cross-cutting the economic dimension” [79] (p. 471): restricted immigration, law and order, EU skepticism, anti-corruption, in sum, the cultural “position” and political “valence” issues that populist right parties hold in ample storage. However, this political supply-side explanation dodges the question why these (and not other) non-economic issues could arise in the first, and why they should appeal precisely to these groups. For this, we need something akin to the cleavage theory discussed earlier.

Starting with the plausible assumption that “globalization shocks” are driving the rise of the populist right, Dani Rodrik [68] has laid out a “conceptual framework” of the multiple channels through which these shocks (that he further differentiates into trade, immigration, and finance shocks) help amass populist votes. In this framework, culture is

“an intermediate variable rather than the ultimate driver”, merely “amplifying the political effects of globalization shocks” [68] (p. 135). That means, there is the possibility of the “economic dislocations” brought by globalization shocks *directly* shaping “individual policy preferences” on the demand-side, or “party programs” on the supply-side, *without* the detour of culture. However, this would amount to the leftist class voting and the class politics that has taken a nosedive under neoliberalism, and that only in some places (and limited times) has found a left-populist successor. Instead, the more likely causal paths are indirect, working through the variable set of “culture, racial attitudes, social identity” [68] (p. 140). This may again happen on either the political demand or supply side, the culture set directly shaping individual voting preferences, or these preferences being indirectly elicited by party programs that first adopted the culture set. The two culture-mediated paths are the more likely today, as the fortunes and agendas of the populist right attest to. Overall, Rodrik’s “conceptual framework” suggests that a “comprehensive analysis” needs to reckon with four causal channels for globalization to fuel populism, two each on the demand- and supply-side of politics<sup>19</sup>. Needless to say, this is a “tall order” that no single analysis has as yet pulled off [68] (p. 141). However, despite the complexity, Rodrik offers a simple reason, equally working for the supply *and* demand sides of politics, why the globalization backlash has taken the “right-wing, nativist form” that works through culture. This is because globalization by definition generates “outsider targets”: “foreign exporters, culturally different workers, international banks”. As a result, economic distress is “recast as threats on the dominant group’s traditional way of life, deepening the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’” [68] (p. 162).

Both Ivarsflaten [79] and Rodrik [68], in different ways, operate with the assumption of cultural deflection, and of a propensity of the political right to engage in it. There are historical precedents for this. Daniel Ziblatt [81] (p. 34) has addressed the “conservative dilemma” in the making of 19th century European democracies, which is that playing “the numbers game” to win elections required compromising their “inegalitarian and hierarchical views”. The solution was to “find and exploit issues that cross-cut and diminish the impact of social class as an electoral cleavage, supplanting it with issues such as nationalism, religion, and patriotism” [81] (p. 49). A contemporary variant is the US Republican Party, which already before Donald Trump had mobilized white identity to defend wealth inequality [82] (see also [83]; a cross-national confirmation of the Ziblatt thesis is [84]).

### 5.1. Ethnic Nationalism

What makes the populist right “right” is a “specific form of nationalism”, which Cas Mudde called “nativism”: “an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group” [78] (p. 19). Nativism is another word for ethnic nationalism, which is usually distinguished from civic or liberal nationalism.

To the limited degree that an intellectual doctrine can be attributed to the ethnic nationalism that circulates in the populist right, it is “ethnopluralism”. Developed by the French *Nouvelle Droite*, in particular Alain de Benoist, ethnopluralism has been influential for the French Front National and other populist right parties in Europe [85] (pp. 3–4)<sup>20</sup>. Much as these parties are located on a new cleavage axis, New Right thinking also has been a response to a prior multiculturalism, which in France has figured as the “right to difference” (*droit à la différence*) on the part of minorities. Now the right to difference is claimed on behalf of the majority. “What is good for the Bororos or the Guayaquis, should be no less good for us”: “the right of peoples to be themselves” [87] (p. 103). De Benoist, chief thinker of the *Nouvelle Droite*, calls this borrowing from multiculturalism “mutual decolonization”, in which “White Power” is the logical progression from “Black Power”. At the same time, “racism” is nominally rejected: “I am for non-discrimination, for de-colonization, for the self-determination of peoples” [87] (p. 102). Unlike classical racism, which was hierarchical, the novelty of ethnopluralism is to be horizontal. It stipulates the “equal value of homogenous peoples in their native territories” (De Benoist, quoted

in [88] (ch. 1)). Indeed, a manifesto entitled *The French New Right in the Year 2000* [89], is often indistinguishable from leftist multiculturalism—*Telos*, where it was published, incidentally was one of the left's intellectual strongholds in the 1980s. This manifesto identifies the "true wealth of the world" in "the diversity of its cultures and peoples" [89] (p. 11, typescript). And it opposes the "homogenizing universalism" of the West that it sees embodied in liberalism, consequently dubbed "the main enemy" [89] (p. 3). The French New Right is even depicted in this manifesto as allied with the "peoples struggling against Western imperialism" and against "racism", in a posture self-described as "differentialist anti-racism" [89] (p. 13). Already long before this striking document, Pierre-André Taguieff had mocked the "third-worldism of the right", calling De Benoist, the 2000 manifesto's main author, "one of the last French leftists" [86] (p. 21).

However, the unmistakable dividing line between left and right is the right's instinctual endorsement of inequality and hierarchy as natural and ineradicable features of human society. As this has been a definitional element of the right since its birth post-1789 [20], it must be a defining feature of the New Right as well. The rub is that positively valued inequality and hierarchy are not easily matched with the "pluralism" element in ethnopluralism, which the latter borrows from multiculturalism and which suggests symmetry and equality. Accordingly, classic racism slips back in<sup>21</sup>. It is barely suppressed in the claim that "all races are superior", and that "all races have their own genius" [87] (p. 85). It is out in the open when "racial differences in intelligence (IQ) . . . cannot be denied", and when De Benoist oddly distinguishes the "intuitive reasoning" of "blacks" from the "discursive reasoning" of non-blacks [87] (p. 97).

Most importantly, ethnopluralism rejects the mixing of races and peoples. Each is to stick to their "own" territory without interference by the others. Next to the endorsement of inequality and hierarchy, the rejection of mixing is a second feature of classic racism that pops up in the New Right. From the rejection of mixing follows a principled rejection of immigration, which can only lead to "discrimination, segregation, the loss of culture, and crime" [87] (p. 99). The rejection of immigration, and this for primarily cultural reasons, is the perhaps strongest communality between New Right ethnopluralism and the agenda of populist right parties, which have been found "unite(d)" in their opposition to immigration [90] (p. 3).

Central to New Right thinking is the frontal opposition to liberalism (as well as to Christianity, as its historical roots). This replaced an earlier anti-communist stance, which has become anachronistic post-1989 [86] (p. 14). However, what De Benoist calls "liberal" is perhaps better called "neoliberal"—a notion that never took off in a French intellectual culture that has not liked liberalism much and generally does not distinguish between the two. Liberalism, De Benoist argues, in line with many of his (non-rightist) French compatriots, "destroys community"; it reduces social life to the "care of material things"; it "does not defend liberty but the right to be private"; and politics is reduced to "a kind of service for economic bosses, administration replaces leadership, nations are reduced to mere markets" [87] (p. 190). Overall, "liberalism", as De Benoist understands it, is the "main enemy" [87] (p. 198), which is evidently a repeat-line of his. Communism or Islam take rather subordinate roles in this respect (and Islam perhaps no role at all).

While it is central to New Right thinking, the anti-(neo)liberal motif is subdued in the programs of populist right parties. As mentioned above, this may be due to (many of) these parties' neoliberal pasts, and their prior endorsement of anti-tax and anti-welfare platforms, in this faithful to the interests of the old middle class of small shop-owners and artisans, their earliest core constituency. Certainly, as they turned anti-immigrant, some populist right parties, especially in the small liberal north-western and northern states of Europe, have complemented their trademark ethnic nationalism with a defense of liberal values, such as gender equality and the freedom of speech [91]. However, they did so only instrumentally, to denounce an "illiberal" Islam [92].

The clearest continuity between New Right thinking and populist right party platforms is thus ethnopluralism and its xenophobic implications. If the Danish People's Party

defends the “right of the peoples of Western Europe . . . to their homelands” [85] (p. 481), and if it claims that “Denmark belongs to the Danes”, this is ethnopluralism in practice. So is the Austrian FPÖ’s avowal to “protect . . . the indigenous population” and “Austrian dominant culture” within a Europe of “self-governing peoples and fatherlands” [93]. US President Donald Trump’s foreign policy also was recognizably ethnopluralist, probably transmitted to him by the Alt-Right in his inner circle: “I honor the right of every nation . . . to pursue its own customs, beliefs, and traditions. The United States will not tell you how to live or work or worship. We only ask that you honor our sovereignty in return . . . Ultimately, the only long-term solution to the migration crisis is to help people build more hopeful futures in their home countries. Make their countries great again”<sup>22</sup>.

### 5.2. Welfare Chauvinism

The nasty truth of ethnopluralism is that its “pluralism” part is not meant to apply to domestic society. After all, it is an intellectual articulation of ethnic nationalism, despite the left-multiculturalist rhetoric. In policy terms, welfare chauvinism, next to the rejection of immigration, is this nationalism’s most pertinent expression, at least in Western Europe. Welfare chauvinism “promotes nativism as the main organizing principle of social policy” and has been embraced by populist radical right parties as they moved away from “neoliberal economic views” [26] (p. 294). Considering that these parties combine an “anti-state petite bourgeoisie” and a “traditionally left-leaning working class” clientele, to become pro-welfare, in however constricted ways, is not an obvious move [94] (p. 328). Nevertheless, populist right parties may support “deregulation”, perhaps, especially if in coalition with the center-right; but not “welfare retrenchment” [94] (p. 328). In colloquial language, welfare chauvinism thrives on the image that “Henk and Ingrid pay for Ali and Fatima”, as has been the slogan of Dutch populist Geert Wilders’ PVV party. This choice and distribution of names (two Dutch against two Muslim) suggest that not just shared citizenship, but co-ethnicity should be the condition for welfare entitlement. All immigrants are thus to be categorically excluded. While welfare chauvinism is one of the rare socioeconomic (as against cultural) planks in populist right platforms, it is of interest here as an applied form of ethnic nationalism. Or rather, it shows how little space there is for it in a liberal state.

Indeed, welfare chauvinism, whose thrust is plain ethnic exclusion, runs into severe constitutional obstacles. Not even formal citizenship, which in itself is a rather imperfect proxy for co-ethnicity in liberal states (that tend to have liberal citizenship laws), provides a shell for limiting social benefits. “The principle of equal treatment is simply sacred. Period”, exclaimed a senior civil servant in the Dutch Department of Social Affairs, when probed by his skeptical academic interviewer [95] (p. 189). As a result, it is “impossible in the Netherlands”, as in other liberal-constitutional states, “to implement any policy that directly discriminates between native-born citizens and legal immigrant residents” [95] (p. 188). The populist right has adjusted to these constraints, in betting on excessive residence requirements as a second-best. For instance, they demand, as the Dutch PVV does, ten years of legal residence before a migrant becomes eligible for social benefits (five years more than required for legal residence, which usually triggers equal treatment), and they demand excluding temporary migrants in total. The Netherlands, where the populist right has been a strong political force for two decades, shows the reach *and limits* of welfare chauvinism: only immigrants with “the most robust status” are entitled to benefits today, after considerable residence time and tough integration tests and requirements [95] (p. 147).

Welfare chauvinism *sensu stricto* is thus non-implementable. Next to the toughening of residence time, one finds two further proxies for it in the populist right. The first is to exclude on the basis of “contribution history”, which is directed against asylum-seekers and undocumented migrants [26] (p. 307). Consequently, there is little populist opposition to including migrants in pension and unemployment schemes, simply because these schemes operate on the basis of reciprocity and prior insurance payments. By contrast, the strongest opposition is to including migrants in tax-financed social aid or health care, which is the

point of the “Henk and Ingrid” polemic. Nevertheless, in insisting on reciprocity and prior contribution, the populist right, not different in this from majority views, takes a de facto neoliberal position, and one that has long found its way into law and policy. Accordingly, a May 2011 report of the Dutch Council for Social Development bears a neoliberal signature that populists, as plain ethnic exclusion is not on offer, can easily accept and make their own: “Who does not contribute . . . to welfare and innovation cannot stay and is not allowed to make a claim on the welfare state” [95] (p. 158). The same neoliberal-populist meeting of minds applies to the “duty to integrate” and the responsibility to “maintain oneself independently”, which the Dutch government laid out as its “new vision on integration” in the same year [95] (p. 161).

Secondly, while right populists have come to oppose welfare retrenchment and austerity, they also oppose positive welfare measures for new risk groups [96] and Third Way social investment policies [97]. This proxy for welfare chauvinism, unlike the first, is not a neoliberal position but backward-looking “welfare nostalgia” [98] (p. 190). Its gist is to continue protecting male and working labor-market insiders, the classic beneficiaries of Bismarckian welfare states. Conversely, welfare nostalgia hits “not only migrants, but also women and perhaps even other non-traditional workers like self-employed and temp workers” [98] (p. 190). As their main clientele is not actual but prospective losers, who still have something to lose, including relatively secure jobs, populist right parties often support harsh workfare programs for the unemployed, who are considered outside the pale of “hard-working people”. Moreover, these parties stand in for a traditional “transfer-oriented welfare state that downgrades those social investments on which new social risk groups rely” [99] (p. 10). These populist party positions exactly match the preferences of their voters, who are “pro-welfare” not across the board but only for the “deserving”, like the elderly and handicapped, not the unemployed, within a “particularistic-authoritarian welfare state” [99] (p. 10).

## 6. Conclusions

Explaining the populist right in a neoliberal order needs to combine political, economic, and cultural elements, and perhaps more<sup>23</sup>. Qua populism, right-wing populism is primarily a political movement addressing the deficit of democracy that is endemic to neoliberalism. However, as it crosses out the liberal elements of democracy, in particular pluralism and constitutionalism, populism, especially the right-wing variant, cannot but become a threat to democracy itself. The economic backdrop to populism is middle-class decline, even though its claims, both on the political demand and supply sides, are mainly cultural. Next to throwing light on the “right” in populist right, cleavage theory is a plausible macro-level explanation of this “cultural deflection”. It shows that globalization has revitalized the cultural cleavage that had first been the result of the late 19th century “national revolution” [34], but that more recently has taken the form of a transnational cleavage. The economics–culture conundrum remains the central challenge for contemporary populism studies. The least to say is that one-sided, either economy- or culture-focused explanations must fail.

Let us look at two prominent examples. A self-consciously economy-focused analysis of “anti-system politics”, right and left, by Jonathan Hopkin [101], argues that “creditor countries” generate right-wing populism, while “debtor countries” produce the left-wing variant: “The ways in which welfare systems distribute exposure to economic risks predict whether anti-systems politics takes a . . . left-wing or right-wing direction” [101] (p. 17). However, if part of the explanation why populism in (south European) debtor countries is leftist, is that it is carried by “more progressive-minded” youth, the question arises where this “progressive-mindedness” is coming from in the first. It does not appear to be endogenous, so that one would need to factor-in the cultural-value or cleavage changes that Hopkin explicitly rules out: “exposure to inequality and financial insecurity predicts anti-system politics better than cultural changes . . . ” [101] (p. 51). Moreover, the claim that “(m)ost anti-system right-wingers addressed economic grievances head-on, identifying

migration as an economic threat as much as a cultural one" [101] (p. 251), does not seem to hold empirically. This is even by Hopkin's own admission, when he argues, correctly in my view, that populist right parties "(lack) credible programs of reform or strategies for fundamental institutional change" [101] (p. 252).

On the opposite end, a decidedly culture-focused account of the populist right, as recently proposed by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart [80], also runs into problems. They claim that "cultural values", better than "economic indicators", predict populist voting [80] (p.20). While not denying the role of "economic conditions", as having "deepened the cultural backlash" (to the post-materialist value revolution of the new left) [80] (p. 17), their central notion of "cultural backlash" suggests a one-factor explanation that discards economics. Sheri Berman [60] (pp. 74–75) notes that individual-level surveys, as conducted by Norris and Inglehart [80], tend to support a cultural explanation of populism, while macro-level analyses support an economic explanation. This is a strong reason for ecumenical thinking on populism. Discarding economic factors faces the difficulty that globalization, which clearly has fueled the rise (and the nationalism) of the populist right, is in the first an economic phenomenon with dismal economic consequences for the core support groups of the populist right. The cleavage theory of Kriesi et al. [33,102], which stresses the "cultural logic" (as against "economic logic") of populist mobilization [102] (p. 17), nevertheless agrees with the view, favored by most, of culture as only intermediate variable, because the first mover, after all, is "globalization".

Norris and Inglehart's "cultural backlash" theory rests on a narrow understanding of who are the "losers" of globalization. The "economic grievance theory" they dismiss is said to identify as losers "the *least prosperous* citizens" who provide "strongest support for authoritarian and populist values" [80] (p. 132; emphasis supplied). However, when summarizing their findings, they concede that "both authoritarian and populist values are consistently stronger among *less well-off* people, who are most likely to feel a sense of economic insecurity" [80] (p. 166; emphasis supplied). As the "least" well-off have long been known to either abstain from the political process or to vote for the left (or for the Democrats in the US, as in the 2016 presidential elections) [80] (p. 139), Norris and Inglehart in fact confirm the argument of the "squeezed middle" presented above, a middle that has not yet lost but is in fear of losing and inflicted by "social pessimism and nostalgia" [80] (p. 21). Accordingly, they describe Trump support as "concentrated among socially conservative older white men, non-college graduates, and residents in small-town America" [80] (p. 21). This, indeed, qua "non-college" and "small-town", is the declining middle class that, as we argued, has been the main loser of globalization *and* support group of the populist right.

I concur with Sheri Berman [60] (p. 83) that "parsimony is intellectually . . . satisfying", but that "understanding the causes of populism and the current problems facing liberal democracy requires embracing complexity and bringing together insights from a variety of perspectives". I leave it as an open question whether the "economics-culture divide" presupposed in this paper is more a "nominal" than a "real issue", a self-produced myopia of the mostly "positivist" (Large-N) works that have been synthesized here for explaining the populist right in the neoliberal West<sup>24</sup>. Anthropologists, for whom "economics is very cultural and much of culture is about economics"<sup>25</sup>, and who have used ethnography rather than survey methods to study the same phenomenon, have been automatically inclined to resist this dichotomy. Don Kalb [103], for instance, in a review of the "contributions of anthropologists of Europe in . . . explaining the neo-nationalist ascendancy of the last 20 years", evocatively speaks of "double devaluations", which are "all round, economic as well as discursive, cultural as well as material" [103] (pp. 204, 206)<sup>26</sup>. The fact that his picture of "popular shifts towards illiberalism" [103] (p. 206) is strikingly similar to mine, suggests that there is validity to both.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.



**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Acknowledgments:** I acknowledge helpful comments by two anonymous reviewers. One reviewer criticized the use of “West” for locating the populisms to be addressed in this paper. I use “West” as a shorthand for “advanced liberal democracies”, with a focus on Western Europe and the United States. A second reviewer bemoaned the “narrow echo-chamber quality” of this limited regional focus. To this I plead guilty, as it reflects my limited area of expertise. This reviewer further noted that “exactly similar conceptual and methodological dilemmas” as the ones discussed in this paper, “play themselves out in the Global South literature”. I concur that a truly global comparative study of populism is the way to move forward, not least because “neoliberalism”, which this paper highlights as the defining context of contemporary populism, is (almost by definition) a global phenomenon.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister Theresa May in a speech on 17 January 2017. Available online: <https://time.com/4636141/theresa-may-brexits-speech-transcript/> (accessed on 13 January 2023).

<sup>2</sup> A reviewer noted that “post-socialist Europe has been the best illustration on the continent of widespread ‘fear of falling’, dispossession and disenfranchisement of working-class populations that imagined themselves to be middle class”—all factors that will be stressed later in this paper. I leave it for area experts or globally competent comparativists to corroborate such communalities.

<sup>3</sup> “The Clown Ceiling”, *The Economist*, 9 January 2021, p. 23. Already Herbert Kitschelt [15] (p. 1177) noted the “self-limiting” performance of radical right parties, winning a maximum of 25 percent of the electorate, and less in most countries, and “quickly punished by their own voters” when in government. This still applies to most of Western Europe, though not the east.

<sup>4</sup> Crouch [28] does that too, with an amended version of Lipset–Rokkan’s theory of cleavage structures, discussed in the following. For earlier attempts to do this, see Joppke [29,30], (ch. 1).

<sup>5</sup> Even Schäfer and Zürn [35] (p. 79) are committed to the Lipset–Rokkan model, though their “added” notion conflicts with it.

<sup>6</sup> The concluding chapter of Kriesi et al. [33], written by Edgar Grande, speculates that the “politics of security” (economically understood), as advocated by left-wing populist parties, “might gain in attractiveness in the coming years” [33] (p.341). This has not materialized.

<sup>7</sup> Nigel Farage, leader of the pro-Brexit UKIP party, celebrated the referendum outcome as “a victory for real people” [48] (p. 423).

<sup>8</sup> “Middle-income households” are those holding between 75 percent and 200 percent of the median national income [50] (executive summary).

<sup>9</sup> The relative share of income and wealth inequality differs from country to country. In France, there is more wealth than income inequality. In the UK, the opposite is the case. The US “stands out in having exceptionally high amounts of both income and wealth inequality” [59] (p. 79). In denying the wealth inequality component in the US, Markovits [57] (ch. 2) draws a somewhat teary picture of American high earners as suffering from “deep alienation”, “exploiting themselves and deforming their personalities”.

<sup>10</sup> “Stuck in Place”, *The Economist*, 6 November 2021.

<sup>11</sup> William Galston and Clara Hendrickson, “The Educational Rift in the 2016 Election”, Brookings, 18 November 2016 (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2016/11/18/educational-rift-in-2016-election/> (accessed on 13 January 2023)).

<sup>12</sup> See previous endnote.

<sup>13</sup> “Brahmins v Merchants”, *The Economist*, 29 May 2021, p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> The focus of Kurer [66] is evidently technological change, not globalization. As Kurer and Palier [67] (p. 2) argue, globalization mainly hits low-skilled workers, while technological change hits “the middle of society”. Because the latter, with “routine workers” at the forefront, respond with endorsing an “exclusive understanding of the nation state and citizenship”, as propagated by the populist right, they do not seem to distinguish between endogenous (technological) and exogenous (globalization-related) sources of change. While economists tend to treat both separately (e.g., [68]), technological change and globalization are in reality closely connected.

<sup>16</sup> The literature is divided whether there is “polarization away from middle-skill jobs to low- and high-skilled employment”, as an OECD report claimed in 2017 [69] (p. 441). Oesch and Piccitto deny this for Western Europe, where they find “clear-cut occupational upgrading” (while conceding that “the traditional working class and subordinate white-collar employees lost ground”) [69] (pp. 443, 461). Kurer [66] (p. 1814), despite his case for the “declining middle”, also observes that occupational “upgrading is slightly more common than downgrading”. A differentiated picture is by Peugny [70], who finds “a very clear trend” toward polarization in seven of twelve examined (non-eastern) European countries [70] (p. 4), along with a general

“decline in the proportion of middle-skilled jobs” [70] (p. 5). At the same time, “the jobs that remain in (the) area of middle-skilled employment continue to offer relatively good employment (conditions)” [70] (p. 6). The US seems to be a clear case of polarization, particularly with respect to earnings. Markovits [57] (ch. 6) reports that one-fourth of mid-skilled jobs have disappeared since 1980, including the death of the entire “middle management” category, while high-skilled jobs have increased by over one-third. He sees a parallel expansion of “glossy” and “gloomy” jobs, which makes for a “labor market epitomized by Walmart greeters and Goldman Sachs bankers” [57] (ch. 6).

18 For “status anxiety”, see Gidron and Hall [71]; for “nostalgia” and “societal pessimism”, see Steenvoorden and Harteveld [72] and Gest et al. [73].

19 The alternative, of course, is taking culture as free-standing and not merely “intermediate variable” [68] (135). Norris and Inglehart [80] have done this. See my discussion in the conclusion.

20 However, De Benoist distanced himself from the FN in 1990 [86] (p. 11), among other reasons, because he did not share the party’s increasingly anti-Islamic orientation.

21 As Taguieff [86] (p.6) showed in his authoritative review, De Benoist had earlier endorsed a biologically racist kind of nationalism, centered around the virtues of “Indo-Europeans”. This included his support of eugenics. Only from the mid-1970s on, did “cultural differentialism” replace “biological determinism” [86] (p. 14).

22 Speech of Donald Trump at the United Nations in 2018 (<https://www.politico.com/story/2018/09/25/trump-un-speech-2018-full-text-transcript-840043> (accessed on 13 January 2023)).

23 One important factor not addressed in this paper is new social media. See on this Empoli [100].

24 This has been the rather brilliant and hard-to-object point of one anonymous reviewer of this paper.

25 Ibid.

26 I owe this reference to the same anonymous reviewer.

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