FASCISTS VS. ANTI-FASCISTS OR SELF-RIGHTEOUS COSMOPOLITANS VS. LEFT-BEHIND COMMUNITARIANS? REFLECTIONS ON POLITICAL AND CULTURAL POLARIZATION TODAY

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We[1] undoubtedly live in polarized times. There are a host of issues on which opinions are sharply divided, with the opposing sides portraying each other's opinion not only as factually wrong, but also as morally evil. This polarization often takes the form of a "culture war" in which a liberal and progressive culture, on the one side, is pitted against a traditional or even authoritarian culture, on the other side. While hardly anyone questions the existence of such polarization, the question of how it should be framed and explained is a matter of debate, as is the way one should deal with it.

This paper contrasts two different approaches. The first approach focuses on far-right ideology and frames the polarization as one between *authoritarianism or even fascism*, on the one hand, and *righteous anti-fascism*, on the other hand. The second approach, which claims to be more neutral and sociological, portrays the polarization as one between *self-righteous better-off cosmopolitans*, on the one hand, and *frustrated forgotten communitarians*, on the other hand. I argue that while both approaches teach important lessons and should be taken seriously, neither of them should be taken at face value. If one wants to understand the current polarization and act responsibly within it, one should heed the warnings of both approaches. In the remainder of the article, I will first sketch the two approaches and then discuss their validity and interrelation.

Fascists vs. Anti-Fascists

The first of the two approaches is based on an analysis of and opposition to far-right ideology. A condensed and pointed version of this ideology can be found in the conspiracy theory of "The Great Replacement," which is spread by far-right online activists, as well as by far-right parties and their leaders (Cosentino, 2020; Davey & Ebner, 2019; Obaidi et al., 2021). According to this theory, populations of Western nations are being deliberately "replaced" with non-Western foreigners in order to make the populations more easily governable and exploitable. In this imagination, the original population—or "the pure people"—is composed of simple, hard-working, decent, and loyal people pursuing a traditional lifestyle and trying their best in life.

At least implicitly, they are portrayed as white heterosexual natives. Dutch far-right politician Geert Wilders refers to them as "Henk and Ingrid," choosing two "typically Dutch" names—with their typicality being determined in a nativist fashion. The foreign others are portrayed as indecent, criminal, wild, sexually backwards, lazy, greedy, etc. They are described sometimes as invading armies or colonizers, sometimes as a

threatening natural force, like water pushing against the floodgates of a city. Depending on the specific context, these external enemies are variously identified as Muslims, Africans, or Latin Americans.

As is usual in populist ideologies, this idea of "the pure people" is contrasted with "the corrupt elite." In the conspiracy theory of "The Great Replacement," this elite is composed of two parts. First, there are those who supposedly rule the world, manipulating, dominating, and exploiting the masses. This small group supposedly masterminds and oversees the whole operation of the "Replacement," leading foreigners into Western countries. This group is identified with political and economic elites, particularly in the finance industry. Second, there is a group that is portrayed as a part of "the corrupt elites" but that is larger in numbers and plays a different role. Rather than all-powerful evildoers, these people are portrayed as degenerate, naive weaklings who do not understand what is really happening but have fallen prey to an ideology misrepresenting this heinous crime as noble humane action. The social groups identified with this image are typically liberals, supporters of green parties, academics from the humanities, journalists, feminists, antiracists, etc.

The narrative of "The Great Replacement" is racist, anti-Semitic, and often also heterosexist (i.e., patriarchal, misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic). The portrayal of migrant foreign others as an uncivilized, unruly, irrational, and sexually dangerous group is a direct continuation of classic racist stereotyping. The portrayal of a small conspiratorial elite dominating the world is a direct continuation of classic anti-Semitic imagery—and it is no coincidence that the narrative of "The Great Replacement" often names Jewish individuals such as George Soros as the main culprits. The portrayal of the naive weaklings likewise has a pre-history in anti-Semitic imagery, being used to depict degenerate non-Jewish groups who knowingly or unknowingly help the Jews.

This narrative is often not only heteronormative, but also misogynistic and homophobic, portraying "the pure people" as "traditional" and straight, but feminism, homosexuality, and queerness as degenerate. Yet in some cases, it can also be combined with "femonationalist" or "homonationalist" discourses to pit a sexually "progressive" West against Muslim others portrayed as culturally backwards (Hark & Villa, 2017; Mudde, 2019).

One can go one step further and describe this ideology not only as racist and anti-Semitic, but even as a continuation of the ideology of National Socialism. National Socialist ideology was centered around the idea of the Aryan race being weakened by liberal degeneration and threatened by a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. Of course, far-right discourses today cannot simply be identified with National Socialism. There are indeed fascist, terrorist mass murderers who invoke the narrative of "The Great Replacement" to justify their actions—as with the terrorist who killed 51 people in attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019 (Cosentino, 2020). Most of the present-day far right articulates its ideology in less extreme forms. Yet the ideological continuity between far-right ideology then and now remains.

So what are the implications of this first approach for political polarization? First, the far-right ideology on which this approach focuses is itself polarizing, since it portrays the racialized others and the "replacists" as enemies that must be fought. Second, this ideology warrants a polarizing response from others. If relevant political forces pursue racist and anti-Semitic ideologies that are a continuation of National Socialist ideology, then democratic actors should react with direct anti-fascist opposition, not with conciliation or appeasement.

Cosmopolitans vs. Communitarians

The second approach questions this kind of anti-fascism and points to the danger that this righteousness might be sheer self-righteousness driven by the ignorance of people in a privileged position. The literature taking this approach argues that society is polarized between *cosmopolitanism* and *communitarianism*. Its

proponents thereby add a twist to the undoubted polarization between the far right and its adversaries, claiming that this division is—at least to some degree—also a class struggle between the lower and higher strata of society. In English, the most notable exponent of this approach is the journalist and best-selling author David Goodhart; in German, the relevant authors include sociologist Cornelia Koppetsch and political scientist Wolfgang Merkel. The most extensive attempt at empirical validation has been made by a research group at the WZB Berlin.

In slightly different ways, these authors claim that the rise of the far right is driven by a "new cleavage," meaning a social and political divide between two groups. Goodhart calls these groups the *somewheres* and the *anywheres*; Merkel and the WZB group use the terms *communitarians* and *cosmopolitans*; and Koppetsch shifts between terms. But while these scholars assign different names to the two groups, the ways in which they characterize them and explain their emergence are very similar. Their basic assumption is that there have been several major social transformations over the course of recent decades. The most notable is the process of globalization, with national borders becoming less and less significant for economic, political, social, and cultural interactions. But it is not only the interaction between societies that has changed; societies have also transformed internally. There has been a general process of social liberalization. "Traditional" virtues and values have been weakened, while more individualistic, aestheticized lifestyles have become more widespread. The proponents of the cosmopolitanism/communitarianism thesis emphasize that such social transformations tend to produce winners and losers, supporters and opponents (Goodhart, 2017; Koppetsch, 2019; Merkel, 2017).

The *cosmopolitans* or the *anywhere* are said to be winners from and supporters of these changes. They disproportionately hold higher education degrees and have internalized the new values of neoliberalism, individualism, and diversity. Both their formal qualifications and their ability to communicate in many languages allow them to cross borders with ease, to live in one country today and another tomorrow. But within these countries they can mostly be found in the bigger cities—cities that largely resemble one another. They think of themselves as being very progressive, asserting this progressiveness by engaging in politics of identity, diversity, and anti-fascism (Goodhart, 2017; Koppetsch, 2019; Merkel, 2017).

The losers and opponents of these transformations are called the *communitarians* or the *somewheres*. They are disproportionately manual laborers who live in the countryside—but their number also includes more traditionally minded elites and middle classes who have not benefitted from globalization and who reject cultural liberalization. They have a harder time crossing now-porous borders because they are bound to the territory where they live. For some of them, this is because they do not have a job qualification that would allow them to take up work elsewhere easily. Others among them might be able to do so but do not want to because they like the more traditionalist, more collective lifestyle they enjoy in their home communities. While the cosmopolitans strive for universalism, the communitarians strive for a particular community (Goodhart, 2017; Koppetsch, 2019; Merkel, 2017).

The interrelation between the two groups is portrayed as asymmetrical. The cosmopolitans have become a new dominant class, enjoying not only greater resources and chances in life, but also hegemony, in the sense that *their* values are the ones that count in public discourse. The communitarians, on the other hand, have seen their values devalued and ridiculed as backwards. From this angle, voting for far-right populist parties is seen as a (misguided and dangerous) form of resistance or self-defense by somewheres or communitarians fighting against their marginalization—or their loss of privilege. These groups used to have well-established stable positions in the world—but then the world changed and now they feel left behind. And not only do they have to cope with being the losers of social transformation, but they also feel that all the major political parties support these transformations, leaving them unrepresented. This leaves them frustrated, and in their

frustration, they turn to far-right populists to represent them and their anger ([Goodhart, 2017](#); [Koppetsch, 2019](#); [Merkel, 2017](#)).

In this second approach, culture, society, and politics still appear to be polarized. Yet the framing of this polarization is very different than in the first approach. What previously appeared to be the hateful assertive struggle of racist, anti-Semitic, and heterosexist successors of National Socialism now appears to be the desperate resistance of groups that have been overrun and left behind. This also reverses the depiction of the opposing side: whereas before they appeared to be righteous democrats and anti-fascists fighting for equality and liberty, they are now depicted as a self-righteous dominant class that is engaged in ridiculing and vilifying a dominated class that is doing nothing more than resisting its marginalization. That this dominant class depicts its opponents as the new fascists (as the first approach does, and I did in section 1), then, only seems to add insult to injury.

Conclusion

On an ethical-political level, each approach implies an urgent warning, with a strong tension between the two. The first approach warns against complacency in the face of anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian politics; the second warns against self-righteousness. On an empirical-analytical level, the two approaches aim at different layers of analysis. Therefore, their descriptions are not mutually exclusive. The first approach aims at the political ideology of far-right actors, the second at the political sociology of far-right support among voters. It may very well be true *both* that far-right parties and their networks in civil-society are racist, antisemitic, heterosexist, and anti-democratic *and* that support for these actors is driven by frustration over and opposition to processes of globalization and sociocultural liberalization.

This article cannot offer a [thorough evaluation](#) of the empirical validity of the two approaches nor discuss the implications of the analogies that can be found between the worldview of far-right ideology criticized in the first approach and the depiction of society offered by the second approach. But it must be remarked that both need to be taken with a grain of salt—and the second approach with two.

The first approach runs the risk of exaggeration and moralization. While it is true that many far-right actors, including major parties in parliament, push ideologies such as that of "The Great Replacement," it would be an oversimplification and exaggeration to categorize all these parties as reincarnations of fascism. While some parties, such as the AfD in Germany, are on a path of continuous radicalization, others elsewhere in Europe, such as the DF in Denmark, are anti-egalitarian and nativist but hardly fascist—and this is even more true of the motivations of these parties' supporters.[2]

The second approach tells a very good story and seems very convincing at first glance. Yet upon closer inspection, it does not quite hold sociological water. It is true that there have been processes of globalization and liberalization; it is true that globalization produces winners and losers; it is true that liberalization is welcomed by some parts of the population but opposed by others; it is true that the share of far-right voters is disproportionately high in lower strata. Thus, there is good reason to heed the warning that opposition to the far right should be careful not to be self-righteous.

To date, however, none of the proponents of the "new cleavage" approach have been able to present convincing evidence that there actually is a globalization-induced cleavage dividing two groups that could reasonably be termed "cosmopolitans" and "communitarians." If we look at demographics, it is very hard to pinpoint which groups exactly are winners and losers of globalization. The multi-dimensional process of globalization affects many groups in different, contradictory ways at the same time (as producers/employees, as consumers, as individuals, as members of a group/class, etc.). If we look at voter preferences or political

party positions, it is simply not the case that those who favor open borders for goods and capital also favor open borders for migrants—quite the opposite (Biskamp, 2020b, 2020a).

If we want to explain today's political dynamics, the now classic two-dimensional conception, with one sociocultural and one socioeconomic axis, still offers better explanations than a new cleavage could—and support for the far right is best explained by the sociocultural axis, especially by nativism. If anything, there is good reason to add a third dimension (Kitschelt, 2012; Lux et al., 2022) rather than reduce it to one new cleavage.[3] There seems to be little sociological need to create a narrative of a struggle between self-righteous cosmopolitans and left-behind communitarians—particularly if this narrative is ridden with tired clichés of self-righteous liberals and left-behind good folks that are quite similar to the clichés produced by far-right ideology.

These caveats notwithstanding, the warnings of both approaches should be heeded. When discussing cultural and political polarization and the rise of the far right, one should never forget the warnings of the first approach: far-right ideology is racist, anti-Semitic, heterosexist, and authoritarian. It attacks the weakest members of society and encourages oppression, violence, and even murder. Therefore, there are good normative reasons for democrats to take a strong—and polarizing!—normative stand against it.

Despite all the problems of the second approach, its warnings should be heeded as well. A simple and self-righteous opposition between a good, liberal, open-minded, and progressive culture, on the one hand, and a bad, racist, close-minded, and regressive culture, on the other hand, is neither helpful nor justified. Those who take a stand against the far right should be very careful not to be hypocritical or arrogant. They should pay attention to legitimate social and economic grievances—including, but not limited to, the grievances of those who support far-right parties and politicians. But in doing so, they should never rationalize far-right ideology nor—even worse—privilege the grievances of far-right supporters over the grievances of others. Supporting the far right should *not* become a pathway to receiving disproportionate empathy.

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[1] This text is an abridged version of an earlier publication.

[2] However, it must be noted that the same was true of historical Nazism: Not all of its voters were fully convinced by national socialist ideology. But the consequences are still the same.

[3] Kitschelt distinguishes three dimensions: "group," referring to questions of polity membership in general and questions of migration in particular; "grid," referring to the libertarian-authoritarian divide; and "greed," referring to questions of redistribution. Lux et al. identify four dimensions: "up-down," referring to economic distribution; "in-out," referring to migration; "we-them," referring to diversity; and "today-tomorrow," referring to generational justice.