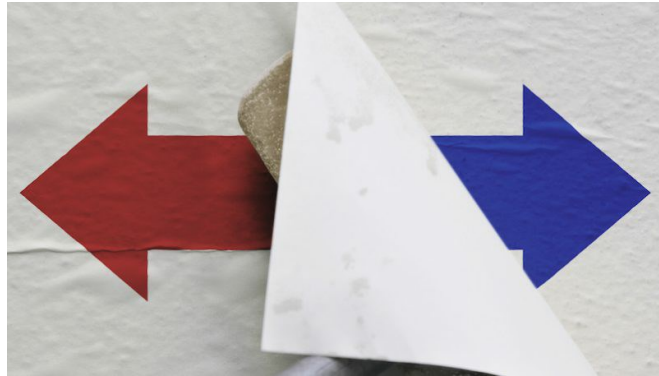


Horseshoe Theory and Covid-19

Hüseyin Pusat Kildiş

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It has been approximately six months since the coronavirus pandemic spread to the world. In Europe, the pandemic has created a new wave of nationalism which the French President Emmanuel Macron named "virus nationalism" (Rettman 2020). Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has used the coronavirus to increase his power (Zerofsky 2020). Traub (2020) points out that the increasing importance of the state due to the pandemic and stresses caused by this situation will continue even after the coronavirus. Perhaps the most interesting effect of the pandemic on politics can be seen on the far-right and far-left. In general, these are thought to occupy different parts of the political spectrum, yet there are similarities in the policies of these two views including the period of Covid-19. The horseshoe theory indicates that the far-right and far-left policies indeed share a number of beliefs. According to this theory, the political spectrum looks like a horseshoe rather than a straight line. The farthest points are the far-left and far-right, and they are bending toward each other. The shape of horseshoe represents common features of two previously distinctive and opposed views (Benyamin 2020).

The theory is attributed to the philosopher Jean-Pierre Faye. Faye used "horseshoe" as a metaphor to describe the relationship between the Nazis and the Communists in 1932 (Mayer 2011: 101). Nowadays, this theory is used to explain the similarities between the far-right and far-left especially with regard to right-wing populism and left-wing populism. The theory has also received substantial criticism from scholars such as Choat (2017), Berlatsky (2018), Paul, Hanel, Zarzeczna and Haddock (2019). Nevertheless, there are obvious common features among left and right versions of populism which compel us to reevaluate the theory.

Although this study focuses on the common behaviors of the far-right and far-left during the pandemic, the horseshoe theory does not describe a new situation. For instance, conspiracy theories have been the common point of the far-right and far-left for quite some time now. As can be seen in Greece and Spain, far-left politics use conspiracy theories to criticize social elites while far-right politics in Turkey and France also mobilize resentment against social elites, along with refugees and foreign powers (Grigoriadis 2020; Nougayrède 2015). This is not a coincidence. The YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project conducted a survey in 19 countries, showing that populists are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories that are contradicted by science or factual evidence. These theories include vaccinations, global warming and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. For instance, according to the survey, 'populist views were almost twice as likely to believe vaccines had harmful effects that were being hidden from the public.' (Lewis, Boseley & Duncan 2019; Smith 2019). This makes conspiracy theories especially important during the Covid-19 global health crisis.

Another feature seen in both groups is that they see themselves as victims. In other words, they portray themselves as aggrieved parties. While far-right parties blame migrants and refugees for economic and social problems, far-left parties hold the system responsible for the problems and underline the inequality between majority and minority populations. Furthermore, not all but some voters of extreme parties are known for their violence. In general, lone-wolf attacks are associated with the far-right while some violent groups such as the Antifa movement are identified with the far-left (Bertzen & Sandberg 2014: 760). The last common feature is maybe the most interesting one: boredom. A significant number of extremist voters are young people who seek a sense of purpose, challenge and excitement (Benyamin 2020; Tilburg & Igou 2016).

A study conducted in the United States concludes that anti-vaccination is more widespread and tolerated in liberal cities and conservative rural communities in the country compared to more central ones (Conrow 2018; Olive et al. 2018). Another study shows that vaccine hesitancy is stronger in Western Europe where populist parties, both left and right, receive more votes (Kennedy 2017). These common characteristics of the far-right and far-left politics are clearly reflected during the pandemic. As already mentioned, anti-vaccination as a conspiracy theory is a common feature of right-wing and left-wing populism (Michailidou & Kennedy 2017). This may cause the pandemic to last longer. Moreover, the extreme right in America is suspicious about the pandemic. In fact, President Donald Trump once called the coronavirus as Democrats' "new

hoax” (Egan 2020; Christou 2020). In short, both political views try to “silence” science by using conspiracy theories (Lassa & Booth 2020). As mentioned earlier, considering the tendency of the people who vote for the extreme parties to conspiracy theories this situation is hardly surprising.

Doubting mainstream science can be seen in the far-right and far-left but cannot be explained only by conspiracy theories. The relationship between alternative and social media sources such as YouTube and extreme-right/left voters is also a key concept to understand how fears are expressed and amplified about mainstream science. A *Wall Street Journal* investigation of whether YouTube supported extremism concluded that ‘YouTube often fed far-right or far-left videos to users who watched relatively mainstream news sources.’ Tufekci (2018) claims that ‘YouTube may be one of the most powerful radicalizing instruments of the 21st century.’ For example, if someone searches on YouTube to information regarding vaccination and other cures, this person probably will come across videos of conspiracy theories about anti-vaccination (Fisher & Bennhold 2018).

A victim complex can be traced in the argumentation of both the far-right and far-left under the pretext of the entry and spread of infectious diseases, including COVID-19. For example, far-right parties in Europe accuse migrants and refugees of carrying the disease. This is especially true for countries in the Mediterranean region, such as Italy and Greece (Andreou 2020). As expected, far-left politicians in the United States blame the health care system for the spread of the virus and want “reparations” for minority groups because of “economic inequality”, which makes them more vulnerable to infection and death (Bowden 2020; Gaffney 2020).

Covid-19 also has an impact on extremist groups in terms of violence and protest. In the United States, demonstrations including far-right groups have been against the government-imposed lockdowns. Some of these groups ‘use lockdown resistance as a platform for extreme rightwing causes’ (Wilson 2020; America’s Far-right... 2020). In France, violent demonstrations involving extreme left groups are organized to support the rights of healthcare workers (Coronavirus: Violence... 2020).

One might expect that the pandemic should prevent far-right and far-left groups from protesting on the streets. This is not the case. Although it is expected that the protests that started with the death of George Floyd will accelerate the spread of the virus, this does not stop the protesters (Meyer 2020). It is clear that not all protesters or those who oppose protesters are made up of the far-right or far-left groups, but some of the groups in the protests can be classified either far-left or far-right such as Boogalo Bois, Antifa and Proud Boys (Sardarizadeh & Wendling 2020). Moreover, there are claims that the far-left and far-right protesters have hijacked the protests for their own interests, and they are behind the destruction and violence that sometimes occurs. Members of the far-right groups sometimes appear heavily armed against the protesters (MacFarquhar 2020). Trump’s proposal to recognize the Antifa movement as a terrorist organization is also important to understand the significance of political extremism amongst the protesters (Wilson 2020).

It is also true that the far-right and far-left sometimes use similar tactics to attract more voters. This situation has not changed during the pandemic. The far-left and far-right are located at opposing ends of the political spectrum, yet both groups doubt mainstream science, instead having a predisposition to conspiracy theories and using the pandemic for their own aims such as reaching more people and creating chaos. Although these similarities do not prove the validity of the horseshoe theory, it certainly makes the theory worth considering further.

Further Reading on E-International Relations

- Can Populism Survive COVID-19?
- Battling Fake News and (In)Security during COVID-19
- Covid Nationalism
- Opinion – COVID-19 and the Coming Crisis in America
- COVID-19: Conspiracy Theories and Lacklustre Global Responses
- Opinion – Impacts and Restrictions to Human Rights During COVID-19

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

Hüseyin Pusat Kildiş is a PhD student at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Ankara, Turkey. His research interests are far-right politics and migration with an emphasis on Syria. Twitter @hpusat94

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A Cultural Sociology of Populism

Marcus Morgan¹ 

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Abstract

This article interrogates dominant definitions of “populism” found in the social sciences, focusing on the term’s conceptual utility in understanding recent changes in Western politics. Though populism is typically treated as a deviant form of politics, this article finds that it in fact holds remarkable continuities with conventional politics, and indeed culture more generally. It argues that these more general cultural processes can be illuminated by cultural sociology, just as the more specific but still routine political processes can be illuminated by Civil Sphere Theory (CST). The article goes on to argue that when populism is understood as a formal mode of public signification, rather than a substantive ideology, the substance it signifies becomes crucial to determining its civility. It suggests that while populism can certainly have anti-civil effects, there is nothing inherent in it that precludes it from also acting to promote civil repair.

Keywords Populism · Cultural sociology · Civil Sphere Theory · Political sociology · Left populism · Post-democracy

Populism: Politics as Usual

One way of characterizing “culture” is as an ever-evolving repository of efforts towards meaning-making. Meaning-making reduces complexity so that communication—and if successful, understanding—can take place. Politics likewise aims towards reducing complexity so as to legitimate efforts to shift, or maintain, power relations. This article will suggest that what has been called “populism” may exaggerate these processes but does not break from them. The purpose is not to reduce

✉ Marcus Morgan
marcus.morgan@bristol.ac.uk

¹ University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

politics to culture, but to show how culture is necessarily “embedded” (to borrow a term from science and technology studies) in culture, and how political action is obliged to conducted itself *through* culture. Civil Sphere Theory teaches us how this reduction of complexity typically takes place through organizing meaning around a binary structure of motives, relationships, and institutions (Alexander 2006: pp. 53–67).¹ This article will argue that populism is unique only in its accentuation of these binaries, its drawing of an explicit frontier between a construction of the “people”—in progressive populism one that is inclusively defined, in regressive populism, exclusively so (Judis 2016)—and an “elite” (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018; Mouffe and Errejón 2016), its development of polarization, its provocation to an audience to decide on which side of the boundary it chooses to stand, and its invitation towards this audience to actively participate in the unfolding political drama, typically through direct, rather than representative, democratic mechanisms.

While the article agrees that useful definitions exclude as much as possible to increase their conceptual grasp, it argues that the difficulty of coming up with a tight, restrictive definition of “populism” is that it is not as tight, restrictive, or discrete a phenomenon as most academic or journalistic accounts present it as being. Rather, populism is best understood as an intensification of routine political dynamics, which are themselves conducted through more generalized cultural mechanisms that allow social signification to take place, group identities to be forged in relation to those they oppose, and collective agency to be mobilized in the process. Populism can therefore be understood within CST, which can itself be understood as following the structures and dynamics of meaning-making illuminated by cultural sociology. From this perspective, different examples of political behaviour come to be seen as more or less populist by degree, rather than populist or not by categorization.

The paper reviews five key features shared across dominant definitions: populism’s binary logic, its ideological nature, its moralism, its anti-rationalism, and its anti-pluralism. It both critiques each feature’s definitional centrality and stresses each feature’s continuities with “conventional” politics, demonstrating how populism functions in ways that CST, and cultural sociology, would expect it to. The paper concludes that populism is compatible with both progressive and regressive political programs, and indeed suggests that if certain criteria are met, there is nothing precluding it from playing a similar role to the social movements described in part III of *The Civil Sphere* (Alexander

¹ Civil Sphere Theory—most comprehensively outlined in Alexander (2006)—provides a novel account of civil society that defines itself in distinction on the one hand, to earlier classical liberal understandings found in thinkers such as Locke and Tocqueville, and on the other hand, to more radical conceptions, associated with the zone in which Gramsci’s “war of position” unfolds. It is neo-Durkheimian in its elaboration of the sacred-profane distinction found in *The Elementary Forms*, seeing similar coding processes as constituting much of the activity that occurs in civil society, the goal of which is understood to ultimately be the moral regulation of society. Since the civil sphere provides the moral regulation of society, this new conception of civil society therefore simultaneously allows for the “autonomy of culture” by showing how culture acts upon other non-cultural spheres of social life. Whilst civil sphere theory focusses on the appeal to ideal notions of solidarity and justice, it acknowledges that such appeals can in reality turn out to be highly contradictory, resulting in the barring of certain groups from civil solidarity through coding them in anti-civil terms that justify their exclusion. Nevertheless, there is an emphasis that appeal to these same cultural codes—which taken as a whole, form the “discourse of civil society” (Alexander and Smith 1993)—can and are used as routes back into civil inclusion. Civil Sphere Theory has been adopted in this article on the basis that its focus on binary coding illuminates many of the operations of populist politics, providing a way of showing how populism, far from being an aberration of democratic processes, is in many ways a predictable feature of them.

2006) in translating restricted political grievances into more universal civil issues, in the process initiating civil repair. Overall, the paper argues against the independence not only of populism but also of politics more generally, from culture. It suggests that beyond violence and coercion, though frequently even within these, power, and the struggles that take place over it, must be seen as operating always and everywhere through culture.

Populism as a Binary

Attempts to define populism have a long, fraught, and inconclusive history (e.g. Berlin et al. 1968; Ionescu and Gellner 1969). So much so, many sociologists have deemed it wisest to set the ill-defined term aside (Jansen 2011). Events over the past few years have, however, predictably propelled the concept back into academic and public prominence. Though the phenomenon is arguably ancient, the term itself was first used to describe two political movements that appeared at the end of the nineteenth century: in Tsarist Russia, a largely unsuccessful effort at mobilizing peasants against feudal exploitation, and in the USA, the movement of mainly farmworkers who rose up to challenge, via the People's Party, what they conceived of as an elite of bankers, railway owners, and the two-party system of government. In a similar sequence of events to that witnessed with the term more recently, it was first used as a pejorative in the US context, but then quickly re-appropriated by those it was intended to deride. Although some prominent observers argue that the movement around the American People's Party fails the test of a genuine populism (Müller 2016: p. 88), there is fairly broad consensus that one feature it illustrates—a politics built around a dualistic opposition between an “elite” and some conception of a “people”, with whom legitimate democratic power belongs—is the basis on which a minimal definition might be agreed upon (e.g. Kreisi 2014; Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018).

However, while the basic notion that “the binary structure of populist claims is largely invariant” (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016: p. 7) may apply to left-wing populisms, it is not so clear that it holds for right-wing variants. Judis describes how while left-wing populism conforms to dominant definitions in its “dyadic” structure, consisting of “a vertical politics of the bottom and middle arrayed against the top”, right-wing populism, by contrast, is “triadic”, in that such “populists champion the people against an elite that they accuse of coddling a third group” (Judis 2016: p. 15).² This third group is typically a minority, often an immigrant group or some other relatively powerless scapegoat, revealing an exclusivist—i.e. non-universalizing and therefore non-civil—deployment of the “people” in such types of populism.

Definitions based upon the binary criterion also assume there is such a thing as a large-scale politics attempting to win the electoral consent of a polity that does not rely upon some construction of the “people”. This assumption is questionable. Democracy is, after all, supposed to be a system in which a people rule (*demos-kratos*), and even in

² Making the same point in a slightly different way, Brubaker (2017: p. 362) describes this in terms of a “vertical opposition between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’”, as distinct from a “horizontal opposition between ‘the people’ and outside groups and forces”.

non-democratic or “formally democratic” systems, lip service is usually paid to this idea to ensure legitimation (Habermas 1976: pp. 36–37). To operate effectively, such a system must therefore presumably decide who this “people” are. Laclau (2005, 2006) has famously argued that constructing a people constitutes the essence of what politics is. Others have suggested that state-formation itself was only possible through determining a “people” (Skinner 2009: p. 328; Peel 2018). In republics, “the people” is typically so central to grounding democracy that it becomes the cornerstone of constitutions, as in “we, the people”. In exclusionary right-wing manifestations, “naming the people” is also used, but in this instance, as a means of excluding the “third group” that Judis identifies, justifying the conviction that this group, which is not part of the essentialized “people”, is therefore undeserving of political representation. In technocracies, the “people” are also implicitly constructed, but in this iteration, often as in need of the enlightened guidance of experts, on the assumption that the people are unqualified to govern themselves.

Liberal politics is hardly immune, although it typically conceives itself as being so. This can be illustrated by the recent calls for a “People’s Vote” on Brexit in the UK. The use of the term “people” here, as in the slogan of the largest march—“Put it to the People”—and in the frequent reference to the number of people on street demonstrations, is unmistakably populist. However, it is arguably a populism against populism; a populism that emerged when a mechanism of direct democracy—a people’s referendum on leaving the EU—failed to go the way that liberal anti-populists, who generally defend a more representative notion of democracy, had proposed, a matter that was in part blamed on the populist mould in which organized Euroscepticism took shape. More direct democracy was the liberal answer to direct democracy gone awry; we need to listen more to the people—another referendum is required to establish what the people *really* think.³

Whether or not there is a paradoxical tension between democracy and populism, as some theorists claim (Urbinati 2017), there is perhaps a simple cultural reason why it is so hard to imagine a politics that does not construct a people. This is that political life, like cultural life more generally, tends to organize itself around symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002) that function on the basis of either/or distinctions, which, when it comes to issues of large-scale group identity, translate into distinguishing between an “us” and a “them”. In democratic systems (or as mentioned above, often in non-democratic ones too) since the “people” is the chief democratic category, who is, and who is not, part of the people becomes paramount. Awareness of the social organization of the cosmos around binaries, the corresponding poles of which can be aligned with one another through analogy, synonym, metaphor, and allusion, has been a mainstay of cultural analysis in the social sciences (de Saussure 1893[1915]; Levi-Strauss 1967: pp. 29–54; Barthes 1977; Durkheim 1995: pp. 33–39), and one that has been productively developed in *The Civil Sphere* (Alexander 2006: pp.

³ In this example, we witness a divide between liberal politics in theory and liberal politics in practice. In theory, rather than deriving its legitimacy from a ‘people’, as populism is said to do, liberalism claims to root its legitimacy in a “population” whose preferences are expressed through voting or polling, and in neoliberal accounts, also through consumption, understood as a proxy for demand. Foucault (2007) adds a critical note to this story, by associating the biopolitical management of “populations” with the emergence of liberal governmentality. In practice, liberalism not only defends itself through its occasional suspension, as Schmitt pointed out, but when politically necessary, also engages in non-liberal appeals to a morally defined “people”, in contrast to a “population”, as this example illustrates.

53–67).⁴ One need not advocate a Schmittian (2007[1932]) account of radical friend-enemy divisions to acknowledge that the discourse of civil society (Alexander and Smith 1993) cleaves the world into who or what “is” and who or what “is not”.⁵ These binaries are of course a simplification of the way things really are but this does not make them any less present within, or functional for, political or other group identity processes.

Populism as an Ideology

There has long been a social scientific perspective that considers populism to be an ideology (e.g. MacRae 1969), providing an overarching normative worldview. Recent mainstream definitions, however, have watered down this position by tending to agree with Mudde’s (2004) view of it being only a “thin-centred” ideology, which contrasts to “thick-centred” ideologies (such as liberalism, socialism, or fascism) in that it has “a restricted morphology, which necessarily appears attached to—and sometimes even assimilated into—other ideologies” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: p. 6; see also Albertazzi and McDonnel 2007; Stanley 2008; Ruzza and Fella 2009).

This conception can serve a functional role for those who see themselves as occupying an anti-populist centre-ground in allowing them to critique both an insurgent left and an insurgent right simultaneously, encouraging a horseshoe theory of politics in which the further one travels in either direction on the political spectrum, the more the two extremes begin to resemble one another. As well as damning the left by association, an effect of this has been allowing movements on the far-right to cloak themselves in a more respectable vocabulary than might otherwise have been attached to them, since despite “its ambiguous connotations, the word populism has always been more acceptable than labels like racist or extreme right” (Jäger 2018). However, not only does this lend such tendencies a legitimacy they typically do not deserve but also in defining it as an ideology, populism is asked to carry a weight it cannot bear, resulting in formulations—analyzing the substance of Fidesz’s politics alongside Syriza’s; Trump’s alongside Corbyn’s (e.g. Wolf 2017)—that obscure far more than they illuminate. Surely the most salient ideological feature of a politician like Marine le Pen is her nativism and authoritarianism, not her populism, just as the most significant attribute of a

⁴ Not all traditions of cultural analysis of course subscribe to this notion that our cultural metalanguages are organized around binaries, although many implicitly do. Post-structuralist accounts claimed to reveal the “instability” of binary oppositions, especially as they had been marshalled in philosophy (e.g. Derrida 1981: pp. 41–42), other critiques focus on the eurocentrism of the notion (e.g. Herdin 2012), whilst others prefer to map multidimensional “fields” of cultural distinction (e.g. Bourdieu 1984). Whilst here is not the place to elaborate an adequate defence of the use of binaries in cultural analysis, it is worth noting a few observations beyond the cheap point that many such critiques—Derrida’s included—are themselves delivered and made sense of through media that rely upon tacit opposition to generate their meanings. First, positing the binary structure of cultural forms is not of course the same as making an ontological claim about the world itself being thus organized, or even, for that matter, our cognitions or feelings. It is instead making a claim about the publicly available shared symbols through which sense is made. Second, arguments for binary understandings of culture originally arrived in the social sciences through anthropological fieldwork in non-Western societies, albeit typically conducted by Western anthropologists. Third, “fields”, as they are conventionally mapped through techniques such as multiple correspondence analysis, rely upon the assumption of binary poles, even if complexity is introduced through binding one opposition orthogonally to another. Such practices do not sit uneasily alongside the proposition of the binary organization of meaning; they simply track the multiplicity and empirical intertwinement of those oppositions.

⁵ This explains why civil incorporation, for instance, is not a process that comes about spontaneously, but is hard won through symbolically oriented political struggle (Alexander 2006: pp. 425–457).

politician like Sanders is his democratic socialism. If populism is just a byword for being against the status quo, then it functions to permit groups to frame themselves as defenders of anti-populism rather than defenders of the status quo. Conceiving populism as an ideology forfeits its analytic utility by failing to mark out anything useful.

These kind of difficulties have led some to jettison the notion of populism as ideology—be it thin- or thick-centred—entirely, and argue that it is not an “actor-level” phenomenon, but a “speech-level” one, revealing how “politicians often rely on populist language selectively, presenting the same political claims in either populist or non-populist terms depending on the audience and broader social context” (Bonikowski 2016: p. 13). Whether this involves arguing that populism is more akin to a “discourse” (Aslanidis 2016), a “rhetorical strategy” (Bonikowski 2016), a “style” (Ekström et al. 2018), a “stylistic repertoire” (Brubaker 2017), or a “frame” (Aslanidis 2018), this alternative perspective recognizes that populism refers more to the form through which politics is done, than to any specific ideological content. Seeing populism in this way ties it to appearance; impression; aesthetics; and, importantly, performance (Moffitt 2016). Adopting this alternative understanding is therefore attractive to a cultural sociological approach, for it allows populism to be set free from debates over substantial content, and yoked instead to the symbolic struggles of civil spheres, and the meta-discourse of civil society through which they occur.

When we understand populism in this performance-based way, we again detect it in places where those who use the term as simply a shorthand for politics they disagree with might not expect to find it. Tony Blair, for instance, whose Institute claims to work to “push back” against the “threat from a rising tide of populism”⁶ relied extensively on populist signification while leader of the Labour Party, to the extent that one initially enthusiastic (though quickly critical) cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, came to recognize him as epitomizing populism (1998: p. 13). The following flourishes from Blair’s 1999 Conference Speech might be given as typical examples:

The future is people. ... The national creative genius of the British people. But wasted. The country run for far too long on the talents of the few, when the genius of the many lies uncared for, and ignored The old elites, establishments that have run our professions and our country too long the elite have held us back for too long ... New Labour, confident at having modernised itself, now the new progressive force in British politics ... can modernise the nation, sweep away those forces of conservatism to set the people free. (Blair 1999)

The eminently populist slogan “For the Many, Not the Few,” now associated with Corbyn’s “populist rebranding” of the Labour Party (Stewart and Elgot 2016) also found its initial airing during Blair’s controversial redrafting of Clause IV (the clause in the Labour Party Constitution that prior to Blair’s amendments referred explicitly to the socialistic aim of securing “common ownership of the means of production”).⁷

Obama likewise deployed populist language in his various campaigns, and on occasion explicitly identified himself with the term (Obama 2016). The “We” in the slogan “Yes We

⁶ See Tony Blair Institute for Social Change, “Our Mission: Renewing the Centre”, at <https://institute.global/renewing-centre>.

⁷ Corbyn has explicitly connected the theme in various public rallies to the final line of Shelley’s famous poem on passive resistance during the Peterloo Massacre, *The Masque of Anarchy*: “Rise like Lions after slumber, In unvanquishable number—Shake your chains to earth like dew, Which in sleep had fallen on you—Ye are many—they are few.”

Can”, for instance, evoked a constructively ambiguous “people”. Originally, a slogan of Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers (“Sí, se puede”), the phrase was most famously used by Obama in the rousing 2008 speech he delivered in Chicago’s Grant Park upon winning the presidency. After telling the assembled crowd that this is “your victory”, he concluded his rhetorical tour de force by making the connection explicit: “[W]here we are met with cynicism and doubts and those who tell us that we can’t, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: *Yes, we can*”. Eight years later, the phrase provided the name for the archetypal left populist party that grew out of the indignados movement in Spain, *Podemos*.

Mudde and Kaltwasser at moments recognize such continuities between the public performances of populist and (apparently) non-populist leaders, but since their understanding of populism is rooted in a substantial conception of ideology, they dismiss them as simply attempts by non-populists “to set themselves apart from other mainstream politicians and (try to) look authentic” (2017: p. 76). From a cultural sociological perspective, in which politics in mass societies *is* performance (Alexander 2010, 2011; Mast 2012), this distinction makes little sense. Viewing populism as a mode of public signification rather than a thin-centred ideology not only reveals its continuity with other forms of politics but also allows us to see populism as a form of cultural work, a way of narrating “brute facts” and making them meaningful. Its efficacy (or lack thereof) can then be explained through its success in mobilizing the binaries of the civil sphere, attempting to align its own motivations, relationships, and institutions to the positive poles of civil codes and polluting those of its adversaries.

Populism as Moral

A third common theme in recent influential definitions has been to emphasize morality as existing at the core of populism. Mudde and Kaltwasser claim that “the key distinction in populism is moral” (2017: p. 35), Bonikowski (2016) argues that “populism is based on a rudimentary moral logic”, and Müller suggests that the term should only be used to identify “a particular moralistic imagination of politics” in which the “people” are conceived as morally untainted, whereas the “elites” are understood as morally corrupt (2016: p. 20). In this manner, populism’s tendency to divide the world into “good” and “evil” is deemed to be both reductive, in that it eschews nuance in favour of Manichaeism, and dangerous, in that it excites collective anxieties and resentments rather than providing discursive space for dispassionate assessments of competing courses of action, meaning that “the likelihood of productive dialogue and compromise is reduced” (Bonikowski 2016: p. 22).

From a cultural sociological perspective, however, using morality as populism’s *differentia specifica* is again unsatisfactory. This is because not only are moral ideas themselves seen to be always and everywhere culturally formed (Durkheim 1973; Geertz 1968; Douglas 1983; Morgan 2014) but also are morals recognized as animating almost all other instances of social classification (Durkheim and Mauss 2009[1903]: pp. 48–52). Processes of moral idealization are, as Stavrakakis and Jäger (2018: p. 13) point out, “present in nearly all identifications, in all passionate attachments, from love to religion and from cultural taste (distinction) to football”; therefore, they ask, “How could power relations be exempt? Especially since identity and difference, love and hate, play such a significant role in all political identification?” While this point is occasionally acknowledged (e.g. Müller 2016: p. 38), its consequences fail to be.

Political philosophy, including most of the classical cannon—Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Mill, etc.—has long been characterized by an extension of moral philosophy into the public sphere, since both ultimately deal with normative matters of “what should be” rather than “what is”. There is no need to agree with Crick’s interest-based account of politics (Alexander 2006: p. 111) to accept his contention that “conflicts, when personal, create the activity we call ‘ethics’ ... and such conflicts, when public, create political activity” (Crick 1962: p. 20).

This continuity between individual, social, and political life, of which populism is a part, can be made sense of through the resources offered by a social science that places symbolism at its centre. Once contemporary societies are recognized as alive with the sacred (Durkheim 1995[1912]: pp. 418–448; Lynch 2012), processes of public symbolization can no longer be presented as supplying flat cognitive maps of the world—a mere semiotic metaphysics—but must instead be seen as “suffused with an aura of deep moral seriousness” (Geertz 1957: p. 421). Populism’s attempt to associate the sacred with a construction of “the people”, in which democratic legitimacy rests, and the profane with a construction of “the elite”, of course reduces the complexity of the actual world, but the “nuance and ambiguity of empirical actions does not often make an appearance in the public language of civil society” (Alexander 2010: pp. 10–11). Civil society’s dichotomies not only organize meaning made elsewhere but also through their relative autonomy as culture structures in fact partially generate this meaning (Alexander and Smith 1993). The struggles that take place around identifying good and evil and the arraying of events, issues, and figures on either side of this binary, constitutes much of what goes on in the civil sphere, and just as populism is said to connect an idealization of the “people” to a vilification of the “elite”, so *The Civil Sphere* (Alexander 2006: pp. 193–209) shows how the discourse of liberty and the production of civic virtue is internally connected to the discourse of repression and the production of civic vice. Since this is an empirical and not a normative claim, it is also resistant to the charge that it falls victim to the fallacy of the excluded middle: the question of whether or not binary moral distinctions are nuanced or correct is irrelevant to the recognition that they hold social force.

Indeed, it is clear that the symbolic work involved in the very attribution of “populism” to certain forms of politics, and not to others, is typically itself accompanied by a heavy dose of moralism (Taguieff 1995), to the extent that we may wish to ask “whether or not having become an accusation, it can remain an analytic concept” (Geertz 1973: p. 194). There is more than a little truth in Francis Fukuyama’s (2016) claim that “populism is the label that political elites attach to policies supported by ordinary citizens that they don’t like”. Others have gone further, arguing that liberal anti-populism in fact hinges upon a substitution of broader political discourse for a narrower moral one. Mouffe (2002: p. 1), for instance, in an extension of Schmitt’s argument that liberalism rests upon an impossible attempt to evacuate the category of the “political”, has argued that such approaches mean that ethical deliberation is asked to fill the role of political struggle: “we are now urged to think not in terms of right and left, but of right and wrong”.

There are also good reasons morality in political affairs ought to be welcomed. First, the notion that collective moral resentments are automatically unacceptable in political life and that reaching a compromise that is pre-written into institutions that already exist is desirable, rules out many of the most valuable political advances—including those discussed at length at the end of *The Civil Sphere* Alexander (2006)—as beyond the pale. It threatens to imply the notion that “politics as usual” should form the horizon of politics in general. In apartheid South Africa, rational dialogue with an unjust system was impotent at tackling the predicament that Blacks faced. Legitimation of collective moral grievances with domestic and international audiences,

the association of the state with evil, and the association of the freedom struggle with good was far more crucial to winning civil incorporation than processes of public deliberation (Morgan 2018, 2020).

Second, politics without a moral element risks transmuting into managerialism, and it is in fact the insistence upon this failed conception of what politics involves—what Michael Sandel (2018) calls “technocratic liberalism”—that helps in part explain the collapse of so many liberal democratic parties in recent years at the expense of populism. Sandel argues that after years of a predominantly neoliberal form of globalization—in which moral and cultural injustices, tied to economic inequalities, have been typically experienced by political subjects as a denial of social esteem—it is important that a clear and progressive moral voice returns to political life. Indeed, he sees such a return as doubly necessary, in that strident moral voices already exist in right-authoritarian populist movements, the seductions of which can only be countered by an equally robust justification of the moral imperative of progressive politics. Denying this imperative in the name of a fictitious liberal neutrality not only, by default, cedes moral questions to the sphere of private deliberation but also feeds the very forces it claims to oppose.

Once again, a feature purported to be unique to populism turns out to in fact be a characteristic of politics more broadly conceived, revealing more universal features of the civil sphere, and in fact cultural life more generally. Not only is morality inadequate as a distinguishing feature of populism but its conscious re-introduction back into politics might also be treated as a welcome development.

Populism as Irrational

Classical social theory was preoccupied with the shift from traditional to modern societies, accompanied by a corresponding shift from myth to reason as the predominant organizational principle of social life. Whether through a movement away from the “theological” through the “metaphysical” towards the “positive” stage, or through processes of “disenchantment” or “bureaucratization”, or even “the rational development of productive forces”, the classical progressivist assumption was that modernity was defined by a process that—albeit typically with internal contradictions—unleashed and expressed rationality. Although Durkheim (1984[1912]) was not himself immune to this assumption, as can be seen especially in his early doctoral dissertation on the shifts in the division of labour in society, he nevertheless came to recognize, and especially so in his late work, that “there is something eternal in religion”, and that “common sentiments” conveyed through symbols, and sustained through rituals, infused modern life far more profoundly than the modernization stories had allowed for (Durkheim 1995[1912]: p. 429).

As the previous section argued, categorical symbolization is rarely a neutral process, and the terms “rational” and “irrational” typically carry moral evaluations. Establishing the irrationality of those with whom one disagrees has proven a time-honoured means of pollution. From Arnold’s (1993[1869]: p. 79) description of the “anarchy” of the “raw and unkindled masses” or Le Bon’s (2006[1896]: p. 10) account of the crowd as characterized by “impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, absence of judgement and critical spirit, and exaggeration of the sentiments”, which he noted were “almost always observed in beings belonging to inferior forms of evolution—in women, savages, and children”, the charge of irrationality has long functioned as a powerful means of exclusion (Foucault 1988).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, populism is often described as an irrational tempest in the calm waters of rational politics (Goodhart 2017: p. 57). In the UK, the Brexit vote was widely treated as an accidental outburst of xenophobic irrationalism, just as Corbyn's initial support was initially explained away as "summer madness" (Toynbee 2015), and later diagnosed as "Corbynmania". As Müller (2016: p. 1) notes, typically "populists are 'angry'; their voters are 'frustrated' or suffer from 'resentment'". While Müller (2016: p. 101) himself avoids such associations, other influential accounts oppose the populist idea of a "general will" to the more "rational process" of political deliberation "constructed via the public sphere" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: p. 18), characterize populists as specializing "in action" but "rarely attempting deep thought" (Canovan 1999: p. 15), or else locate the dangers of populism in its tendency "to encourage politics based on fear and resentment rather than informed policy debate" (Bonikowski 2016: p. 22; Rico et al. 2017). Even cultural sociological accounts have located populist motivation in the "allure" of the "irrational" (Wagner-Pacifici and Tavory 2017: p. 319), though others have correctly recognized that we need not agree with the reasons behind populism to acknowledge that such reasons exist (Gorski 2017: p. 348).

Relying as it does upon the civil structure that sacralizes reason and profanes its opposites (Alexander 2006: p. 57), othering populists as irrational helps simultaneously reassure anti-populists of their own reasonability. It also helps avoid uncomfortable questions concerning the links between anti-populist politics and the recent rise of passionate populism they so fear. The discourse of "populism", when used in this undeniably moral way, likely entails the unintended consequence of encouraging the very phenomenon it condemns, since populist sentiments rely upon an image of a distant elite, always ready to counter reports of lived experience with carefully reasoned arguments. We therefore see a "working of the binaries" (Alexander 2010: pp. 89–110) in the very identification of populism as irrational: because "liberal-democratic capitalism has imposed itself as the only rational solution to the problem of organising modern societies; its legitimacy could be put into question only by an 'unreasonable' element" (Mouffe 1999: p. 3).

The apparently less-excitabile politics to which populism is typically contrasted features in political theory in the contention that fundamental questions and antagonisms can be rationally answered and overcome by public reasoning. This approach is associated most famously with Kant, and later developed in different ways by Rawls and Habermas. It is also an approach that is critiqued in *The Civil Sphere* (Alexander 2006: pp. 13–17). Turner (2015) defends against this critique, contrasting a broken American political sphere in which "politics as performance have so far blocked the emergence of a rational policy of economic and financial reform", with a more rationalistic British one, in which the emotivism of Thatcher is presented as an aberration—"the only example of a recent British prime minister who walked the boundaries and talked the binaries" (Turner 2015: p. 69). Churchill, who we are told was "undoubtedly the twentieth-century hero of British political life" was apparently "not inclined to conduct domestic political elections on the basis of a moral binary" (Turner 2015: p. 70). Turner neglects to mention Churchill's record in domestic elections, never having won the national popular vote, and having been voted out of office as soon as the deeply polarized and emotionally charged atmosphere of World War II – which Turner (2015: 70) concedes ought to be seen "as a titanic struggle between the noble virtues of liberalism and the craven values of fascism" – concluded. Since not long after Turner's piece was published, and certainly since the EU referendum, it has become almost a cliché to suggest that British parliamentary and extra-parliamentary politics have become increasingly emotional. Commentaries on the rise of populism in the UK typically point out the deepening and sharpening of the binaries of

political life, the failure of “phlegmatic” and “lugubrious” characters, and the rise of charisma and emotion as core to political success. As Davies 2019: p. 15) puts it in a recent book on the phenomenon: “Democracies are being transformed by the power of feeling in ways that cannot be ignored or reversed”. Increasingly, social scientific studies have identified the impossibility of an emotionless politics, whatever one’s substantive political orientation (Loseke 1993; Marcus 2000; Weber 2012).

By drawing on Durkheim’s insights, one thing that CST offers in making sense of the debate over whether populism ought to be characterized as rational or emotional, is a way to transcend the opposition itself. It does this through a focus on symbolics, ritual, and performance. Sign systems are rationally ordered in structured ways that depend upon distinction, difference, and opposition to generate meaning. What society decides to make sacred, for instance, it does so by ensuring that it is “set apart” from the profane (Durkheim 1995[1912]: p. 44). In generating such meaning, these categories move beyond being merely analytic codes and begin to acquire moral and emotionally laden social significance. While others have convincingly demonstrated how emotion and reason are almost always mutually embedded within the “alchemies of the mind” (Firth 1958: pp. 150–183; Elster 1998; Goodwin et al. 2001), focusing upon symbolism, and the ritual processes that take place around it, has the added advantage of again revealing the continuities between apparently highly variable cultural practices. In this case, it allows us to see populism as consistent with other forms of politics, and indeed public culture more generally, since all are compelled to operate through the same symbolic channels.

The Civil Sphere (Alexander 2006) stands in opposition to two influential political models: interest-based and deliberative democratic. In place of these models, it offers an approach in which successful performance is capable of redrawing the boundaries of solidarity and moral cohesion. Performance trumps realism and ontology, since it is the performed appearance of sound judgement, fairness, integrity, or truth that matters, not the ontological presence or absence of such things.⁸ Politics, like culture more generally, works through persuasion, not rational accomplishment, enlightened revelation, or the realist resolution of some conjunctural balance of forces.⁹ While symbolization (the medium of performance) takes place within a rationally ordered (and therefore rationally accessible) set of binaries, these binaries do not remain mere cold logical distinctions. Moreover, the claims that are made for where particular events, relationships, or figures are to fit within this logical structure succeed or fail on the basis of their appeal to an audience’s feelings. This means that the same rules of performative success apply whether one’s cause is in fact worthy or not. Since political struggle is, at its heart “moral and emotional” (Alexander 2010: p. xii), this paper will later argue that suppressing these elements in an effort to achieve some pristine reasonability simply yields these potent motivational resources to whatever other political forces are prepared to use them.

⁸ This account of politics resonates with humanistic accounts of knowledge, in which “truth” is a compliment we ascribe to knowledge that seems to be “paying its way” or managing to convince a relevant community on the basis of that community’s standards of justification (James 1981[1907]; Rorty 1982: p. xxv; Morgan 2016).

⁹ This point has been forcefully made in an astute study of social movement success by Woody (2015), in which she argues that political victory depends upon “political acceptance”, which is distinct from “political agreement”. Whereas the latter involves acceptance of a movement’s policy goals, the former is simply an acceptance of the cultural relevance of a movement’s concerns to public discourse.

Populism as Anti-Pluralist

A final definitional criterion that dominant accounts of populism tend to reach consensus around is the notion that populism is a way of conducting politics that is by its nature “anti-pluralist” (Galston 2018). Although it speaks “the language of democracy”, populism, so we are told, is in fact “always *anti-pluralist*” and therefore offers a “degraded form of democracy” (Müller 2016: pp. 3, 6; see also Mounk 2018).¹⁰ This is apparently linked to its Rousseauian claim to represent the “will of the people”, but doing so in a non-institutionalized manner that treats the categories of the “elite” and the “people” as “homogeneous wholes” (Müller 2016: p. 6; see also pp. 7, 12, 18). This non-empirical “claim to exclusive representation” (Müller 2016: p. 6) is said to lead to a second danger with populism: an inability to recognize the legitimacy of its opponents (Bonikowski 2016: p. 22). This section will address these connected claims in turn, arguing that while they may provide an accurate account of certain varieties of populism, they by no means apply to all instances and, therefore, once again, fall short as definitional criteria.

Populists, we are told, consider “society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups” (Mudde 2004: p. 543; Müller 2016: pp. 6, 18). This is said to derive from their sharing an understanding of “the political” with Schmitt, who believed that “the existence of a homogeneous people is essential for the foundation of a democratic order”, and in listening to what Rousseau called the “general will” of this homogenous group, “those who do not belong to the demos ... consequently, are not treated as equals” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: p. 18). Populism is therefore said to be irredeemably anti-pluralist in its rejection of an image of “society as a heterogeneous collection of groups and individuals with often fundamentally different views and wishes” (Mudde 2004: pp. 543–544).

Such charges may apply to nativist populisms, but there are good reasons to assume that it is the nativism, not the populism, that produces them. While inspired by Carl Schmitt (Mouffe 1999), left populist theory departs from his thinking at various significant junctures. One such juncture is that neither the “elite” nor the “people” are considered homogenous wholes. Drawing on Gramsci, theorists of left populism have instead argued for the importance of articulating the fundamentally heterogeneous interests of segmented groups into a “people”. Gramsci (1971: p. 191) had argued that successful leaders and parties could articulate disconnected groups, transforming them “from turbulent chaos into an organically prepared political army”. If the “people” in left populism were conceived as a pre-existing homogenous unit, as the mainstream definitions suggest, such hegemonic articulation would clearly be unnecessary: articulation is required precisely because heterogeneity is acknowledged. Constructing salient shared distinctions by drawing a political frontier is very different to claiming homogeneity. The very power of the concept of “the people” to mobilize—which, if the arguments above are accepted, it must be acknowledged as a power it holds over liberal democracy as much as the radical democracy advocated by left populism—is its capacity to act as an “empty signifier” to be filled with whatever content political agents determine (Laclau

¹⁰ It should be noted that Mudde’s position, which draws upon Canovan’s earlier arguments (1999), is more nuanced, arguing that populism is in many ways more democratic (yet less liberal) than liberal democracy, which is characterized as “a complex compromise of popular democracy and liberal elitism, which is therefore only partly democratic” (Mudde 2004: p. 561). Alexander (2010: pp. 278–279) also touches on this point in his discussion of how the democratic resonances of the Preamble to the US Constitution’s reference to “We, the people” were tempered by the more liberal specifications of the Bill of Rights amendments.

1996). This is also, of course, what allows it to lend itself to both right- and left-wing invocations (Badiou et al. 2016).

Due to its moralistic nature, populism is also charged with being “typically based on a fundamental rejection of the political legitimacy of one’s opponent”, so that “the likelihood of productive dialogue and compromise is reduced” (Bonikowski 2016: p. 22).¹¹ While this charge no doubt applies to certain forms of what Stuart Hall (1979) called “authoritarian populism”, it again sits uneasily with theories of left populism, which have been at pains to stress that while politics will never be able to eradicate antagonism entirely, such conflicts can, and should, be transformed into “agonistic” relationships (Mouffe 2013). Whereas Schmitt (2007[1932]: p. 26) saw politics as in essence defined by an antagonistic, and ultimately lethal, struggle of friends against enemies, Mouffe (2013) both critiques the opposite rational-liberal view that a non-antagonistic consensus lies hidden, awaiting discovery through reasoned debate, but also argues that antagonism can be transformed into agonism through appropriate democratic institutions; the very institutions that mainstream accounts would have it that populists undermine. Whereas the Schmittian image is a war against enemies, the left populist image represents a struggle against adversaries in which the viewpoints of one’s opponents are taken seriously as authentic viewpoints. The adversary becomes “a legitimate enemy with whom there exists a common ground”, and while adversaries might “fight against each other”, they nevertheless—in stark contrast to what populism’s critics charge—“share common allegiance to the ethico-political principles of liberal-democracy” (Mouffe 1999: p. 4).

This transformation of enemies into adversaries, antagonism into agonism, opens up the possibility of a civil populist politics, in other words, a populism conducted within a broader shared civil solidarity, which makes reference to the same civil metalanguage as that of its opponents. It is presumably for this reason that Alexander quotes Mouffe’s work appreciatively in *The Civil Sphere*, in its insistence that “‘the novelty of democratic politics is not the overcoming of this us/them opposition.’ The challenge, rather, ‘is to establish this us/them discrimination in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy.’ ... which ‘consists in domesticating hostility’” (Alexander 2006: p. 124). What Mouffe describes as the “conflictual consensus that constitutes the basis of a pluralist democracy” (Mouffe 2018: pp. 91–92), Alexander would, I suspect, simply call the routine struggles that occur with reference to the shared “discourse of civil society”, in which neither the possibility of consensus nor progress is assumed, but the legitimacy of one’s opponent certainly is.

Interestingly, even within varieties of national populism (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018) that endanger but fail to break civil autonomy, these conditions can hold to the extent that “enemies” can be refashioned into “frenemies” (Alexander 2019: p. 6). What is threatening about such forms of populism, typified in figures like Trump, is less their delegitimizing of opposition and more their direct assault upon civil institutions (the judiciary, the media, the scientific establishment, etc.) which can ideally act to ensure the autonomous functioning of the civil sphere (Alexander 2019: p. 8; Kivisto 2017). These conditions clearly do not hold in the more extreme expressions of exclusionary populism that Trump routinely flirts with, and various European leaders have chosen to embrace. Such populist manifestations use an appeal to “the people” as a way of injecting antagonism into areas of the state and civil society which liberal democracies base their legitimacy on defending. If the perimeters of the judiciary, the

¹¹ As argued in the section before last, an irony that is too often lost in such claims is that the moralizing rhetoric of liberal anti-populism can itself come across as anti-pluralist, not only through the ease with which it shades into elitism, but in its rejection of the legitimacy of what it conceives as populist voices by labelling them such.

civil service, the media, the scientific establishment, and so on (which may themselves of course be distorted by other societal spheres) become penetrated by these forms of power, then populism risks decomposing into authoritarianism. Moreover, these expressions of populism bar and expel on the primordial bases of blood or soil and in so doing attack the foundation of the shared togetherness that defines membership in the civil sphere. In such cases, agonistic struggle slips into antagonistic battle, and what Victor Serge called “respect for the man in the enemy” (Serge 2012[1951]: p. 375) is indeed lost. However, this loss is not a function of populism but of authoritarianism, nativist essentialism, and the quest for purity— political tendencies that appear both in the presence and absence of populist signification.

Populism as Civil Repair?

The focus of dominant definitions of populism has typically been upon its dangers, distortions, and reductions. The one consistent virtue identified in such accounts is its capacity to act as a canary in the coal mine for social grievances (Bonikowski 2016: p. 23; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: p. 40). Here, I would like to argue that just as it can function as a threat to civil solidarity, populism also holds the potential to act as an agent of civil repair.

There are at least two ways of telling the story of the recent rise of populism. One is that healthy, responsive, and pluralist liberal democratic systems were unexpectedly rocked by the eruption of irrational forces. This story posits populism as the cause of Western polities’ current ills. There is, however, an alternative story, which casts populism as an effect as much as a cause, and which can be told by drawing upon the ideal types of the civil sphere.

This story begins by decentering populism and instead bringing into focus the democracies in which it has arisen. Although the civil sphere is analytically independent, actual civil spheres are “always deeply interpenetrated by the rest of society” (Alexander 2006: p. 194; also 2013: pp. 123–124). Non-civil spheres constantly edge into the civil sphere, threatening to distort its priorities. Such spheres aim towards more restrictive goals, employ variant standards of justice, and exchange information through alternative media. The economic sphere poses a particular threat to civil imperatives in its pursuit of profit above justice and efficiency above solidarity, and its communication through the reductive medium of price rather than the rich symbolics of performance. While Alexander (2006: pp. 206–208) recounts the beneficial inputs of the economic into the civil sphere, he also notes the obvious risks it poses to the solidarities of civil life.

The alternative story of the rise of populism identifies how, from the late 1970s onwards, Western liberal democracies progressively submitted to a narrow set of economic priorities, allowing the market to structure sectors—education, utilities, healthcare, social care, transportation, etc.—in which civil imperatives had previously governed during the post-war consensus period. Many of the Western leaders that rose to power in the wake of this Reagan/Thatcher revolution not only continued to welcome market forces into the civil domain but also attempted to evacuate not only antagonism but also agonism from politics too. Through political triangulation, the arbitration of competing demands, and the technical administration of the economy, initially highly popular leaders such as Blair, Schröder, and Clinton attempted to forge a consensus politics “beyond left and right” (Giddens 1994) in which “debate on the sensible givens of a situation” (Rancière 2003: p. 4) became stifled. This did not of course mean that fundamental social conflict disappeared—social movements in the global North blossomed during this period—but this conflict struggled to find adequate expression in

institutionalized democratic channels. While all the traditional institutions of democracy remained intact, an increasing proportion of the imperatives driving decision-making became outsourced to experts (Crouch 2004), and the role of the *demos*, upon which democracy apparently rested, became more and more circumscribed (Rancière 1998). When democratic processes were required, marketing and public relations mechanisms—such as focus-groups and professional communications strategies—increasingly stepped in to devise or defend “policy” in a manner that fundamentally divorced it from “politics” (Schmidt 2006). Governance began to resemble management, the revolving-doors between political assemblies and elite private sector organizations began to spin ever-faster, apathy increased, party membership and voter turnout dropped (Mair 2013), and democratic societies entered their “post-democratic” phase (Crouch 2000).

At no time was this more apparent than following the 2007–2008 economic crisis. A global event caused by elite economic mismanagement was met with a political response that protected this elite, on their own advice, at the expense of broader populations. The choice to pursue austerity policies was of course felt materially, but their effects were also experienced symbolically, in ways that solidified public distrust in politico-economic elites. Across Europe, but especially so in Southern European countries like Spain and Greece, “necessary” economic imperatives further colonized areas in which civil solidarity had once held sway.

Social democratic parties founded in the nineteenth or the early twentieth centuries in an attempt to provide representation to workers and offer institutional barricades against the anti-civil incursions of the economic sphere detached themselves from their traditional electoral base by failing to shield them against swingeing public service cuts, or even pioneering their implementation. Such parties are now paying the electoral price (Bickerton 2018). While centre-right parties had long been comfortable with market priorities driving public policy, this unholy pact between social democratic organs and the market, combined with the associated evacuation of agonism from politics, provides an alternative account of where the populist “backlash” (Alexander 2019), in both its regressive and progressive manifestations, originated.

All this is not to say that the recent wave of what has been labelled “populism” can be reduced to an epiphenomenal effect of a post-democratic political culture meeting its post-crisis moment. The evident success of populism as a mode of doing politics has led to it becoming an effective and autonomous culture structure in its own right, and one that has been self-consciously drawn upon and implemented by politicians eager to win votes. Moreover, cultural work invariably mediates between the reality and the perception of public issues, and the populisms that have sprung from this neoliberal postpolitical landscape have worked away at making these material and political realities meaningful. It is hardly a great surprise that anti-elitism has characterized many of them. Some have made austerity meaningful through a focus on ethnically or racially marked “enemies within”, who they identify as really to blame for the lack of opportunities and declining public services, and in the process have degraded civil solidarity even further.

Other populisms, however, have kept open the possibility, though by no means the guarantee, of civil repair. This is especially the case where populist signification has been combined with substantive policy to address those grievances—both moral and material—that nativist populism feeds upon. Such populisms promise a return of the political by drawing excluded groups into the democratic orbit in ways that can “translate” their sectoral grievances into universal civil issues of concern to societies at large (Alexander 2006: pp. 231–232). Populism, conceived in the weak, formal manner argued for in this paper, has not been the

primary cause of the current crisis of Western politics, though certain of its expressions can no doubt be seen to have hastened this crisis. The challenge for progressives is to resist treating it as some easy solution. Nevertheless, drawing upon the preceding discussion, we might identify certain conditions that would enhance its viability, when combined with appropriate substantive policy, to act in the interests of civil repair.

First, in the discussion of the binary feature of populist politics and the critique of the tendency to treat populism as an ideology, it was argued that we need to challenge the notion that contention is alien to democracy and that the solution to populism is a return to a consensus style of public administration. Friend-enemy, us-them, and pure-polluted distinctions, which are often presented as unique to populism, cultural sociology teaches us, are in fact expressions of more universal culture structures, which when evoked in an agonistic manner can be understood as homologous with the binaries that compose the “discourse of civil society”. As the three examples that form part III of *The Civil Sphere* illustrate, it has been precisely the construction of political frontiers around pressing issues that has historically led to civil expansion.¹² If movements had not convincingly used the discourse of civil society to simplify reality into good and evil, coding those forces pushing for civil repair as pure and those acting against it as polluted, the success of these movements would have been far less certain. However, if populism is understood as a formal mode of political signification, rather than a substantive ideology, the substance with which it works is clearly critical. Polarization needs to occur around the right issues, and issues that social movements have brought to the fore in recent years, and populist politics may be well placed to carry forward, include those around inequality and climate degradation. Compelling arguments exist that such issues deserve to be made subject to the binary treatment of the discourse of civil society, since they have been inadequately addressed by the routine functioning of civil sphere institutions, especially under the distorting influence of market-oriented imperatives.

Since civil repair will emphatically not be brought about by a triadic populism that scapegoats social ills on communities that were neither responsible nor hold the power to defend themselves against such charges, it is also key that such frontiers be open and inclusive. This inclusivity must involve a willingness to hear the grievances of those seduced by exclusivist populism, and a preparedness to invest in the cultural work necessary to reframe their concerns in universalizing, civil terms. Whether it comes from the left or the right, any populism that defines the frontiers of political life in essentialized and closed, and primordial terms is, by its very nature, non-universalizing and anti-civil.

Second, it was suggested that treating morality and emotion as automatic threats to democratic politics is likewise problematic. Not only does this position too often fall back upon the flawed alternative assumption that political contention is settled only through ratiocinative modes of public discourse, drained of values or feelings, but it also cedes these powerful motivating forces to those anti-civil tendencies currently using them to such great effect. Just like civil restriction, the success of civil translation depends upon its appeal to feelings, beliefs, and ideals as much as cognition. Neglecting moral language and emotive performance in the public signification of politics is not only foolhardy in an environment in which anti-civil forces readily make use of it, it can also be experienced as an affront by groups whose exclusion is experienced in moral terms, and whose anger at such exclusion is felt in visceral ways. A populism capable of civil repair would therefore need to be culturally creative

¹² It is worth noting how many of the new populist parties and their leaders have emerged from what *The Civil Sphere* identifies as the primary agents of civil repair: social movements.

and dramatically astute in its telling moral tales, harnessing public feeling and constructing shared affect. This would involve engaging not only in the statics but also in the dynamics of the civil sphere (Alexander 2006: pp. 60–62), fashioning compelling narratives capable of supplanting those of restrictive, anti-civil populism. Feelings mustered in support of civil restriction will not be conquered simply by reasoned arguments, but by evoking more powerful feelings in support of civil expansion. Compelling exclusionary narratives will not be displaced simply by a presentation of facts, but by crafting even more compelling universalizing stories.¹³

Thirdly, populism must be both agonistic and pluralistic if it is to function as a force for civil repair. Working within the shared semantic coding of the civil sphere and elaborating dynamic narratives capable of inspiring hearts as well as minds, such a populism would need to treat its opponents as adversaries to be struggled with and ultimately persuaded, rather than enemies to be silenced and ultimately eradicated. Its pluralism would derive from its creation of a “people” composed of coalitions articulated across difference. Such difference would need to be conceived not as a problem to be overcome, as in *völkisch* conceptions of a “people”, but as a resource to be celebrated or a productive tension capable of promoting civility by occasionally testing it. Such articulations will fail if they are conceived as rooted within the spontaneous alignment of pre-determined “interests”. Instead, they must be understood as the outcome of ongoing cultural work aimed at tying together segmented grievances into hegemonic civil solidarities. In this sense, a progressive appeal to the “people” would need to be seen as a forever unfinished project.

Conclusion

The preceding section has suggested that like the social movements described in the final part of *The Civil Sphere* (Alexander 2006), populism can promote civil repair by translating restricted sectoral grievances into universal civil concerns, with the goal of incorporating previously excluded groups into the fold of social solidarity. Such processes are neither guaranteed nor often complete, however. Populisms can either fail in their efforts at representation, faltering in their capacity to successfully mobilize the metalanguage of civil society, or they can push—consciously or not—in the opposite direction, asserting particularistic claims and promoting forms of civil exclusion rather than incorporation.

These qualifications stem from the weaker, non-substantive definition of populism that this paper has proposed: if populism is taken to be a formal mode of doing politics, rather than a substantive set of political ideas, whether it promotes civil restriction or repair, or both, is not something that can be settled in the abstract. The main purpose of this paper has been to suggest that many of populism’s formal dynamics can be connected, via CST, to what is usually considered to be non-populist politics, and, via cultural sociology, to the routine ways in which culture operates in most other spheres of social life.

Just as routine processes of group identity formation structure their meaning around either/or oppositions, so too does populism work the binaries of the civil sphere, cementing unity with those it defines as a “people”, and breaking ties with those it does not. Understanding populism as a mode of public signification rather than an ideology (thin-centred or otherwise)

¹³ For an illustration of the fundamental inadequacies of fact-based politics in shaping perceptions, feelings, and motivations, see Smith and Howe’s (2015) analysis of climate consciousness.

allows us to recognize it as a form of cultural work that codes its own motivations, relationships, and institutions in civil terms, and those of its adversaries in terms of the opposite. Just as in other spheres of cultural distinction, moral judgements of good and evil animate these classifications, so that populism's efficacy is determined as much, and often more so, by its persuasive power in appealing to an audience's values and feelings, as by its ability to rationally demonstrate its propositions. Finally, this paper has defended against the view that populism is inherently anti-pluralist, suggesting that populist signification can, and often does, operate within a broader acknowledgement of civil togetherness.

Since politics—and populism as a specific mode of doing politics—is obligated to operate through culture (which is of course different to the reductive claim of saying it simply *is* culture), effective social scientific tools for analyzing culture are, unsurprisingly, also effective tools for analyzing populism. Moreover, populism paints boldly what more routine politics tends to sketch more faintly: its categorizations are clear-cut, its public significations sharp, its binaries transparent, and its moral and emotional resonances distinct. Within it, we can discern clearly the structured ways in which culture reduces complexity, allowing information to be conveyed and meaning organized. Focusing our attention on such pronounced modes of political expression promises therefore to strengthen our understanding of the civil sphere.

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Compliance and Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest. This research did not involve human participants and/or animals. Informed consent was therefore unnecessary.

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‘Horseshoe theory’ is nonsense – the far right and far left have little in common

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After the first round of the French presidential elections, several [liberal commentators](#) condemned the defeated leftist candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon for refusing to endorse the centrist Emmanuel Macron. His decision was portrayed as a failure to oppose the far-right Front National, and [it was argued](#) that many of his supporters were likely to vote for Marine Le Pen in the second round. [Comparisons were drawn](#) with the US presidential elections and the alleged failure of Bernie Sanders supporters to back Hilary Clinton over Donald Trump.

[Underlying these claims](#) is a broader and increasingly popular notion that the far left and the far right have more in common than either would like to admit. This is known as the “horseshoe theory”, so called because rather than envisaging the political spectrum as a straight line from communism to fascism, it pictures the spectrum as a horseshoe in which the far left and far right have more in common with each other than they do with the political centre. The theory also underlies many of the attacks on the leader of the UK Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, who is accused of cosying up to authoritarian and theocratic regimes and fostering antisemitism within his party.

Taken one by one, these claims do not withstand scrutiny. Did Mélenchon give succour to Le Pen? No: he explicitly ruled out supporting Le Pen, and most of his supporters [voted for Macron](#) in the second round. Are there antisemites in the Labour Party? Yes: but there are antisemites in every British political party; the difference is that [repeated incidents of racism](#) in other parties go unremarked (as does Corbyn’s longstanding record of [anti-racist activism](#)).

Fans of the horseshoe theory like to lend their views weight and credibility by pointing to the alleged history of collusion between fascists and communists: the favoured example is the Nazi-Soviet Pact. But – aside from the fact that the Soviet Union played a vital role in defeating the Nazis – it is patently absurd to compare Stalin to present-day leftists like Mélenchon or Corbyn.

Author



Simon Choat
Senior Lecturer in Political Theory, Kingston University

Disclosure statement

Simon Choat is a member of the Labour party.

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Can we instead find convergence between far left and far right at the level of policy? It is true that both attack neoliberal globalisation and its elites. But there is no agreement between far left and far right over who counts as the “elite”, why they are a problem, and how to respond to them. When the billionaire real-estate

mogul Donald Trump decries global elites, for example, he is either simply giving his audience what he thinks they want to hear or he is indulging in [antisemitic dog-whistling](#).

For the left, the problem with globalisation is that it has given free rein to capital and entrenched economic and political inequality. The solution is therefore to place constraints on capital and/or to allow [people to have the same freedom of movement](#) currently given to capital, goods, and services. They want an *alternative* globalisation. For the right, the problem with globalisation is that it has corroded supposedly traditional and homogeneous cultural and ethnic communities – their solution is therefore to *reverse* globalisation, protecting national capital and placing [further restrictions on the movement of people](#).

Trump and Sanders both attacked globalisation – for different reasons. Michael Vaden, CC BY-SA

Is there a more fundamental, ideological resonance between far left and far right? Again, only in the vaguest sense that both challenge the liberal-democratic status quo. But they do so for very different reasons and with very different aims. When fascists reject liberal individualism, it is in the name of a vision of national unity and ethnic purity rooted in a romanticised past; when communists and socialists do so, it is in the name of international solidarity and the redistribution of wealth.

Given the basic implausibility of the horseshoe theory, why do so many centrist commentators insist on perpetuating it? The likely answer is that it allows those in the centre to discredit the left while disavowing their own complicity with the far right. Historically, it has been “centrist” liberals – in Spain, Chile, Brazil, and in many other countries – who have helped the far right to power, usually because they would rather have had a fascist in power than a socialist.

Today’s fascists have also been facilitated by centrists – and not just, for example, [those](#) on the [centre-right](#) who have [explicitly defended Le Pen](#). When centrists ape the Islamophobia and immigrant-bashing of the far right, many people begin to think that fascism is legitimate; when they pursue policies which exacerbate [economic inequality](#) and [hollow out democracy](#), many begin to think that fascism looks desirable.

If liberals genuinely want to understand and confront the rise of the far right, then rather than smearing the left they should perhaps reflect on their own faults.

Sharing the Same Political Ideology Yet Endorsing Different Values: Left- and Right-Wing Political Supporters Are More Heterogeneous Than Moderates

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Paul H. P. Hanel¹ , Natalia Zarzeczna², and Geoffrey Haddock²

Abstract

Members of extreme political groups are usually perceived as more homogeneous than moderates. We investigated whether members of the general public who share the same political ideology would exhibit different levels of heterogeneity in terms of human values across 20 European countries and Israel. We directly compared the variability across moderate-, left-, and right-wing groups. Our findings suggest that the values of more extreme (left-wing or right-wing) supporters are usually *more heterogeneous* than those with more moderate views. We replicated this finding for politics-related variables such as attitudes toward immigrants and trust in (inter)national institutions. We also found that country-level variables (income, religiosity, and parasite stress level) did not moderate the pattern of value variability. Overall, our results suggest that endorsing the same political ideology is not necessarily associated with sharing the same values, especially in the case of common citizens holding extreme political attitudes.

Keywords

human values, political ideology, left-wingers, right-wingers, European Union

Human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights: these are the core values of the EU.

—European Union. (n.d.)

As noted in the quote above, shared core values are considered to be fundamental to the European Union (EU). However, while these core values are endorsed by most people across all European countries *on average* (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001), it has been found that within-country value variability is substantial (Fischer & Schwartz, 2011), suggesting that the values are not endorsed by everyone equally. In the present research, we extend this line of inquiry in a novel way by investigating whether two groups that are usually perceived as homogeneous, extreme political left- and right-wing supporters, are indeed homogeneous with respect to their core values.

While values have been found to significantly predict identification with ideological groups and voting behavior (Barnea & Schwartz, 1998; Caprara, Schwartz, Capanna, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2006; Schwartz, 1996), we are aware of no studies that have directly explored within- and between-country value variability in the context of nonpolitically active individuals residing in European countries. In considering value variability in the political context, we believe that it is important to study values differences among the general public, not only those of elected politicians or active party members. This is

because heterogeneity within active political party members might be underestimated, a result of group processes that tend to increase perceived homogeneity among group members (see Mason, 2006). We propose that value differences are derived from country membership, which in turn is associated with a range of variables, such as historical context, religious denominations, or income (Fischer, 2017; van Herk & Poortinga, 2012; Welzel, 2013).

There is a popular belief that individuals within political left- and right-wing extremist groups share very similar values and attitudes in contrast to more moderate activists who are seen as more heterogeneous. Likewise, some even argue that all extremists, across the political left and right, in fact, support similar policies, in a view known as “horseshoe theory” (see Choat, 2017). However, not only do recent studies fail to support such beliefs, they also contradict them. For example, van

¹ Department of Psychology, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath, United Kingdom

² School of Psychology, Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom

Corresponding Author:

Paul H. P. Hanel, Department of Psychology, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath BA2 7AY, United Kingdom.

Email: p.hanel@bath.ac.uk

Hiel (2012) analyzed variability in values and anti-immigration attitudes among political party activists who reported affiliation with left-, right-wing, and moderate groups. Analyzing European Social Survey data (2002–2008) collected from Western European political activists, van Hiel found a substantial amount of heterogeneity of values within left- and right-wing party members, and greater homogeneity reported among members with moderate views. However, he did not directly compare the variability across groups of individuals who identified themselves with the political left, right, or center. Van Hiel also found that left-wing respondents reported significantly lower endorsement of values associated with conservation, self-enhancement, and anti-immigration attitudes compared to both moderate and right-wing activists, with individuals on the right reporting greater endorsement of such values and attitudes. In a subsequent study, he corroborated the above findings for values and ethnic prejudice for Belgian activists. Overall, van Hiel (2012) provided evidence demonstrating that Western European extremist groups are far from being homogenous and left- and right-wing groups represent distinct ideologies.

However, one limitation of van Hiel's (2012) article is that he focused on value variability only among political activists from Western European states (Study 1) and Belgium (Study 2). Further, as noted above, he did not directly compare the variability across groups of individuals that identified themselves with the political left-, right-wing, or center. Therefore, in the current article, we extended van Hiel's research questions by exploring whether value endorsement and sociopolitical attitudes differ more among extreme political supporters than moderates (not limited to political activists) and how much of such variability can be explained by country membership within the European context across 20 European states and Israel, separately for each of the three groups.

Generally, in terms of between-country differences in values, Fischer and Schwartz (2011) found that across 66 countries, values vary most between *individuals*, with smaller differences between *countries*. However, specific to the European context, a study by Schwartz and Bardi (1997) on values within Eastern versus Western European countries revealed substantial differences in value priorities. Specifically, citizens of countries that were more deeply penetrated by the communist regime were more likely to adopt values associated with such ideology. That is, they endorsed conservatism, conformity, and had lower interpersonal trust in comparison to people in Western countries.

In a later study on cross-country value differences in the context of politics, Duriez, van Hiel, and Kossowska (2005) explored value endorsement among politically interested supporters and found stronger evidence of variability across two European countries—Poland and Belgium. They studied the relationship between right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO). RWA is usually related to openness to change and conservation values, while SDO is linked to self-enhancement and self-transcendence values (Duckitt, 2001). As both RWA and SDO correspond to the

right-wing ideology (Altemeyer, 1998), such personality dimensions should be positively correlated. Indeed, a significant positive relationship between RWA and SDO was detected among Belgian participants ($r = .24$). Yet the same was not true for the Polish participants ($r = -.03$), indicating that having authoritarian values did not predict preferences for a social structure based on inequality. Aside from between-country differences, Duriez et al. (2005) reported *intracultural* variability in the RWA-SDO relationship, which depended on the degree of people's political involvement, such that greater involvement was linked with a more pronounced relation between RWA and SDO. Duriez et al. (2005) suggested that within Western European countries (e.g., Belgium), political groups were historically positioned on the left–right dimension, with neither side being dominant. However, in Eastern European countries (e.g., Poland), there was substantial asymmetry in the dominance of different political groups (e.g., strong dominance of the socialist left or conservative right); therefore, the left–right dimension might capture different values in Eastern countries than in Western ones. This implies that left- and right-wing ideologies may have different meanings on account of variability in the sociopolitical and historical context (see Piurko, Schwartz, & Davidov, 2011) corroborating Schwartz and Bardi's (1997) findings.

However, value and attitude variability at a supranational level (i.e., relevant to our article, as we investigate 21 countries) might differ when compared to variability studied at a small-scale level, for example, when considering local activist political groups. Indeed, Ondish and Stern (2017) studied in-group consensus levels among U.S.-American liberals, conservatives, and moderates in the context of political attitudes (e.g., welfare, gun control). They reported that although conservatives were relatively cohesive in terms of political attitudes in local/self-selected network groups, they were more heterogeneous than liberals when their opinions were investigated at a national level. Indeed, more consensus on a local level has been found to be related to less cohesion on a broader (national) scale (Newson, Richerson, & Boyd, 2007). Interestingly, there was more in-group consensus among conservatives and liberals than moderates. Taken together, such results provide an argument that endorsing the same ideology might not necessarily lead to sharing similar attitudes at a broader level. Also, having moderate views is not always associated with greater homogeneity, especially in the U.S.-American context and political attitudes, which contradicts findings obtained in the European context (Duriez et al., 2005; van Hiel, 2012).

Altogether, it appears that extreme political activists, politicians, and political supporters in Europe demonstrate more variability in terms of attitudes and values than moderates (Duriez et al., 2005; van Hiel, 2012). Yet such findings are based on studies that investigated limited and specific European contexts, such as using solely activists from Western European countries (van Hiel, 2012) or comparing two European countries (Belgium and Poland; Duriez et al., 2005). The only study that examined attitude variability at a broader level among general population was confined to the United States

(Ondish & Stern, 2017), which is not necessarily applicable to Europe. Therefore, in the present study, we investigated how much value and attitude variability country membership explains within left-/right-wing and moderate supporters and which of the three groups is most homogeneous within and across countries.

The Present Research

We propose that the high-value heterogeneity found in groups endorsing more extreme ideologies, as found by van Hiel (2012) within activist groups, and Duriez et al. (2005) within both activist and supporter groups, will exist among citizens from a wide range of European countries. Such heterogeneity could be partly explained by country membership. We predict a higher proportion of variance in value endorsement to be explained by country membership among more extreme political supporters compared to individuals with moderate views. Further, as pointed out by Duriez et al. (2005), understanding of the left-/right-wing political principles varies across countries *within* Europe (also see Piurko et al., 2011). Hence, it is likely that left-/right-wing politicians and political supporters understand the meaning of ideologies and their underlying values differently as a consequence of cross-country variability.

We used data from the most recent European Social Survey (2014–2015). The survey measured all value types and political attitudes on the left-/right-wing political spectrum in the general population. We selected 20 European countries and Israel within the survey, and we divided the survey participants into three ideological groups according to their self-reported political attitude (extreme left, extreme right, and center). As noted earlier, the left-right dimension might have different meanings across different countries; however, we suggest that such variability is underpinned by differences in value endorsement (Piurko et al., 2011), which is the focus of our investigation.

Based on the reviewed literature (Duriez et al., 2005; Fischer & Schwartz, 2011; Ondish & Stern 2017; van Hiel, 2012), we hypothesized that country membership would explain more variance in endorsement of values within supporters of political extremes (left- and right-wing) than those with more moderate political views. We also predicted a lower level of within-country value agreement in the case of more politically extreme individuals compared to individuals in the political center. Finally, based on Fischer and Schwartz (2011), we expected that country membership would explain less than 15% of the variance overall, as European countries are less culturally diverse.

In addition, we tested whether extreme left- and right political supporters are more heterogeneous across other politics-related variables that are linked to values: attitudes toward immigrants and trust in (inter)national institutions than those in the center. For exploratory purposes, we also included well-being. This is to explore whether the findings from values also hold for other important psychological constructs (attitudes and well-being). We expected a similar pattern of results as in the case of values.¹

Method

Participants

The sample was representative and contained 40,185 participants (53.0% female) from 20 European countries and Israel. The mean age of the sample was 49.28 years ($SD = 18.74$, range = 14–114). The 21 countries are Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom. The data were collected in 2014 and 2015 and were obtained from the European Social Survey (seventh round; <http://europeansocialsurvey.org/>).

Materials and Procedure

To measure the 10 value types of Schwartz's (1992) model of values, we used all 21 items of the short Portrait Value Questionnaire (PVQ; Schwartz et al., 2001). Using a scale from 1 (*very much like me*) to 6 (*not like me at all*), participants indicated how similar they were to a fictitious person who shows a positive attitude toward a prototypical behavior for 1 of the 10 value types. Sample items include: "Thinking up new ideas and being creative is important to her or him. She or he likes to do things in her/his own original way" (self-direction) and "It is important to her or him to be rich. She or he wants to have a lot of money and expensive things" (power). The internal consistencies were acceptable (median $\alpha = .59$). In other research, this short version of the PVQ was found to be invariant across 20 European countries, allowing us to compare the relations between values and political attitudes across countries (Davidov, Schmidt, & Schwartz, 2008; see also Zercher, Schmidt, Cieciuch, & Davidov, 2015).

Respondents' political attitudes were measured on scale ranging from 0 (*left wing*), 5 (*center*), to 10 (*right wing*). We operationalized left-wing individuals as those who responded 0 or 1; moderates as those who responded 4, 5, or 6; and right-wing individuals as those who responded 9 or 10.

As stated above, we analyzed data from three additional variables associated with attitudes. The data set of the European Social Survey (ESS) is rich and contains various variables. However, because the main focus of this article is values, we limited the number of additional variables to three. We selected attitudes toward immigrants and trust in (inter)national institutions as they are related to politics, whereas the third variable, well-being, was included for exploratory purposes. Attitudes toward immigrants were measured with 7 items. Participants were asked whether various immigrant groups (e.g., immigrants from poorer European countries) should be allowed to enter their country and whether immigrants were enriching their country ($\alpha = .90$). The items were standardized before being averaged because lengths of the response scales varied across items. Trust in (inter)national institutions was measured with 7 items which asked about the amount of trust participants had in institutions such as the legal system, the police, and the European parliament ($\alpha = .90$). Answers were given on a scale

ranging from 0 (*no trust at all*) to 10 (*complete trust*). Well-being was measured with 6 items which assessed how often in the past week respondents experienced negative emotions such as feeling depressed, lonely, or sad ($\alpha = .80$). Answers were given on a scale ranging from 1 (*none or almost none of the time*) to 4 (*all or almost all of the time*).

Data Analysis

We computed intraclass correlations (ICC[1]; Bliese, 2000), the agreement index a_{wg} (Brown & Hauenstein, 2005), and standard deviations (*SDs*) as relevant measures. The ICC[1] indicates the proportion of between-group to within-group variance and ranges from 0 to 1. Thus, the higher the ICC[1], the higher the proportion of variance is explained by group (i.e., country) membership. The a_{wg} denotes the ratio amount of consensus on the maximum possible disagreement and ranges from -1 (*complete disagreement*) to 1 (*complete agreement*). While the ICC[1] and a_{wg} are independent of the scale length, *SDs* are not but can be easily compared with the Levene test. Further, the ICC[1] measures variance explained by country membership, the a_{wg} and the *SD* measure variability within groups, both within and across countries. While our choice of dispersion measures was guided in terms of practicality and comparability with previous research (Fischer & Schwartz, 2011), they are all highly correlated among each other: The *SD* correlates highly ($|rs| > .94$) with the interrater agreement r_{wg} , normed-coefficient of variation V' , and the a_{wg} (Roberson, Sturman, & Simons, 2007). The R code that allows reproduction of analyses can be found on the Open Science Framework (OSF; https://osf.io/nhsp3/?view_only=fd8f342306774694a5c536d6f118af7b).

Results

Across all 21 countries, 2,264 participants identified themselves as left wing ($M = 107.81$ per country, $SD = 58.27$), 18,705 as center ($M = 890.71$, $SD = 278.26$), and 2,262 as right wing ($M = 107.71$, $SD = 88.41$).²

ICC[1]

First, we report the results of the ICC(1). As expected, the variance in values explained by country was, with one exception, below .16 (see Table 1 and Figure 1). As predicted, left- and right-wing respondents were more heterogeneous across countries than individuals in the political center. Figure 1 displays the ICC[1]s for all 10 value types and the three groups (left, center, and right). As just one example, the ICC[1] of achievement was smaller for people in the center (.09) than for those on the extreme left and right (.16 and .15), indicating that between-country differences explained more variance for left- and right-wingers than for those with moderate political views. As noted at the bottom of Table 1, the ICCs for attitudes toward immigrants, trust in (inter)national institutions, and well-being were approximately the same for all three groups except

Table 1. Intraclass Correlation (ICC[1]).

Variables	ICC[1]		
	Left	Center	Right
Security	.10	.09	.11
Tradition	.10	.06	.10
Conformity	.10	.05	.03
Benevolence	.09	.12	.06
Universalism	.08	.08	.03
Self-direction	.06	.05	.03
Stimulation	.06	.02	.03
Hedonism	.12	.09	.15
Achievement	.16	.09	.15
Power	.21	.11	.09
Immigrants	.21	.12	.11
Trust	.13	.15	.16
Well-being	.05	.05	.05
Mean (values)	.11	.08	.08

Note. Immigrants = attitudes toward immigrants; trust = trust in (inter)national organizations.

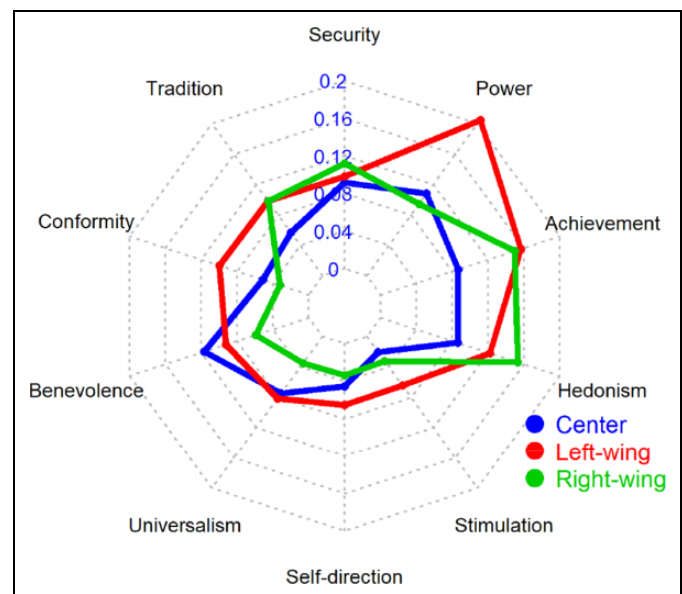


Figure 1. Intraclass correlations for all 10 value types across 21 European countries separated by political ideology.

attitudes toward immigrants, which differed across countries more for left-wingers than the other two groups.

Heterogeneity and Agreement Across Countries

Next, we compared the heterogeneity of all three groups across all 21 countries. Specifically, we tested whether the values of left- and right-wingers are more diverse than the values of those in the center across all European countries, using a series of Levene tests for variance homogeneity. The results showed that left-wingers were significantly more heterogeneous than those in the center for all 10 values (see Table 2),³ supporting the

Table 2. Heterogeneity Across Left-Wingers, Centers, and Right-Wingers.

	SD/a_{wg} (Left)	SD/a_{wg} (Center)	SD/a_{wg} (Right)	Left-Center		Left-Right		Center-Right	
				<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Security	1.14/.52	0.99/.62	1.03/.59	24.48	<.0001	10.72	<.0001	7.75	<.0001
Tradition	1.11/.59	0.98/.68	1.06/.63	18.73	<.0001	5.00	.0018	8.68	<.0001
Conformity	1.24/.53	1.07/.63	1.12/.57	29.32	<.0001	15.37	<.0001	4.20	.0021
Benevolence	0.85/.66	0.80/.72	0.85/.66	5.63	.0002	2.66	.0467	7.41	<.0001
Universalism	0.78/.71	0.76/.76	0.88/.69	4.72	.0008	8.57	<.0001	21.39	<.0001
Self-direction	1.00/.60	0.93/.66	0.98/.62	4.83	.0007	5.76	.0006	4.93	.0006
Stimulation	1.28/.51	1.18/.56	1.29/.49	7.89	<.0001	1.26	.2872	10.29	<.0001
Hedonism	1.24/.51	1.14/.59	1.27/.53	13.55	<.0001	6.13	.0004	29.01	<.0001
Achievement	1.34/.47	1.20/.56	1.32/.48	18.09	<.0001	2.32	.0732	15.36	<.0001
Power	1.25/.59	1.07/.67	1.16/.61	33.74	<.0001	6.45	.0002	14.01	<.0001
Immigrants	0.99/.75	0.75/.84	0.80/.80	118.02	<.0001	58.32	<.0001	22.46	<.0001
Trust	2.15/.53	1.91/.67	2.24/.54	36.99	<.0001	14.86	<.0001	59.02	<.0001
Well-being	0.57/.60	0.50/.64	0.55/.59	25.39	<.0001	4.58	.0033	17.80	<.0001

Note. Inferential tests were conducted with the standard deviations. $df1 = 1$ for all comparisons; $df2 = 20,550\text{--}20,573$ (left-center comparison), $4,409\text{--}4,417$ (left-right comparison), and $20,518\text{--}20,542$ (center-right comparison); immigrants = attitudes toward immigrants; trust = trust in (inter)national organizations; SDs = standard deviations (computed across all countries); a_{wg} = agreement index (computed separately for each country and then averaged).

view that extreme left-wingers form a less homogeneous mass. Also, right-wingers were significantly more heterogeneous than those in the center for all values except for conformity. Left-wingers tended to be more heterogeneous than right-wingers. For attitudes toward immigrants, trust in (inter)national institutions, and well-being, the same pattern was observed. The agreement index a_{wg} supported the findings: The amount of agreement was higher across almost all variables for the people in the center.

This pattern suggests a quadratic trend: The more extreme the political attitudes, the larger the heterogeneity. To visualize this pattern, we plotted the SDs of each of political attitude groups, separately for all 13 dependent variables. Figure 2 shows a clear quadratic trend for the 13 dependent variables. A 21 (countries) \times 143 (11 levels of political ideology \times 13 dependent variables) matrix with the SDs in each cell can be found on *osf* (https://osf.io/nhsp3/?view_only=fd8f342306774694a5c536d6f118af7b).

Heterogeneity Within Countries

In a next step, we investigated whether the findings were consistent within each country. For this, we assessed how often left- or right-wingers were more homogeneous than those in the center within each country and variable, using again the SD as a measure of heterogeneity. This resulted in two sets of 21 (countries) \times 13 (dependent variables [DVs]) comparisons. Left-wingers were more heterogeneous than centrists in 210 of the 273 comparisons (77%). In Belgium, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom left-wingers were more heterogeneous for at least 12 of the 13 DVs than those in the center. In contrast, in Israel, Lithuania, Norway, and Spain, left-wingers were only in 6 or 7 of the 13 DVs more heterogeneous. Right-wingers were heterogeneous than centrists in 202 of the 273 comparisons (74%).

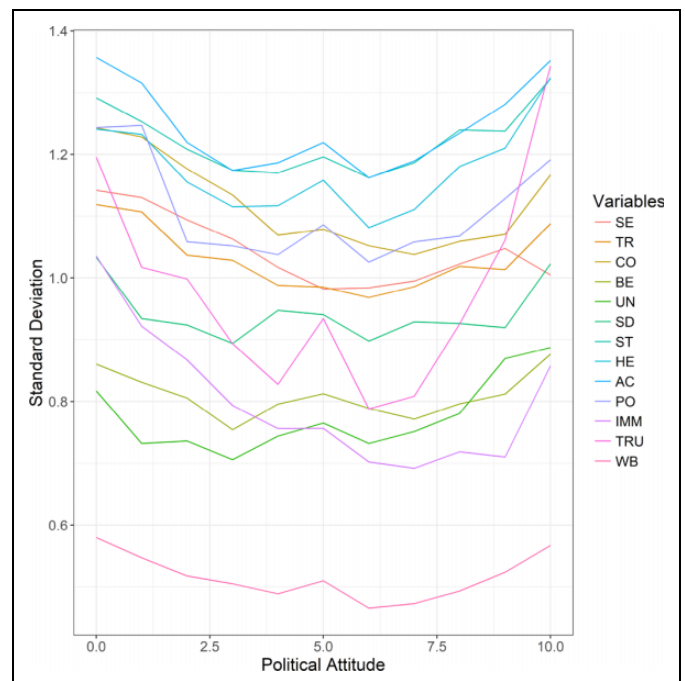


Figure 2. Standard deviations for all 10 political attitude groups, separately for all 13 DVs. SE = security; TR = tradition; CO = conformity; BE = benevolence; UN = universalism; SD = self-direction; ST = stimulation; HE = hedonism; AC = achievement; PO = power; IMM = attitudes toward immigrants; TRU = trust (inter)national institutions; WB = well-being. The SD of trust has been decreased by 1 for illustrational purposes.

In Austria, Belgium, Germany, and Poland, right-wingers are more heterogeneous for at least 12 of the 13 DVs than those in the center. In contrast, in France, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, and Slovenia, right-wingers were in only 6 or 7 of the 13 DVs more heterogeneous.

Discussion

In the current article, we addressed the issue of value endorsement variability among citizens from 20 European countries and Israel. The results based on two different analysis (ICCs and Levene's tests for differences between *SDs*) between and within countries largely supported our hypotheses. Specifically, we found that more extreme left- and right-wing political supporters were more heterogeneous compared to those with more moderate political attitudes. Specifically, we found that on almost 70% of all value and attitude comparisons, both left- and right-wingers were more heterogeneous than moderates, and that these effects were not moderated by a set of country-level variables. Overall, a higher proportion of variance in value endorsement was explained by country membership among more extreme political supporters compared to individuals with moderate views.

It is essential to note, however, that cross-country value/attitude variability within groups of political supporters might also partially stem from within-country variability. Indeed, Fischer and Schwartz (2011) reported that values vary the most *between* individuals rather than countries. This is also reflected in our findings—left-wing supporters exhibited higher heterogeneity more often than moderates in Western European countries, Estonia, and Finland. The same was true for right-wing supporters and moderates comparisons in Austria, Germany, Poland, and Belgium. At the same time, only on half of the studied variables, left- and right-wing respondents exhibited higher value/attitude variability than moderates in Lithuania, Norway, Spain, Israel, France, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, and Slovenia. These findings also demonstrate that the pattern of value/attitude variability within countries cannot be used to distinguish Western from Eastern European countries or Israel. It is possible that the integration of European states has contributed to a change in value endorsement in countries that had been previously dominated by communist regimes. Hence, the findings reported by Schwartz and Bardi (1997) on communist value endorsement (i.e., conservation), which would suggest a higher homogeneity of conservative values among political supporters in Eastern Europe, might not be valid anymore.

Finally, we found that the extent of heterogeneity was not explained by the country-level moderator's parasite-stress level, religiosity, and income for any political attitude group. This replicates Hanel and Vione (2016) who investigated whether student samples and the general public are more heterogeneous in more autonomous and less embedded countries (cf. Schwartz, 2006). Across 59 countries and 7 attitudinal variables, they did not find a moderating effect of autonomy or embeddedness.

Consistency Between Citizens and Politicians in Value/Attitude Variability

We demonstrated that the heterogeneity of value endorsement among more extreme political supporters, rather than simply activists, can be partly explained by country membership.

Therefore, country membership might have been a reason for value heterogeneity among left- and right-wing politicians in van Hiel's (2012) study. We observed the same pattern of results in our study by taking into account 20 European countries and Israel and studying value differences within *and* across these countries. In this way, we could test for heterogeneity of values among general population. Therefore, the observed heterogeneity of values in our study was less likely influenced by group and conformity processes (Mason, 2006). Importantly, by using inferential statistics, we showed that within European countries, the heterogeneity between left- and right-wing supporters is equal.

Also, Duriez et al. (2005) provided partial evidence that there are between-country differences in personality traits related to values among left- and right-wing supporters and activists across Western and Eastern European countries. Our findings were corroborated by large heterogeneities for the political extremists across all 21 countries for attitudes toward immigrants, trust in (inter)national organizations, and well-being. This contrasts with recent findings in the United States based on the data from political supporters (Ondish & Stern, 2017), suggesting that moderates are more heterogeneous in their political attitudes locally (i.e., within their own countries) and also at a supranational level (across countries). Overall, integrating our findings with the previous literature (Duriez et al., 2005; van Hiel, 2012), it seems that political supporters and political activists exhibit similar patterns of value heterogeneity.

It is also worth noting that the larger heterogeneity among European conservatives might be due to historic reasons: European conservatism is more strongly tied to old feudalistic structures such as landed aristocracies or churches (Hartz, 1955; Schultze, Sturm, & Eberle, 2003; Viereck, 1956). As the nature of such structures varied across European states, those who still believe in them, that is, mainly conservatives or right-wing supporters, would be therefore more diverse than those who entirely reject feudalistic structures, such as moderates or left-wing supporters. However, this post hoc reasoning is somewhat speculative, as it would need to be directly tested in a cross-cultural comparison.

However, our somewhat surprising finding that right-wing supporters are also more heterogeneous regarding their attitudes toward immigrants seemingly contradicts literature, suggesting that more extreme right-wing politicians share anti-immigration and related anti-EU integration views (see Cherepnalkoski, Karpf, Mozetic, & Gear, 2016). It is believed that anti-immigration attitudes appear to be a strong unifying factor across right-wing parties, especially in the recent years (see also Ivarsflaten, 2007, for empirical support), as the popularity of such parties across many European countries has increased significantly (e.g., in Austria, France, Greece, Denmark, Finland, Hungary; Adler, 2016). Thus, our findings could hint to some potential differences among party members and citizens who endorse the right-wing ideology. A further possibility is that the two groups had different immigrant groups in mind: Many decisions in the European Parliament

concern non-EU immigrants, whereas participants in our sample might have thought mainly about EU immigrants (recall that the data used in the present study were collected in 2014 and 2015, presumably before many refugees from Syria and Afghanistan were looking for shelter in the EU). We also need to acknowledge that the political ideology item consisted of a single item. Piurko, Schwartz, and Davidov (2011) claimed that the single dimension of left–right might not fully capture people’s political attitudes. It is also possible that people may have different understanding of the left–right spectrum depending on the historical and socioeconomic context of their countries of origin (Duriez et al., 2005). However, it is worth noting that previous between-country research relying on ESS data found meaningful differences between those participants who identified themselves as belonging to the political left and right wing (Aspelund, Lindeman, & Verkasalo, 2013; Ivarsflaten, 2007; Rydgren, 2008). We should note that we also found the expected mean differences. For example, left-wingers across all 21 countries valued conformity, tradition, and security less than right-wingers, replicating Caprara, Schwartz, Capanna, Vecchione, and Barbaranelli (2006).

Variability in Conservation, Self-Transcendence, and Self-Enhancement Values

Overall, the variance explained by country membership in value variability was less than 10%. Such findings are in line with Fischer and Schwartz (2011), indicating that values differ the most *between* individuals rather than between-country members in general. In Fischer and Schwartz’s research, the only value type that was influenced by country membership was conformity. Our results extend such findings by indicating that country membership is indeed an important determinant of conformity and tradition differences, but mainly in the case of left- and right-wing political supporters. The same pattern was true for tradition. To summarize, we show that although country membership might not account for large differences in value importance among European citizens, it plays a significant role in value variability within the political context.

In turn, we found the highest homogeneity among extremists for benevolence and universalism values, which are coincidentally the most important value types for people in general (see Barnea & Schwartz, 1998). These values can be also seen as essential for successful cooperation between people and across groups, as they refer to tolerance and welfare of others. In contrast, agreement for achievement (i.e., intellectual autonomy or independence) is relatively low. This might be because achievement values might be understood (i.e., instantiated) differently than benevolence. Some people might think about achievement as receiving good grades or earning large sums of money and dismiss it therefore more readily because it might be against their universalism values. In contrast, if people understand it more as achieving a good work life balance than some people might find it more important (Hanel et al., 2018).

The relatively lower homogeneity in terms of benevolence and universalism might be also a methodological artifact, as

we obtained ceiling effects for these values. However, future experiments can build upon such findings by highlighting that not only are benevolence and universalism some of the most important values on average, but that this view is also shared by many people within political groups across European countries and Israel. At the same time, people often underestimate how important benevolence and universalism are for other people (Hanel et al., 2018). This is relevant because people who believe that others have higher self-transcendence values are also more inclined to do civic engagement (Sanderson et al., 2018). Previous research that has tried to change the perception of others’ self-transcendence values by presenting absolute percentage of people endorsing those values, has failed to highlight the *relative* homogeneity of these values (Hanel et al., 2018), which possibly resulted in subtyping (Richards & Hewstone, 2001). Overall, it appears that all political supporters across EU and Israel are relatively homogenous in endorsing benevolence and universalism values. Despite large cross-country heterogeneity in other values, it seems that in general self-transcendence values make it possible for various political groups to form political groups at supranational level in European Parliament.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge that the European Social Survey data did not allow us to include all EU nations in our analyses. Therefore, the heterogeneity of the values found in the present research might have been impacted. Future research should further investigate these issues. Also, for the purposes of generality, it would be worthwhile to be able to assess value heterogeneity using a sample of members of the European Parliament to assess whether their pattern of responses converges with our ESS findings.

Conclusion

To conclude, we demonstrate that European country membership is a relevant factor in explaining value heterogeneity, especially in the case of more extreme political supporters in comparison to moderate ones. Such differences were most pronounced in the case of tradition and conformity values and the least pronounced in the case of self-transcendence values and were not moderated by country-level variables. Overall, our findings suggest that speaking of “extreme left-wing values” or “extreme right-wing values” may not be meaningful, as members of both groups are heterogeneous in the values that they endorse.

Authors’ Note

Paul H. P. Hanel and Natalia Zarzeczna contributed equally to this work.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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ORCID iD

Paul H. P. Hanel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3225-1395>

Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

Notes

1. We also examined whether people are more homogeneous if they live in a country with more pressure to behave alike (i.e., in countries with lower incomes, higher religiosity, and higher parasite stress level). A rationale for this moderator analysis and findings can be found in the Online Supplemental Material. To summarize, country-level moderators did not correlate with the variability in any of the three groups.
2. The pattern of results remained across all analyses the same when only extreme left-wingers (i.e., those who chose 0 on the 0–10 political attitude scale, $n = 1,144$), “extreme” center (5 on the political attitude scale, $n = 10,294$), and extreme right-wingers (10, $n = 961$) were included.
3. Because we have conducted 39 Levene tests (see Table 2), we set our significance level to $\alpha = .002$. The use of multiple correction methods is usually arbitrary, with the number of tests being to control for being the most difficult number to determine. Our adjusted significance level was set in a way that it is neither extremely conservative nor liberal (in our view). We report the exact p values of up to four decimal places to allow the readers to use different thresholds.

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Author Biographies

Paul H. P. Hanel is a postdoctoral Research Associate (RA) in social and cross-cultural psychology. His research interests involve human values and scientific communication.

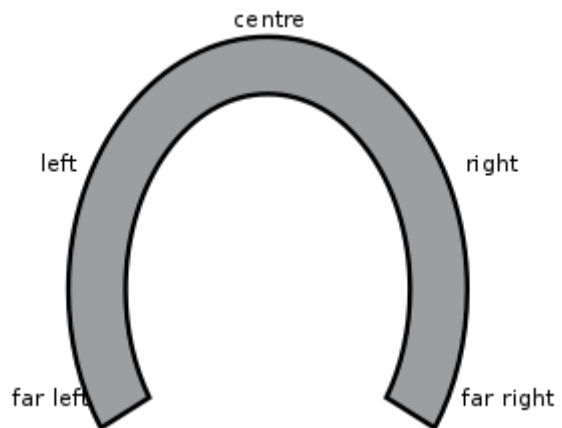
Natalia Zarzeczna is a PhD researcher in social and cognitive psychology. She is interested in spatial processes underlying thinking about abstract concepts. Currently, she examines spatial bases of stereotypic thinking about gender in relation to power.

Geoffrey Haddock is a professor in social psychology. His primary area of research is the psychology of attitudes.

Handling Editor: Jesse Graham

Horseshoe theory

In [political science](#) and also popular discourse,^[1] the **horseshoe theory** asserts that the [far-left](#) and the [far-right](#), rather than being at opposite and opposing ends of a [linear](#) political continuum, closely resemble one another, much like the ends of a [horseshoe](#). The theory is attributed to French philosopher and writer [Jean-Pierre Faye](#).^[2] Proponents of the theory point to a number of similarities between the far-left and the far-right, including their supposed propensity to gravitate to [authoritarianism](#) or [totalitarianism](#). Horseshoe theory has been much criticised^{[3][4]} and is not currently supported within academic circles.^{[4][5]}



Proponents of Horseshoe Theory argue that the extreme left and the extreme right are closer to each other than either is to the political center

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Origin

The horse shoe metaphor was used as early as during the [Weimar Republic](#) to describe the ideology of the [Black Front](#).^[6]

Modern usage

In a 2006 book, political scientist Jeff Taylor wrote: "It may be more useful to think of the Left and the Right as two components of populism, with elitism residing in the Center. The political spectrum may be linear, but it is not a straight line. It is shaped like a horseshoe".^[7]

In 2006, the term was used when discussing an alleged resurgent hostility towards Jews and [new antisemitism](#) from both the far-left and the far-right.^[8]

In a 2008 essay, [Josef Joffe](#) (a visiting fellow at the [Hoover Institution](#), a conservative think tank)^[9] wrote:

Will globalization survive the gloom? The creeping revolt against globalization actually preceded the Crash of '08. Everywhere in the West, populism began to show its angry face at mid-decade. The two most dramatic instances were Germany and Austria, where populist parties scored big with a message of isolationism, protectionism and redistribution. In Germany, it was left-wing populism ("Die Linke"); in Austria it was a bunch of right-wing parties that garnered almost 30% in the 2008 election. Left and right together illustrated once more the "horseshoe" theory of modern politics: As the iron is bent backward, the two extremes almost touch.^[10]

In 2015, reformist Muslim [Maajid Nawaz](#) invoked the horseshoe theory while lamenting a common tendency on the far-left and far-right towards the compiling and publishing of [lists of political foes](#),^[11] adding:

As the political horseshoe theory attributed to Jean-Pierre Faye highlights, if we travel far-left enough, we find the very same sneering, nasty and reckless bully-boy tactics used by the far-right. The two extremes of the political spectrum end up meeting like a horseshoe, at the top, which to my mind symbolizes totalitarian control from above. In their quest for ideological purity, Stalin and Hitler had more in common than modern neo-Nazis and far-left agitators would care to admit.^[11]

In a recent article for [Eurozine](#) titled "How Right is the Left?",^[12] Kyrylo Tkachenko wrote about the common cause found recently between the far-left and the far-right in [Ukraine](#):

The pursuit of a common political agenda is a trend discernible at both extremes of the political spectrum. Though this phenomenon manifests itself primarily through content-related overlaps, I believe there are good reasons to refer to it as a red-brown alliance. Its commonalities are based on shared anti-liberal resentment. Of course, there remain palpable differences between far left and the far right. But we should not underestimate the dangers already posed by these left-right intersections, as well as what we might lose if the resentment-driven backlash becomes mainstream.

Criticism

The horseshoe theory has been criticized not just by people on both ends of the political spectrum who oppose being grouped with those they consider to be their polar opposites, but also by those who see horseshoe theory as oversimplifying political ideologies and as ignoring fundamental differences between them

Simon Choat, a senior lecturer in political theory at [Kingston University](#), criticizes horseshoe theory from a leftist perspective. He argues that far-left and far-right ideologies only share similarities in the vaguest sense in that they both oppose the [liberal democratic status quo](#), but the two sides both have very different reasons and very different aims for doing so. Choat uses the issue of globalization as an example. Both the far-left and the far-right attack [neoliberal globalization](#) and its elites, but have conflicting views on who those elites are and conflicting reasons for attacking them:

For the left, the problem with globalisation is that it has given free rein to capital and entrenched economic and political inequality. The solution is therefore to place constraints on capital and/or to allow people to have the same freedom of movement currently given to capital, goods, and services. They want an *alternative* globalisation. For the right, the problem with globalisation is that it has corroded supposedly traditional and homogeneous cultural and ethnic communities – their solution is therefore to *reverse* globalisation, protecting national capital and placing further restrictions on the movement of people.^[13]

Choat also argues that although proponents of the horseshoe theory may cite examples of alleged history of collusion between [fascists](#) and [communists](#), those on the far-left usually oppose the rise of far-right or fascist regimes in their countries. Instead, he argues that it has been centrists who have supported far-right and fascist regimes that they prefer in power over socialist ones.^[13]

In popular culture

- *Horseshoe Theory* is the title of a 2017 romantic comedy short film by [Jonathan Daniel Brown](#) in which an [Islamic State](#) jihadist and a white supremacist meet following a weapons deal over the internet and fall in love after discovering how much they have in common.

See also

- Argument to moderation
- Blair's Law
- Centrism
- Comparison of Nazism and Stalinism
- Hemicycle
- Left–right political spectrum
- Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact/Germany–Soviet Union relations, 1918–1941
- Neutrality
- Nolan Chart
- Open–closed political spectrum
- Political compass
- Political spectrum

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External links

-  Quotations related to Horseshoe theory at Wikiquote

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Horseshoe theory

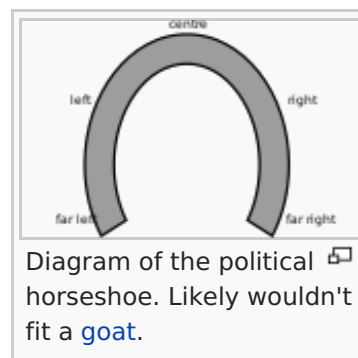
“ All bigots and frauds are brothers under the skin. ”
—Christopher Hitchens^[1]

The **horseshoe theory** in [political science](#) claims that the [far-left](#) and [far-right](#) are more similar to each other in essentials than either is to the [political center](#).

It was formulated by the [French post-postmodernist philosopher](#) Jean-Pierre Faye in 1996,^[2] but similar ideas existed previously.^[3] Faye believed that the [extremes](#) of the political spectrum both represented [totalitarianism](#) of different kinds; this meant that the [political spectrum](#) should *not* be described as a linear bar with the two ends representing the far-left and right being ideologically the furthest apart from each other, but as a horseshoe in which the two ends are closer to each other than to the center.

Horseshoe theory has been observed in the various competing [monotheisms](#) as well, where professed arch-enemies like [Christian dominionists](#) and the [Muslim Taliban](#) actually *share views* on some social issues, including on consumer culture, [abortion](#), [feminism](#), [drug use](#), [homosexuality](#) and so on.

[Nationalists](#) from different nations and



It doesn't stop at the water's edge
Politics



Theory

- [Political spectrum](#)
- [Political party](#)
- [Government \(forms of\)](#)

Practice

- [International relations](#)
- [Propaganda](#)
- [War](#)

Philosophies

- [Libertarianism](#)
- [National anarchism](#)
- [Producerism](#)

Terms

- [Environmentalism](#)
- [Junta](#)

race supremacists from different ethnic groups ([white supremacy](#), [black supremacy](#)) also share the majority of their political outlook with their rival [cranks](#), *not* with the majority.

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Critiques [\[edit\]](#)

The concept of horseshoe theory has been criticized in academia,^{[4][5]} and the supporting evidence seems to be a large collection of [exceptional cases](#) without much in the way of theoretical underpinnings. Simon Choat has noted that there is not much convergence between far-left and far-right on political policy and that few voters switch between the far-left and far-

right when given the chance in a runoff ballot.^[6] Choat has argued that the perpetuation of horseshoe theory "is that it allows those in the centre to discredit the left while disavowing their own complicity with the far right. Historically, it has been 'centrist' liberals – in [Spain](#), [Chile](#),^[note 1] [Brazil](#), and in many other countries – who have helped the far right to power, usually because they would rather have had a fascist in power than a socialist."^[6]

Quite a few examples can be given for centrists supporting or making agreements the far-right, e.g., Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler, centrists' defense of [Marine Le Pen](#),^[6] and center-right Republicans backing Trump *en masse*.^[8]

The simplest critiques tend to come from the extremists themselves, naturally, who either see themselves as being complete, utter, Manichaeian opposites of the people on the other side of the spectrum, or acknowledge the similarities between the two extremes yet maintain that they are fighting for the "right people" while their enemies are not.

Also, so called "political centers" are socially and historically specific. For example, what was considered a norm in Europe 500 years ago, such as publicly beheading political rivals, would be considered extreme today. See the entry on moral relativism on the [morality](#) page.

From extremists [\[edit\]](#)

On the right-wing side, the criticisms are often couched in terms of



Centrist [Neville Chamberlain](#) making nice with [Hitler](#) in 1938 

religion, with right-wingers claiming that they are completely different from left-wingers because they believe in different "[gods](#)," or different takes on the same God. One example is the contrast drawn during the U.S.'s [Second Red Scare](#) between Christianity and "Godless Communism."

A common gambit on the left-wing side is to claim that few, or none, of the historical communist states are representatives of 'True' (classical Marxist) Communism, which has *nothing* in common with the evil right-wing fascist extremism.^[note 2] One would be mistaken to think that this is an example of the [No True Scotsman](#) argument, if it weren't for the fact that [Vladimir Lenin](#), founder of the Soviet Union, described it as 'State Capitalist' (as opposed to Socialist) himself, explaining that State Capitalism was a path to Socialism as proposed in his 1921 New Economic Policy. [Leon Trotsky](#) held a similar, more bitter take on the same idea, viewing the Soviet Union under [Josef Stalin](#) as a betrayal of 'true' communism and the ideals of the [October Revolution](#).^[11] A mirror version of this argument can also be found on the right wing among hardcore libertarians and [anarcho-capitalists](#), who may claim that all historic examples of deregulated capitalism in action (e.g., [Galt's Gulch Chile](#) and other [libertarian paradises](#)) weren't *true laissez-faire* societies because there was still some degree of state intervention (or merely the existence of a state) that they didn't like.

Another variant of the same argument is that the term "left-wing" refers to philosophies that promote broader democracy, political participation, and social [equality](#), and that any form of [government](#) straying from this ideal is automatically right-wing instead. In considering this criticism it is instructive to look at the origins of the term "left-wing," which originally referred to the people who sat on the left side of the National Assembly during the [French Revolution](#). Among these original left-wingers was Maximilien Robespierre, on whose watch the revolutionary government, still seated on the left wing, staged a series of political purges, [executing](#) about 40,000 people in the space of ten months. To which is replied that this proves nothing at all, as just because they [said](#), or even [believed](#), that they were left-wing, doesn't mean they were, if their actions contradict this. Notably, when in power, Robespierre was just as violent towards those on his left as he was towards those on his right.

From non-extremists [\[edit\]](#)

From the other direction, abuse of the horseshoe theory can lead to the [balance fallacy](#) and [appeals to moderation](#). This is a problem common among [Very Serious People](#) and radical [centrists](#), who, in

their desire to avoid slipping into one partisan extreme or another, often have the opposite problem and go out of their way to characterize both sides as being fundamentally crazy, even if one side or the other may very well be clearly in the right in this instance. More cynically, it can be abused by those in power to frame all opposition to their rule as extremist by connecting their more grounded, legitimate critics with the crazies. Also it should be noted that at one point or another throughout history, people who advocated for a lot of the things we take for granted in the modern West (democracy, abolition of slavery, rights for women and LGBT people, religious freedom, etc.) were often derided as extremists and that things that we nowadays frame as extremist ([Apartheid](#), [eugenics](#) etc.) were considered to be moderate options at the time they were implemented.

Political centrism itself is not immune to radicalism and authoritarianism. As a historical example of this instance we've [Napoleon Bonaparte](#), who in a period between fights of republicans and monarchists proclaimed himself to be the centrist in between the two options and then proceeded to establish a dictatorship (by assuming the role of an executive office with unlimited power) in the name of centrism and moderation, although this is a somewhat odd example since he claimed a syncretic politics that transcended left and right, whereas in the actual French Revolution "centrists" were often considered advocates of a constitutional monarchy. Although after he was exiled and King Louis XVIII became a French monarch, people who demanded a return of the Napoleonic empire were considered far-centrist.



Also, as the horseshoe theory relies on the mainstream left-right [political spectrum](#), it runs the risk of over-simplifying political ideologies. One leading argument against a linear political spectrum is that it appears to have no place for ideologies which are less authoritarian than the political center, and as such, there exist alternative systems to delineate political ideologies, such as the [Political Compass](#), the [Nolan chart](#), and assorted surveys and quizzes with even more detailed analyses. For European parties, there exists a three-way system of free-loving vs. authoritarian, left economic vs. right economic, and pro-EU v anti-EU, which allows for eight quadrants — and there are parties at all quadrants. Furthermore, our conceptions of left-wing and right-wing, with "liberal capitalism" being the political center, are largely derived

from a modern, [Western](#) take of politics. In countries such as China, for instance, the political center is dominated by reformist Communists, while in Russia the center is defined by [Vladimir Putin](#)'s brand of nationalist politics. Likewise, extremists themselves tend to have their own warped versions of the horseshoe theory, seeing extremists on the other side as having more in common with (if not mere tools of) the political mainstream than with them, and condemning them both. The definition between "mainstream" and "extremist" depends on perspective and background. During the Cold War, centrist liberal politicians in the United States and Europe also had histories of propping up and colluding with [far right governments](#) in order to stop the rise of socialist ones.^[12]

Likewise, just because there are similarities between groups doesn't mean they are *exactly* the same. One example of this is that, while both fascists and communists claimed to adhere to revolutionary economic agendas and used authoritarianism to carry them out, fascist states largely protected the existing elites and gave them some leniency in what they were allowed to build and sell (so long as it didn't stand in the way of growing the military), while communist states overthrew the existing elites altogether (setting up new ones instead) and attempted to exert more direct control over the economy.

Not all members of all groups are also perfect examples of such an overlap. [Eurocommunism](#)^W is considered to be a communist ideology, but the adherents favor democracy over dictatorship and rejected the authoritarian policies of the Soviet Union.

Scientific research also suggest that Democrats and Republicans have a different [brain](#) structure.^[13] Although it has been suggested that American Republicans and Russian Communists have a similar brain, if we start to put a Democrat brain on the left and a Republican brain on the right it is rather difficult to justify that the sum of all processes in a far-left brain and that of a far-right brain lead to the same outcome in ideas and thoughts. It's very likely that those brains are different, but that political ideas can be acquired by both.

Examples [\[edit\]](#)

“ The real division is not between conservatives and [revolutionaries](#) but between authoritarians and [libertarians](#). ”

—George Orwell^[14]

On the left side of the horseshoe are placed [communist](#) countries

such as the [Soviet Union](#), [Maoist China](#), [Cuba](#) under [Fidel Castro](#), [North Korea](#) under the [Kim Il Sung](#), and, well, every other communist country, with "happiest-barrack" countries like [Hungary](#) under "goulash communism" and [Yugoslavia](#) furthest from the end. On the right side goes (in order from the end) [Nazi Germany](#), militarist [Japan](#), [Pinochet's Chile](#), [Mussolini's Italy](#), [Franquist Spain](#), and various [clerical-fascist](#) regimes, [military dictatorships](#), and absolute [monarchies](#).

In the center is the center-left to center-right continuum occupied by mainstream political parties in the countries that have adopted [democracy](#), [social democracy](#) and [liberal capitalism](#).

One rather explicit example of the horseshoe theory in action is [third positionism](#), which intentionally blends [far-left](#) and [far-right](#) politics. [Fringe](#) political movements such as the one initiated by [Lyndon LaRouche](#) also take ideas from both fringes of the spectrum. Certain other ideologies, such as [North Korea's Juche](#), have also been known to mix far-left and far-right politics.

Far-left vs far-right anti-semitism [\[edit\]](#)

[Anti-Semitism](#) is absurdly common on both ends of the political spectrum. Whereas the far-right will engage in the usual bigoted anti-semitism and [Holocaust denial](#), many third positionist elements within them tend to be anti-capitalist, ranging from ascribing to center-left social-democratic ideals to outright communism ([National Bolshevism](#) is a thing).

While most left-wing groups will criticize and combat anti-Semitism, many will traffic in anti-Semitic [conspiracy theories](#), evidenced by some racial justice movements engaging in it (typified by [Jesse Jackson](#) referring to New York as "Hymietown" and many BLM members using [dog whistles](#) against [Bernie Sanders](#)).

Authoritarian parties [\[edit\]](#)

[Authoritarian](#) type parties on the hard-left and hard-right may not represent the furthest ends of the political spectrum but still mirror each other in significant ways.

Take the anti-pragmatic side of the [United States Republican Party](#) (especially the [Religious Right](#)) and compare it to the modern [Communist Party of the Russian Federation](#) and you can find quite a few similarities (besides the obvious one that both are [ideologues](#) focused on the "purity" of their movement), especially on [social](#) policies. In fact, if each party's leaders avoided talking to each other about [economics](#) they would find more common ground than they may expect, especially considering their vehement hatred for

each other. For instance:

- Both strongly endorse "tough on crime" policies and the death penalty.^[15]
- Both strongly support "traditional values", meaning hardcore social conservatism, pro-life attitudes^[16] and hostility to LGBT rights.
- Both have weaknesses for conspiracy theories, especially the conspiracy theory that there is some deliberate effort to destroy morality.^{[17][18]}
- Both are fervently patriotic and support some form of nationalism while holding the belief that each of their countries are the greatest in the world. This leads to some supporting a degree of historical revisionism as well.^{[19][note 3][note 4]}
- Both are reactionary in nature and extremely nostalgic for some sort of "golden age" (Stalin for the commies,^[21] Ronald Reagan or the 1950s^{[22][23]} for the GOP).
- Both support increasing spending on an even larger national defense while rarely questioning if it's necessary. Also, they both tend to admire "masculinity" and militarism.
- Both make populist appeals to the lower classes, mainly by promising to cut their taxes,^[24] regardless of whether it will be done or whether it can be afforded.
- Both have a love of dramatic rhetoric, even by political standards.
- Both support largely discredited economic crankery that is usually defended with "common sense"-type arguments.
- Both have strands of anti-intellectualism, with intellectuals who question them being seen as "elitist."
- Both are currently trying to appeal to the religious majority in each of their respective countries, with even Communist Party of the Russian Federation leader Gennady Zyuganov citing the "spiritual values" of communism in his speeches to appeal to followers of the Russian Orthodox Church, despite the party being historically atheist.^[25]
- Both support censorship, and passing legislation to stop the "degradation" of national symbols.^[26]
- Both support the limiting of free speech.
- Both, hilariously, blame each other for the supposed "degradation" of art, literature, culture, and philosophy. The commies claim that the embrace of capitalism has left these areas bland because artists are only concerned about profit, not quality, whereas the Republicans like to say that "leftists" or "secularists" have ruined these areas because their "hostility" to religion has harmed creativity.
- Both like to reference revolutionary heroes from their nation's

past in their [arguments](#),^[note 5] usually by claiming that they are fighting for the same values they were, which is commonly followed up by saying that what they stand for is "[True American/Russian values](#)," whereas their opponents stand for [evil/radicalism](#). They may also liken themselves to being the "underdogs" in their current fight, like said revolutionary leaders. Expect these historical figures to be [glorified](#) and their flaws to be ignored/excused/downplayed.^{[27][28]}

- Both oppose more moderate factions holding the same ideas, often using terms to distance themselves from them (RINO's for the GOP, Revisionist Communists for the Communist Party of Russia).

(At least on the Republican side, none of this is new: at the height of the [New Left](#) movement and the [hippie](#) tendency, Americans were regularly regaled with encomia favourably comparing Soviet youth to our own, the Soviets' supposedly being sober, patriotic, sexually puritanical, (if male) short-haired (and never draft-dodging), never foul-mouthed, and eagerly doing as they were told. This was usually presented as a "this is why we're in danger from them, our decadence will doom us" argument, but the admiration was patently unmistakable. If only Soviet youth had been permitted to hear these: they could have used a good laugh.)

[Bob Altemeyer](#)'s research backs the theory that authoritarian types tend to mirror each other, even if they aren't as extreme to the right or left as they could be.

A 1985 study of political extremist groups in the US at the time came to similar conclusions:^[29]

...while the two camps embrace different programmatic beliefs, both are deeply estranged from certain features of American society and highly critical of what they perceive as the spiritual and moral degeneration of American institutions. Both view American society as dominated by conspiratorial forces that are working to defeat their respective ideological aims.

The degree of their alienation is intensified by the zealous and unyielding manner in which they hold their beliefs. Both camps possess an inflexible [psychological](#) and political style characterized by the tendency to view social and political affairs in crude, unambiguous and stereotypical terms. They see political life as a conflict between 'us' and 'them', a struggle between good and evil played out on a battleground where compromise amounts to capitulation and the goal is total victory.

The far left and the far right also resemble each other in the way they pursue their political goals. Both are disposed to

censor their opponents, to deal harshly with enemies, to sacrifice the well-being even of the innocent in order to serve a 'higher purpose', and to use cruel tactics if necessary to 'persuade' society of the wisdom of their objectives. Both tend to support (or oppose) [civil liberties](#) in a highly partisan and self-serving fashion, supporting [freedom](#) for themselves and for the groups and causes they favour while seeking to withhold it from enemies and advocates of causes they dislike.

In sum, when the views of the far left and far right are evaluated against the standard left-right ideological dimension, they can appropriately be classified at opposite ends of the political spectrum. But when the two camps are evaluated on questions of political and psychological style, the treatment of political opponents, and the tactics that they are willing to employ to achieve their ends, the display many parallels that can rightly be labelled authoritarian.

Objectivism and Marxism [\[edit\]](#)



John Galt

Ayn
Rand's



Che Guevara

philosophy of [Objectivism](#) has frequently been described as the "Marxism of the Right" by ~~everyone not blinded by love of Rand~~ its many critics.^{[\[note 6\]](#)} For example, Whittaker Chambers, in his review^{[\[31\]](#)} of *Atlas Shrugged* for the *National Review* in 1957, suggested that Rand's [materialism](#), despite all protests to the contrary, was functionally almost identical to the [Marxism](#) that she so despised. Similarly, Vladimir Shlapentokh, who grew up and lived in the [Soviet Union](#), points out that Rand was more marked by the Soviet system than she was aware.^{[\[32\]](#)}

The similar [personality cults](#) that have been developed around each of them has also caused parallels to be made between [Karl Marx](#) and Ayn Rand — both are small political groups that base themselves around a largely discredited economic philosopher (or a [shitty novelist](#), in Rand's case) who is seen as a [divine authority](#) (or would be, if they weren't both staunch [atheists](#)) on how life works and what the ideal moral system would be like. Both are obsessed with ideological purity within the group and especially on who (*if anyone*) can take up the writer's mantle now that they are

no longer alive, and both have significant infighting because certain members [couldn't be bothered to put their small differences aside](#) and try to advance the movement's credibility in the [academic](#) and social spheres. Finally, both Rand's ideology and Stalin's (which was Marxism as she knew it first-hand) dedicatedly divided people into groups of 'productive individuals' and 'parasites', and [art](#) and literature into acceptable (ideologically valid) and '[degenerate](#)' types. In the first instance, they strongly disagreed as to who were in these groups (Marxists saw the [working class](#) as productive and the upper class as parasites, while Objectivists held the opposite view), but they generally agreed about what art was acceptable versus 'degenerate'.

Marxist economics vs Austrian school economics

[\[edit\]](#)

Despite being on polar ends of the political spectrum (Marxists being radically anti-capitalist and Austrian schoolers being radically pro-capitalist), both schools of economic thought share striking similarities.

Both use pseudo-scientific syllogistic reasoning (called "praxeology") to justify their theories^{[\[citation needed\]](#)}. Both have a fondness for using thought-terminating cliches in order to deflect criticism (Marxists using "bourgeois ideology" and Austrian schoolers criticizing the use of "empiricism"). Both have a tendency of using conspiracy theories to justify why they're not accepted in mainstream economic circles (Marxists once again criticizing the bourgeoisie and Austrian schoolers blaming Keynesianism). Both are completely unable to realize why their theories are wrong and will cling to them with religious fervor.

Subculture of libertarians and authoritarianism

[\[edit\]](#)

Libertarianism contains many strains, and some are more consistent on *civil* libertarianism than others.^{[\[note 7\]](#)} On one hand, libertarians like Radley Balko support movements like [Black Lives Matter](#)^{[\[34\]](#)}, Johan Norberg is well-known for his support of liberal immigration policies and his anti-racism while Julian Sanchez is well-known for his excellent work on surveillance and privacy issues.^{[\[35\]](#)} However, it is necessary to separate the wheat from the authoritarian chaff within the libertarian movement.

The subculture of younger, male libertarians online can be among the more authoritarian strains, as can be older men (they usually are) who, in the US, are often too comfortable with the religious right and other intolerant aspects of the Republican Party. This brand of libertarians loves to single out [the crazies on the left](#), but

some (not remotely all) are [extremely big tent](#) when it comes to [right-wing lunatics](#) on the fringe, including "[race realists](#)" and [theocratic bigots](#) like [Ted Cruz](#) or the [Bush-Cheney](#) horror.^[note 8] Others, like [Gary North](#), have adopted libertarian rhetoric in the name of advancing a reactionary Christian agenda, seeing the [government](#) as restricting the 'freedom' of Christians to [form their own private theocracies](#) and lock sexual and ethnic minorities out of society; this brand of the movement is known as [paleolibertarianism](#).

More recently, the [neoreactionary movement](#) and [Gamergate](#) types have been making inroads into the younger libertarian base and venting their anger and resentment in unexpected directions unrelated to government intrusion on liberties, particularly in terms of race relations and [gender theory](#). This may cause more traditional civil libertarians to modify their own philosophies to win that market of morons, or risk becoming irrelevant.^[37] You can no longer rely on just hating the government — you also have to hate culture, [intellectualism](#), [feminism](#), [sexuality](#), ethnic minorities, your mommy,^[38] and modernity in general^[39] as enemies of freedom (specifically, freedom for straight white males).

Fascism, communism and ultra-nationalism [\[edit\]](#)

See the main article on this topic: [Fascism § Fascism and the political spectrum](#)

“ I think the Soviet Union protected Russians from an even worse ideology, that is the liberalism of the United States and Western Europe... ”

—White nationalist [Richard Spencer](#)^[40]

All the way back since their respective moments of inception, *far-right* (fascist/ultra-nationalist) and *far-left* (revolutionary communist/anarchist) movements have been trading players back and forth like the freaking NFL. Irrespective of political wing, *every* supposedly unique ~~lone-wolf~~ ~~terrorist~~ 'activist' movement positioned in violent opposition to liberal democracy has aligned perfectly with the [narcissism of small differences](#)^W. Illustrative of this fact, the [Swedish Security Service](#)^W and the [Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention](#)^W both classify left- and right wing extremism as practically identical,^[41] concluding formally that "the similarities are greater than the differences".^[42]

Japan [\[edit\]](#)

See the main article on this topic: [Japan](#)

During the 1930s, many Japanese Marxists were arrested by the [Japanese](#) military government and volunteered or were forced to

disavow the Japanese Communist Party. Rather than simply disowning the party, many — but not all — Marxists converted to [fascistic ultra-nationalism](#).^[43]

“ Among the reasons were their formalistic radicalism and blind adherence to Comintern and party dictates and, despite their advocacy of "democracy," a lack of real experience or understanding of [human rights](#). Although prewar Marxism was a sharp thrust to the left and away from tradition, its psychological structure had much in common with the ideology of the emperor system, a rote submission to authority. In one sense, Marxism was simply the reverse coin of a *banzai*-shouting, emperor worshipping [statism](#). ”

—Saburo Ienaga^[43]

North Korea [\[edit\]](#)

See the main article on this topic: [North Korea](#)

The totalitarian regime of [North Korea](#), despite having originated as a Soviet- and [Chinese](#)-backed communist state, has been called, in practice, the last display of "pure" fascism currently in existence. It speaks of the Korean people as "the cleanest race", proclaiming that, because of their purity and childlike virtue, they need strong, parental leadership (i.e. the [Kim dynasty](#)) in order to be safe from an outside world that wants to destroy them. This is an ethnic supremacist ideology more analogous to that espoused by far-right [white nationalists](#) in the West, or by Imperial [Japan](#) in the 1930s and by Japanese ultra-nationalists today, than it is to the "Workers and peasants of the world, unite!" rhetoric that emanated from Moscow and Beijing.^[44] Speaking of Imperial Japan, the worship of the Kim dynasty has also been argued to have more in common with the emperor-worship of Korea's former [colonizer](#) than with the personality cults of Stalin and [Mao](#), and many of the early leaders that the Soviets installed in North Korea had in fact previously collaborated with the Japanese during their colonization of Korea.^[45]

Even with the North Korean regime's fascist roots, however, it had little problem cozying up with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China and adopting an officially communist ideology in its quest to get revenge on the U.S. and their "colony" of [South Korea](#). Notably, once communism fell in Russia and their main benefactor evaporated, the North Koreans started dropping all pretense of communism with fairly little effort. On the surface, it had swung from the far-left to the far-right, but on a practical level, virtually nothing had changed. Today, some on the [alt-right](#) in the West have expressed solidarity with North Korea, viewing it as a

bastion of resistance to 'globalism' that has been unjustly smeared by Western governments; in this, they stand aligned with many of North Korea's traditionally far-left apologists.^{[46][47]}

Benito Mussolini [\[edit\]](#)

See the main article on this topic: [Benito Mussolini](#)

The story of [Benito Mussolini](#)'s conversion from socialism to being the inventor of [fascism](#) is a famous one, repeated most often by right-wing pundits wishing to pretend that fascism is left-wing and has absolutely *nothing* to do with the right, no siree. Regardless, even after Mussolini had renounced left-wing politics and moved to the right, his vision for fascism contained many elements borrowed from socialism, most notably in its economic platform, with him dismissing both capitalism and Marxism as "obsolete doctrines" and upholding a [corporatist](#) economic system as a "[Third Alternative](#)" for [Italy](#).

Horst Mahler [\[edit\]](#)

The [Red Army Faction](#), a far-left terrorist group in [West Germany](#) that was most active in the '70s, was a particularly extreme manifestation of the [New Left](#) in that country, where outrage over the ruling class' historical, unanswered-for complicity in the [Nazi regime](#) was a major motivating factor in protests. Odd, then, that Horst Mahler, one of the RAF's founding members, would himself become a [neo-Nazi](#) later in his life after serving ten years in prison for his activities with the RAF.^[48] Notably, Mahler insists that his views have not substantially changed; rather, he asserts that his conversion to neo-Nazism, and accompanying espousal of [anti-Semitism](#) and [Holocaust denial](#), stemmed from his opposition to capitalism and the United States, with him coming to see both as being in the hands of the Jews.

Birchers and communists [\[edit\]](#)

Historian [Richard Hofstadter](#) noted the similarities between the recruiting methods used by both [radical](#) left and radical right groups when he wrote "The [John Birch Society](#) emulates Communist cells and quasi-secret operation through '[front](#)' groups, and preaches a ruthless prosecution of the ideological war along lines very similar to those it finds in the Communist enemy." Hofstadter also quoted [New Right](#) leader [Barry Goldwater](#), who said "I would suggest that we analyze and copy the strategy of the enemy; theirs has worked and ours has not."^[49] Cue the historical origins of [neoconservatism](#). Important figures in the parallel development of [Thatcherism](#), such as [Keith Joseph](#)^W and [Alfred Sherman](#),^W similarly modelled their tactics on the Leftist idea of the "long march through the institutions". Another rather explicit

example of this is some [Tea Party](#) members reading the writings of leftist [Saul Alinsky](#) because of his suggestions on how to have a successful "radical" movement.

Hofstadter also points out the other examples of the radical right and ultraconservative emulating the "enemy". For example, while the "[paranoid](#)" may be an anti-intellectual, "the paranoid will outdo him in the apparatus of scholarship, even of pedantry." [Glenn Beck](#) has been cited as a modern example of this.^[50]

In fact despite the dislike and paranoia many hard-right figures have for academia, they often end up mimicking academia in many ways because as Hofstadter notes, their style of writing "is nothing if not scholarly in technique. [McCarthy](#)'s 96-page pamphlet, McCarthyism, contains no less than 313 footnote references, and Mr. Welch's incredible assault on [Eisenhower](#), *The Politician*, has one hundred pages of bibliography and notes. The entire right-wing movement of our time is a parade of experts, study groups, monographs, footnotes, and bibliographies." The modern right-wing pundits' habit of overstuffing their book with unnecessary footnotes has become so cliché that even [Stephen Colbert](#) mocked it in his book *America Again: Re-becoming the Greatness We Never Weren't*.^[51]

Islamists and the Western far-right [\[edit\]](#)

“ In numerous cases of apparently ethno-nationalist conflict, the deepest hatreds are manifested between people who — to most outward appearances — exhibit very few significant distinctions. ”

—[Christopher Hitchens](#)^[52]

[Islamists](#) and [Islamophobes](#) (as in *actual* Islamophobes on the order of [Britain First](#), [Geert Wilders](#), etc., rather than people who've been labeled as such by people nervous of racism) seem to have more in common with each other than either mainstream [Western](#) or Islamic society, to the point that each could be described as an identical phenomena occurring in different cultures.

Both share extreme social and often religious conservative views, have a clear sense of their own culture's superiority, a tendency to see other cultures as morally deficient and a threat to one's own culture, a powerful sense of group belonging, a tendency to view the opposing side as one homogeneous horde of [evil](#) (and thus if one member of the other side does something awful it reflects badly on all of them), a tendency to dehumanise the other side, a desire to "cleanse" their perceived homelands of all foreign influence, a keenness on violence as a solution and a favoritism for

anti-immigration policies.

Furthermore, they have a [complete blindness to the failures of their own culture](#) and will, without any apparent sense of [irony](#), rip into the other side's culture for things their own is guilty of. For instance, Islamophobes have a nasty tendency to morph into [feminists](#) as soon as the subject is Islam, yet will revert to their natural sexist form when discussing their own culture and will gladly call feminists all the names under the sun. Conversely, Islamists see Islam as the only culture in which women are respected, unlike in the West where women are forced to behave like "whores" (that are allowed to drive, leave the country of their own free will, choose who they marry, testify in court, et cetera). Some, to their credit (for a certain value of 'credit'), don't even try to hide the shared misogyny. [Vox Day](#), for one, has been known to defend the [Taliban](#)'s vicious repression of women's rights as a measure to preserve their birth rate.^[53]

Both sides like to [quote mine](#) the [Qur'an](#), in particular [Qur'an 9:5](#):

“ Then, when the sacred months have passed, slay the [idolaters](#) wherever ye find them, and take them (captive), and besiege them, and prepare for them each ambush. ”

Islamophobes quote this because it "proves" that Islam can never make peace with [infidels](#), and Islamists quote this because it "proves" that Islam can never make peace with infidels. Normal Muslims and scholars of Islam don't start in the middle of a paragraph, and instead read the whole thing with preceding verses, in which it becomes a bit more clear that the Qur'an is only referring to "idolaters" that have been working against you. Unless, like most people, they just treat their holy books like a [EULA](#);^W pretend to have read it, scroll to bottom, press agree. Anyway, if the "idolaters" aren't fighting you or they are keeping peace treaties with you, no, don't attack them.^[note 9]

On a similar note, some neo-Nazis have also taken to expressing sympathy for [DAESH](#), with a number of cases of neo-Nazis converting to fundamentalist Islam but maintaining continuity with their fascist views. Despite the often-virulent Islamophobia within the white nationalist and neo-Nazi movements, the common denominators of [anti-Semitism](#) and disgust with the 'decadence' of Western society serve as ideological links.^[54]

Immigrants and Nativists [\[edit\]](#)

In most great waves of mass immigration, members of the immigrant groups concerned and the nativist conservatives that oppose their immigration oftentimes share very striking

similarities.

Both camps are typically very socially and religiously conservative in whichever brand is particularly common in whichever culture they originated in. Both tend to hold racist prejudices against various groups, including whoever is opposed to them. Many members of both camps also tend to be working-class people and, more often than not, hold left-leaning views on economics, which some people might consider surprising considering what was written immediately prior.

Two stellar examples come to mind.

The first is the Irish migration to America before, during and after the famine. The Irish immigrants and the Know-Nothing nativists who opposed them held many commonalities. Both parties were devoutly religious (with the Irish being Catholics and the Know-Nothings being Protestants) who held to whichever brand of social conservatism best jibes with their religious tradition. Both also held a strong sense of national pride and identity. Moreover, most of the most radical members of both camps were out-of-work young men. Most also held varying degrees of anti-Semitic prejudice. Many Irish Catholics held quite progressive views on economics (with the Catholic Church's moderately anti-capitalist teachings being a guide) and many of the Know-Nothing protestants who opposed them holding left-wing Millsian liberal views, which differed greatly from the conservative capitalist establishment of the time.

The second is the mess during and immediately following the European migrant crisis. On both sides of the spectrum (MENA immigrants on one hand and European nationalists on the other), there were many commonalities. Once again, most MENA immigrants are devoutly religious Muslims or Christians and most right-wing nationalities cling to either fundamentalist Christianity or some more modern political religion like far-right neoliberalism. Both are oftentimes convinced of their own superiority and hold deep racist prejudices against one another (with migrants to Sweden openly referring to Swedish women as whores) to the point of ignoring their own failings (like Swedish nationalists failing to acknowledge the rampant sexism within their own camp). Both camps are also deeply anti-Semitic, with Swedish authors Tino Sanandaji and Paulina Neuding noting that both groups hold a very strong hatred for Jewish people. Immigrants, particularly new arrivals, very often vote for left-wing parties (despite their social conservatism) and nationalists oftentimes hold left-leaning, anti-neoliberal views.

It's quite easy to understand why this is. Most immigrants tend to be poor, desperate people who will typically find themselves holding menial jobs at below-market wages and most members of

Nativist parties will be the people who's jobs they "took". This is evidenced by the fact that the most hard-line support for Nativist parties tends to be in places where there is high levels of immigrant population and where competition for low-skilled work is the harshest (such as in the working-class suburbs of Sweden's cities, for example). Given both their statuses as working-class, they will typically hold left-wing views on economics. The capitalist establishment of the time will not oppose immigration on grounds that it gives them cheap labor (while probably holding the same racist prejudices as the Natvists).

The mentality of a Nativist is best summed up in a quote from Bill the Butcher (the main antagonist of the movie *Gangs of New York*) which says "These Irish people do for a nickel what a n***** did for a dime and what a white man used to do for a quarter).

Palestinian nationalists vs the Israeli far-right

[\[edit\]](#)

On both ends of the Israel-Palestine conflict, both Palestinian nationalists and far-right Zionists have more in common with one another than they're willing to admit.

Both tend to be devoutly religious and socially conservative, with Palestinian nationalists typically being Muslim (though some, like Solomon Solomon, being Christian) and Zionists very often being Orthodox Jews. Many of their beliefs and traditions hold a striking similarity (with both Judaism and Islam being very close in terms of practice). Most have a nasty tendency to de-humanize one another, with Palestinian nationalists trafficking in bigotry many Neo-NAzis could agree with and with far-right Zionists being rancid Islamophobes. Many also see absolutely no wrong in hurting one another (with more moderate representatives of each camp being more pro-peace, like the Israeli center-left and Fatah). Finally, both want a one-state solution, though disagree on which side should remain.

TERFs and the religious right/MRAs [\[edit\]](#)

One of the more extreme wings of the [feminist](#) movement, [trans-exclusionary radical feminism](#) (or "TERF"), has, in the past, worked closely with religious conservatives on some sexual matters, despite their otherwise fervent hatred of each other.^[55] The two seem to get along on matters that have to do with being [hostile](#) to the [transgender](#) community (hence the name), wanting [pornography](#) and [prostitution](#) to be banned, and a dislike of certain other sexual minorities ([bisexuals](#), the [BDSM](#) community, et cetera). Margaret Atwood's feminist dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* even presented TERFs as having helped to pave

the way for the theocratic Republic of Gilead through colluding with Christian fundamentalists on such issues.

Similarly, TERFs have been repeatedly compared to [men's rights activists](#)^[56] due to both having the tendency to direct overly aggressive rhetoric at the opposite sex, which is almost always based around [hasty generalizations](#). Both may also overestimate the power of their enemy, believing that there is an organized effort by the media/society to destroy/oppress their [gender](#). Some MRAs have even emulated fringe radical feminists, such as through the [Men Going Their Own Way](#) movement which encourages straight men to avoid women, much like what fringe radical feminists do with [political lesbianism](#), which encourages women to stay away from men. Also, both groups are (obviously) typically transphobic, often repeating the same claims about how letting trans people choose what bathroom to use will be the doom of society, and have both attracted certain [homophobes](#).^[57] MRAs also have a tendency to look for [bias](#) against them in the [media even where none may exist](#); for example, if a women bests a man in combat on television or in a movie, there is a tendency to immediately assume this is for "PC empowerment" as opposed to more likely reasons such as plot convenience (apparently, the idea this is very possible is too crazy to be taken seriously).^[note 10] This is especially ironic considering that this is basically what they decry radical feminists for doing (i.e., eagerly looking for [bias](#) against women where none may exist).

TERFs also tend to share their right-wing counterparts' hostility for [third-wave feminism](#).^[58] While religious conservatives and MRAs oppose it because they don't like feminism in general, TERFs often come out against it because they see third-wavers as allowing transgender "[infiltrators](#)" into the women's movement^[59], as well as their more permissive views on sexual matters and resultant opposition to the TERFs' hardline stances against pornography and sex work.^[note 11] In fact, some otherwise dyed-in-the-wool anti-feminists have taken to developing an appreciation for TERFs, seeing them as "[real feminists](#)" versus the "[modern feminists](#)" with their embrace of transgender rights, [intersectionality](#), and that hippity-hoppity jungle music the kids these days are into.^[60]

Vladimir Putin's fan club [\[edit\]](#)

See the main article on this topic: [Vladimir Putin](#)

Extremists sometimes champion surprising *causes célèbres*, which can lead far right and far left to back the same horse. Their responses to Vladimir Putin illustrate this. When U.S.-Russian relations chilled in 2013 amidst controversy over a proposed U.S. intervention against [Assad](#) in [Syria](#), a vocal minority of Western

leftists went beyond opposing the intervention and actually praised Putin. This tendency, most visible on [tankie](#) websites like [Globalresearch.ca](#) and Counterpunch, continued throughout the crisis in [Ukraine](#), in which the Euromaidan that ousted President Viktor Yanukovich was portrayed as a mob of neo-fascists. Around this time, American conservatives also began warming up to Putin, seeing him as a stalwart defender of Christendom against homosexuals, Muslims, and [riot grrrl punk bands](#) who made their favorite boogeyman, [Barack Obama](#), look "weak" in the bargain. It's no secret that sections of the American "libertarian" movement have [deep strains of authoritarianism and power-worship](#), and Putin has crafted an image that appeals to such people.^[61] The logical conclusion of this came in 2015, when [Donald Trump](#) accepted Putin's *de facto* endorsement for the presidency. Putin's moonbat supporters (probably) don't share many of his wingnut supporters' motives, apart from reflexive loathing of the Western "establishment", but their behavior has still dovetailed.

Another example is how in Europe, for example, Putin is generally associated with the far-right, linked with (open or secret) support of parties like the French Front National and Austria's Party for Freedom that, conversely often praise Russia and Putin and propose a more Euro-Russian stance instead of Atlantism, whilst in places like Latin America Putin is associated with the far-left and seen as a strong sponsor of far-left regimes like those in Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, to the point that some people in Latin America still think that Russia is socialist.^[citation needed] Nevertheless, both the European far-left and the Latin American far-right also praise Putin. This is probably not entirely a coincidence, apart from both groups' love for authoritarian anti-American and anti-NATO regimes, Putin indeed tries to get closer to every regime that is critical of the US for geo-strategic reasons whether it's a far-right ultra-Conservative theocracy like Iran or a far-left socialist regime like Nicaragua.

White and black nationalists [\[edit\]](#)

[White nationalist](#) and [black nationalist](#) groups have been known to get along and even collaborate in the past. The founder of the American [Nazi Party](#), [George Lincoln Rockwell](#), was invited by Elijah Muhammad to speak at a [Nation of Islam](#) rally; in turn, Rockwell "praised" Muhammad as the "Black People's [Hitler](#)."^[62] White supremacist [Tom Metzger](#) has also praised the Nation of Islam for their [anti-Semitic](#) views. Future [British National Party](#) leader [Nick Griffin](#) worked with Nation of Islam leader [Louis Farrakhan](#),^[63] and allegedly distributed Nation of Islam publications in the [United Kingdom](#) in the early 1990s.

From a purely ideological perspective, it makes sense. Both white and black nationalists believe that their respective races ought to be [kept separate](#) so as to "protect" their [ethnic/cultural](#) identities from being diluted through contact with the other, and would thus see a movement trying to enforce such separation from the other side as a natural ally. As a result, both sides have little love for the pro-integration wing ([MLK](#), the [NAACP](#), etc.) of the [civil rights](#) movement. A similar tendency can be seen in the more extreme condemnations of white people who take from black American or Jamaican musical influences, with leftists attacking them for [cultural appropriation](#) (or simply "theft") and rightists attacking them for being "race traitors" (sometimes glossed up, especially in Britain, by calling them "class traitors"). There also exists shared belief in [racialism](#), albeit in somewhat different forms. While white nationalists tend to follow the discredited ideas of turn-of-the-20th-century [scientific racism](#), black nationalists likewise have [melanin theory](#), with both having questionable views on [historical revisionism](#). Lastly, a lot of the same anti-[LGBT](#) rhetoric and [anti-Semitic conspiracy theories](#) circulate in both white and black nationalist circles, with the latter in particular claiming that the [Jews](#) were responsible for [slavery](#).

Anti-Semitic ethno-nationalists and Jewish ethno-nationalists [\[edit\]](#)

If one looks at the behavior of neo-Nazis, black nationalists and the Israeli far-right, one cannot help but notice that they have more in common than they want to think.

All of them seem to believe that they have some kind of inalienable right to a particular locality (regardless of the legality or the feasibility of such a plan) and will viciously defend this (with white nationalists whining about the non-white "invasion" of Europe and the Israeli far-right wanting to steal Palestinians' land to build settlements). All of them have a fondness for blaming their problems on some bugbear (with non-Jewish ethno-nationalists blaming Jews and Jewish ethno-nationalists blaming anti-Semitism, even if said action isn't motivated by real anti-Semitism (like criticizing Israel)). A lot of them are viciously anti-communist and will typically hold centrist views on economics (with European nationalists typically being social-democratic on economics and with both wings of the Israeli nationalist right (Shas and The Jewish Home respectively) being centre-left to moderately right-wing).

Many of them also are very welcoming towards traditionally marginalized groups within their identity. White nationalists will typically promote a kind of "Europe, A Nation" view of the white race and will oftentimes include historically and currently

marginalized groups like Irish people or Eastern Europeans whereas Kahanists (another term for Israeli nationalist) will typically be very welcoming towards Sephardic and Mizrahic Jews (who have been historically marginalized within Israeli society).

And, most strikingly, many seem to have a cordial working relationship. Richard "Heil Trump, Heil our people, Heil Victory" Spencer vehemently supports Israel, as do anti-Semitic figures like Viktor Orban and Donald Trump. Bibi doesn't seem to mind this.

Arab nationalism/Arab socialism/Islamism [\[edit\]](#)

See the main articles on this topic: [Arab nationalism](#) and [Islamism](#)

These ideologies, while often virulently opposing one another on paper, are very similar in many ways. For starters, they all have a near pathological hatred of the West and [Israel](#) and blame almost all evils in the world on them. Many of them oftentimes engage in anti-Semitic behavior (with more moderate Arab socialists engaging in dog whistling while Islamists will simply engage in straight up pogroms of Jews). All these ideologies will also hold fairly left-leaning views on economics, criticizing capitalism for reasons as varied as Marxist critique to Islamic anti-usury laws.

The Unabomber [\[edit\]](#)

See the main article on this topic: [Unabomber](#)

The American domestic [terrorist](#) Ted Kaczynski, better known as the Unabomber, has been embraced as a hero by people and groups on both the far left and the far right. On the left, a number of [hard greens](#) have embraced his anti-industrial, neo-[Luddite ideology](#) on [environmental](#) grounds. The [anarchist](#) collective [CrimethInc.](#), for example, has an extended hagiography declaring Kaczynski "a hero for our time", claiming that the actions of his targets against people and the environment made his bombing campaign justified.^[64] On the right, he's also won the affection of [radical traditionalists](#) and other reactionaries due to his view that modern technology was responsible for the decadence, crumbling [moral values](#), and [tyranny](#) of the modern world. Right-wing pundit [Keith Ablow](#), for one, has defended Kaczynski's ideology; while he took great pains to state that he thought Kaczynski's *actions* were wrong, he went on to state that his ideas "are increasingly important" and "cannot be dismissed", saying that his manifesto, *Industrial Society and Its Future*, deserved a place alongside [Nineteen Eighty-Four](#) and *Brave New World*.^{[65][66]} According to Ablow's logic, since the [NSA](#) is spying on us and Barack Obama heavily employed the internet as a key campaign and outreach tool, that means that the internet is totally rotten to the core and

that Kaczynski was right about technology.

Art and propaganda [\[edit\]](#)

Within the [art](#) world, the state-sponsored artistic styles of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union have been described as having more in common with each other than either side might have been willing to admit, with art historians sometimes using the term "heroic realism" to describe both socialist realism and Nazi art.^[67] Both were characterized by a firm rejection of [modernism in the arts](#) as 'bourgeois' or 'degenerate', instead seeking to depict idealized figures representing the common man with the intent of use for propaganda purposes, and their state sponsors cracked down on alternative, modernist styles. During the [Cold War](#), the [CIA](#), as a reaction to socialist realism, sponsored modern artists to serve as a counterweight to the Soviet state style, even though, in the US, their main critics traditionally came from the right rather than the left.^[68]

In fiction [\[edit\]](#)

One of the most famous demonstrations of the horseshoe theory was in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, a [satirical](#) critique of Soviet communism and how it had betrayed its [working class revolutionary](#) roots. The animals' [revolution](#), after overthrowing the farm's [cruel human owners](#), quickly turns into exactly the same sort of tyranny that the [humans](#) had once imposed upon them — all in the name of stopping counter-revolutionaries, of course. To represent this evolution, the pigs, the leaders of the revolution, start taking on an increasing number of human-like qualities, until at the end they cannot be distinguished from them.

The *BioShock* video game series also likes to feature this with its villains. The hyper-capitalist Andrew Ryan in the first game is mirrored by the hyper-collectivist Sofia Lamb in the second, with both their ideologies turning out to be rather hollow and easily discarded out of self-interest. *BioShock Infinite*, meanwhile, has Zachary Hale Comstock and Daisy Fitzroy, the former being the theocratic, racist tyrant running the city of Columbia with an iron fist, and the latter a working-class black woman who rises to become the leader of a communist-flavored resistance against Comstock — and, upon attaining power, turns into a tyrant in her own right by launching purges against Columbia's upper class.

In religion [\[edit\]](#)

The horseshoe theory can be seen in other ways besides far-right/far-left politics. [Anti-Catholicism](#) and [Traditionalist Catholicism](#), seemingly opposites, share the same predilection to

anti-Semitic, anti-Masonic, and New World Order conspiracy theories, and to conspiracy theories about the current Catholic Church leadership. One can see similar parallels between the conspiracist views of Mormon writer W. Cleon Skousen and anti-Mormon writer Ed Decker, and between New Ager David Icke and fundamentalist Christian, anti-New Age writer Texe Marrs.

Even when it comes to religious prejudice, Richard Hofstadter can note examples of extremists emulating the "enemy". For example, he references the fact that despite the Ku Klux Klan's extreme Protestant views and anti-Catholicism they ended up imitating Catholicism "to the point of donning priestly vestments, developing an elaborate ritual and an equally elaborate hierarchy." The infamous Klan hoods and robes are actually based on the garb Spanish Catholic priests worn in certain ceremonies.

Similarities [\[edit\]](#)

There are several common features of far-left and far-right politics and political movements.

Use of othering in rhetoric [\[edit\]](#)

Both far-right and far-left movements portray their enemies in a dehumanizing manner as a faceless mass. Often the enemy group is portrayed as having much more power than they actually have, approaching the near-omnipotence of Satan.

Enemy groups used by the far-right can be defined by ethnicity or class; common targets are local ethnic minorities, as well as international bankers and foreigners in general. The far-left largely uses class to define its enemies, such as bankers (these guys just can't catch a break!), industrialists, and other Bourgeois Capitalist Oppressors; however, some anti-colonial and similar movements associated with the left-wing, such as Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, use race or ethnicity as the defining factor. Both extremes tend to toss the groups on "their side" that fit the horseshoe theory in with the other side (such as how conservatives insist that Nazis were left wing and progressives sometimes consider TERFs and SWERFs right wing).

The "othered" group is portrayed as having to be swept aside in some way in order to make things better; this has led to the groups in question being marginalized, or further marginalized, or subjected to mass slaughter as in Nazi Germany, the Holodomor, communist Cambodia, the slave trade *etc.*

Insistence on orthodoxy [\[edit\]](#)

Far-left and far-right movements often require adherents (or all

people in their jurisdiction, if they get into power) to adhere to a [very rigid set of beliefs](#), expelling or punishing [heretics](#) and dissenters. These beliefs are often accompanied by an *ad hominem* to be used against any dissenter; for example, that a non-communist has [false consciousness](#), or that a non-Nazi is of Jewish descent, or that an opponent of [apartheid](#) in [South Africa](#) is a communist, or the simple "[sheeple](#)."

In a [cult-like](#) manner, people who defect from the "[true faith](#)," or else are insufficiently doctrinaire, are not merely said to have changed their minds or voiced dissent: they are viewed as traitors and [apostates](#), who have sold their souls completely to the hated enemy for the most venal of motives. This is the logic that motivates [Tea Party](#) supporters to accuse [pro-bailout Republican presidents of being secret socialists](#) (a sure sign that the accuser has read neither Marx nor any mainstream economic textbook). It also explains the mutual loathing between the various strains of [communism](#) (e.g. between [Stalinists](#), [Trotskyists](#), and [Maoists](#)^[note 12]).

Often, this can take form in accusations that anyone who disagrees with them [must be an extremist working for the other side](#). An example of this would be American radical right pundits constantly trying to "[prove](#)" that fairly moderate presidents such as [Dwight Eisenhower](#) or [Barack Obama](#) were/are political radicals/socialists (or in Ike's case a communist agent) in order to portray them as dangerous. It can also be seen in the infighting between libertarians, [paleoconservatives](#), and [neoconservatives](#), with the first group accusing the other two of supporting "[intrusion by big government](#)", the second one accusing their rivals of supporting policies that "degrade" the nation's morals, economy, and identity, and the last one accusing the others of being of like mind with dovish liberals on foreign policy. Likewise, Stalinist groups label(ed) anyone who broke from the Soviet Union's idea of communism, including Trotskyists and [social democrats](#), as secretly being fascists or agents of capitalism. The Communist International even coined the term "[social fascism](#)"^W in the 1930s as a disparaging synonym for social democracy. The Trotskyists themselves, of course, turned around and labeled the Soviet Union itself as a betrayal of "true" communism. Of course, this makes a kind of sense: if you're very far from the political centre, then anyone even slightly closer to it, on any issue, would appear (to you) to be far to your "right" or "left".

The most obvious manifestation of this is the hundreds and hundreds of splinter-sects that have grown out of right and left-wing movements through disagreements on fairly minor points, with more infighting than cooperation going on between them. This

was satirized in the film *Life of Brian* as a dust-up between the Judean People's Front and the People's Front of Judea.

Conspiratorial thinking [\[edit\]](#)

“ Anti-Semitism is the socialism of fools. ”

—Ferdinand Kronawetter^{[\[note 13\]](#)}

Fringe ideologies often appeal to neurotic and paranoid types, and actual political positions often take a back seat to their mental states. Thus, conspiratorial thinking beyond the bounds of reason tends to characterize political extremes, so much so that the libertarian right and the anarcho-(*your movement here*) left seem interchangeable. Take the [9/11 truther](#) movement, which thrives on both political fringes because conspiratorial ideation and extreme values are correlated. This is not, of course, to say that *all* belief in the existence of conspiracies is irrational. But when someone views conspiracy as the prime mover behind history, or sees a [unified conspiracy theory](#) behind the fall of every leaf, they've gone off the edge of the map.

Historical revisionism is common on the political fringes. [A wide selection of isolationist weirdos and unreformed anti-Semites on the Old Right](#) have famously sought to [rationalize, downplay, or flat-out deny the Holocaust](#). So too have [a vocal minority of crazy assholes](#) within the [anti-Zionist](#) movement.

Likewise, a few hard-core leftists have denied that the conduct of the [Bosnian War](#) constituted a [genocide](#). Some of the absolute worst revisionists, like Edward S. Herman,^{[\[70\]](#)} even claim that the [Bosnian Serb](#) militias' massacre of at least 8,373^{[\[71\]](#)} unarmed Muslim civilians at and around Srebrenica was a legitimate act of self-defense, a shadowy Muslim mass-suicide, or an elaborate hoax. Presumably, these deniers fear it would be "imperialist" to say that big bad [NATO](#), which eventually intervened in [Bosnia](#) and Kosovo, *once* did a good thing. Even [Noam Chomsky](#) has [occasionally](#) indulged in this [intellectual dishonesty](#): he once claimed that the [Trnopolje camp](#)^W was not a [concentration camp](#), because "people could [leave](#) if they wanted"^{[\[72\]](#)} (although he has since backed off on this). In this particular debate, moonbats align with [Orthodox Christian](#) fundamentalists (defending the Serbs as they're predominantly Orthodox too), pan-Slavicists in Russia, [neo-fascists](#) like [Golden Dawn](#), paleoconservatives like [Pat Buchanan](#), and [Islamophobic](#) "thinkers" like [Pamela Geller](#) and [Michael Savage](#); strange bedfellows indeed.

Conspiracism and its subset, revisionism, is endemic in all these groups because their members hold all their beliefs to be both true

and self-evident to anyone of good will who knows the facts, leaving open (though not begging)^[note 14] for them the glaring question of why these beliefs are so unpopular in the general populace. The usual answers are some sort of anti-democratic thought (most people are 'sheeple') and a belief that one or more conspiracies must be keeping them from knowing the facts and possessing the mental equipment necessary to arrive at the correct conclusions.

Pseudoscience promotion [\[edit\]](#)

Quite a large number of extremists have but little regard for [science](#), and are often openly dismissive of it, seeing it as part of the [bourgeois/liberal/Jewish/Marxist](#)/what-have-you establishment. As a result, they are very prone to promoting various [pseudoscientific](#) ideas. Well-known examples include:

- Christian, Muslim, and other religious [fundamentalists](#) deny any scientific findings contradicting their religion, such as [evolution](#) or the [big bang](#).
- [Racist](#) groups likewise deny any scientific findings suggesting that the races are not separate sub-species or something of that description, while promoting [bullshit](#) claims designed to elevate their own race/ethnic group above all others. Among [white supremacists](#), this manifests in claims taken from *The Bell Curve* and discredited [scientific racism](#) from the late 19th/early 20th centuries, while among [black supremacists](#), you can find the [Nation of Islam](#) teaching that white people were created by a [mad scientist](#) six thousand years ago.
- Many forms of mutually-exclusive [national mysticism](#) claiming a divine/supernatural heritage for a particular people.
- Marxists promoted their philosophy as "scientific socialism."
- Stalin, out of sheer will to give the impression that massive developments were happening, [banned scientific disciplines](#) such as [genetics](#) and [Darwinian](#) evolution. Nikita Khrushchev also promoted the pseudoscience of [Lysenkoism](#) after Stalin's death, but allowed freedom of the scientific press. After his death science saw a rapid development in the Soviet Union, even if it was still way behind Western developments.
- Nazi Germany attempted to suppress the work of [Albert Einstein](#) and other Jewish [physicists](#) simply because they were Jewish, instead promoting *Deutsche Physik* as an "[Aryan](#)" alternative, by educating about Aryan physicist [Jew sympathizers](#) such as Werner Heisenberg.
- Fringe groups on both the left and the right are prone to promoting crankier forms of [alternative medicine](#), [global warming](#) denialism and anti-[GMO](#) whackery, often

accompanying it with [appeals to nature](#) and conspiracy theories about [Big Pharma](#) and [Monsanto](#). [Survivalists](#), [New Agers](#), [Occupiers](#), [Teabaggers](#), *Huffington Post* readers, [Alex Jones](#) readers, and Christian and Islamic fundamentalists all can be found in the big [anti-vaxxer](#) and anti-GMO tent. Likewise, in the 1990s, [HIV/AIDS denialism](#) infected both the [religious right](#) (who saw AIDS as a consequence of "sinful" lifestyles and quite possibly [divine retribution](#)) and radical [gay](#) and black activists (who saw AIDS as part of a government conspiracy to wipe them out). That being said, anti-GMO opinions still tend to be way too common on the political centre, as the EU 1997 GMO-moratorium clearly demonstrated, suggesting that anti-GMO is still mainstream consensus despite clear contradictory scientific evidence.

- [9/11 conspiracy theories](#) are a recreational sport on both the far right and the far left.
- Both [Hard Greens](#) and [anti-environmentalists](#) tend to deny the danger of certain pesticides that have scientifically been shown to be dangerous (the former on rotenone and the latter on DDT) and tend to invoke post-apocalyptic doom scenarios that are scientifically improbable.

See also [\[edit\]](#)

- [Crank magnetism](#)
- [Eric Hoffer](#), and his observation about the interchangeability of mass movements
- [Balance fallacy](#)
- [My enemy's enemy](#)
- [Zeal of the convert](#)
- [Poe's Law](#)
- [Political Compass](#)

Notes [\[edit\]](#)

1. ↑ The centrist [Christian democrats](#) in Chile basically called upon the military to stage a [coup](#), leading to the [Pinochet](#) dictatorship.^[7]
2. ↑ See, for example, Noam Chomsky discussing how non-socialistic the Soviet Union was.^{[9][10]}
3. ↑ Such as [Texas](#) "revising" textbooks to fit an [American exceptionalist](#) point of view^[20]
4. ↑ Or wingnuts such as [Glenn Beck](#) who claim MLK was a conservative.
5. ↑ This can be said for many other political parties, but authoritarian parties are especially abusive.
6. ↑ For example, [George Monbiot](#).^[30]
7. ↑ For example, [neoconservative](#) pundit Jennifer Rubin laments

that: "Some libertarians, including Richard Epstein, argue that an isolationist foreign policy reflects a misunderstanding of true libertarian principles, but in practice the overwhelming number of libertarians vehemently oppose U.S. interventionism and want to eliminate foreign aid and slash defense spending... Libertarians have gotten the notion that the [Bill of Rights](#) supplants the laws of war and protects, for example, American jihadists from being droned and data gathering to detect [terrorism](#) plots. In that they often seem to be mimicking the Obama administration's fetish with applying criminal justice concepts to anti-terrorism policy. Most Republicans resist that leap of logic and constitutional misinterpretation.^[33]

8. ↑ For instance, self-identified libertarian [Glenn Reynolds](#) ceased being anything but an authoritarian during the Bush era.^[36]
9. ↑ Of course, in the mind of a [fanatic](#), any action that isn't doing exactly what the fanatic wants is "betrayal".
10. ↑ This is also an odd complaint, considering that weaker men regularly defeat stronger men on television, so long as they're the hero.
11. ↑ [Tumblr](#), famously viewed as an online stronghold for the social justice left and third-wave feminism, is also well-known for its very laissez-faire attitude towards porn, drawing the line only at [actually hosting it](#). About [a fifth](#) of all Tumblr traffic is porn-related, and the porn and feminist sides of the site cross over more than you might think. Draw your own conclusions.
12. ↑ It was pretty much de rigueur for [every proper](#) communist [dictator](#) to get his own -ism. Hence Albanian [Hoxhaism](#), [North Korean Kim Il Sungism](#) ([Juche](#)), [Yugoslav Titoism](#), and so on and so forth.
13. ↑ The saying is frequently attributed to [Bebel](#),^W but probably originated with the Austrian democrat [Kronawetter](#);^W it was in general use among German Social Democrats by the 1890s.^[69]
14. ↑ [Begging the question](#) is a logical fallacy where someone assumes what they're trying to prove — it doesn't mean "raising the question"

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