Populism and Perception: Reassessing Cultural Backlash in an Age of Discontent

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the ways in which the rise of right-wing populism in Europe can be understood as a period of "cultural backlash." It begins by outlining the conceptual foundations of populism, drawing on Cas Mudde's definition, and then reviews two major explanatory frameworks: the economic shock model, which emphasizes globalization and labor insecurity, and the cultural backlash model, which interprets the populist surge as a reaction to rapid cultural and moral change. While the economic insecurity thesis receives the lion's share of the literature, this essay focuses on Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart's cultural backlash thesis, which argues that older, uneducated, and conservative voters from the rural hinterlands reject the progressive values of younger, cosmopolitan elites. However, this generational bifurcation is problematized by recent work, notably by Armin Schäfer, whose empirical data challenge the extent of value divergence across cohorts. Drawing on original qualitative fieldwork with young voters and activists of French right-wing populist Éric Zemmour, the essay suggests that cultural backlash is not limited to the older or economically insecure, but is increasingly found among younger, highly educated elites who feel alienated by the dominant cultural codes of their institutions. The essay ultimately argues that the binary between cultural and economic explanations is reductive. Instead, the interplay between material and symbolic grievances—shaped by perception and positionality—offers a more comprehensive understanding of populist sentiment. By incorporating micro-level narratives, the essay calls for a more nuanced, multidimensional approach to the study of the populist radical right and its cultural resonances.

On a crisp November evening in 2021, a private boat quietly drifted along the Seine, doubling as the unlikely venue for a chapter in France's newest radical-right youth movement. Beneath soft deck lights, banners reading Grandes Écoles avec Zemmour[1] framed the modest podium. Men in fitted blazers and women with a touch of Parisian poise sat attentively, awaiting the start of the evening's speeches. The moderator's voice rang out over the microphone, tallying the presence of France's most prestigious academic institutions. When Sciences Po—the incubator of the French political class and long regarded as a bastion of progressive thought—was announced among the top three, the room erupted in cheers. "It goes to show that Sciences Po is not left-wing!" the moderator quipped, triggering knowing laughter.

The evening was not just a rally. It was a rallying cry.

What unfolded was not just politics, but a cultural inflection point where elite youth contested the very norms that shaped them. This scene—one of many observed during my years of ethnographic research—is striking in its symbolism, reflecting a broader phenomenon: the growing appeal of right-wing populism not only among the so-called "left behind," but increasingly among segments of the cultural elite. What unfolded that night on the Seine was a microcosm of a deeper malaise, and one that, over the past few years, has transformed political discontent from background noise into the defining mood of our age.

Over the past decade, trust in the democratic process began to fray as social disruptions from the modernization process were brought to the foreground. One would be hard-pressed to pinpoint a region in the world untouched by the rise of populism which has become a salient feature of political discourse across both developed and developing nations. Right- and left- variants of populism have surged, keeping alive an ongoing fraught debate over the very definition of the phenomenon. This widespread unrest has compelled scholars to probe more deeply into its roots and ramifications.

To fully investigate whether or not we are experiencing a period of "cultural backlash," it is crucial to situate the theory within the broader political context that gave rise to it—namely, the rise of populism. This essay will first clearly define populism. Then, it will move on to sketch the trajectory of populist scholarship starting with the globalization/economic insecurity model, the silent revolution, and the more recent debates on cultural backlash. Finally, it will assess the thesis as to whether or not we are currently experiencing a period of cultural backlash by fleshing out its strengths and limitations and by proposing future avenues for qualitative research.

The Road to Populist Resentment

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[1] Éric Zemmour, a radical-right polemicist, rose to prominence as a media commentator. While best known for his positions on immigration and Islam, he also positioned himself as the standard-berarer against *wokisme* and progressive social norms—framing them as existential threats to France's cultural and intellectual heritage. In 2021, he founded his own political party *Reconquête!* after young activists of Génération Z—the subject of this study, urged him to run for president. The latter then became the very backbone of his presidential campaign, helping him to position himself as a hardline alternative to Marine Le Pen and to champion limited immigration and an uncompromising stance against left-wing progressivism.

The Road to Populist Resentment

"Populism" has been widely debated as a concept in the literature, yet many of its interpretations have converged, by and large, around two key reference points, namely "the elite" and "the people," and at its core, populism articulates a particular vision of the relationship between the two.[2] This essay adopts Cas Mudde's definition of populism given that it helps bring into sharper focus the crucial yet complex meaning of this phenomenon: populism is "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and the latter argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will)."[3] Central to this definition is a Manichean morally-laden framework—one that draws a stark, charged distinction between a virtuous, unified people and a corrupt, self-serving elite.[4] More often than not, however, populism has been called a "thin ideology" insofar as it is about depicting the people, rather than a coherent ideology that clearly defines what its adherents stand for. Furthermore, while many scholars and commentators magnify the populist radical right, it is important to bear in mind that there are several populist parties, such as left-wing populism and centrist populism. For the purposes of this essay, however, the analysis of the cultural backlash thesis will be limited to the context of right-wing populist parties and their electorates.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the incendiary rhetoric of European populism and Trumpism marries vertical and horizontal antagonisms. "The elite" is cast not only as "outside" or culturally alien but also "on top"; they are insulated and insensitive to the economic struggles of the masses and also culturally deracinated.[5] Two major theoretical frameworks especially promote our understanding of the root causes of populism and promise fresh insights into the demand side of populism : (1) the economic shock model, centered on economic grievances and globalization and (2) the cultural shock model, which locates the roots of populism in perceived immaterial threats to cultural identity and moral order.

Economic Shock Model

The globalization or economic insecurity thesis figures prominently in discussions of populism: as economies become increasingly interconnected, that is, there have been exogenous changes to the labour market, namely—globalization, migration, and automation. Numerous scholars, however, have used the umbrella term "globalization." They point to the ways in which developed countries have seen their economies mothball in the last decade, and how the working class has especially experienced the full brunt of globalization.

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[2] Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): pp. 541-563, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x, 543.
[3] Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," 543.
[4] Cas Mudde and Kaltwasser Cristóbal Rovira, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford university press, 2017), 7.
[5] Rogers Brubaker, "Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 8 (January 15, 2017): pp. 1191-1226, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1294700, 1192.

Globalization seems to have been affecting certain parts of the population more strongly than others because not everyone is at the same risk: those with high value-added jobs and highly marketable skills are not at the same risk by globalization, but quite the contrary, are benefitting from it, causing the gap to even widen.

A few decades ago, in the absence of a common market, most workers were insulated from international labor competition. Today, however, those whose skills are vulnerable to globalization—as well as to automation, shifting consumer preferences, and corporate rationalization—find themselves increasingly exposed. Their jobs may be deemed too expensive compared to workers on the other end of the globe, who often labour in poorer conditions, for lower wages, and with less social protection. Therefore, as those in the upper echelons of society have embraced globalization as being its primary benefactors, many others have felt left out. This is where the radical-right populist movements enter the picture.

Kriesi et al. provide a salient contribution to this debate by framing a new cleavage in Western European countries: that is, in a structural conflict between the winners and losers of globalisation. Parties of the populist radical right have proven especially successful in appealing to the fears and anxieties of the 'losers' of globalization and have offered them a seductive and resonant ideological and emotional package.[6] Moreover, Kriesi et al. make the case that a rise in economic competition ultimately increased cultural competition as a result of waves of immigration in the West.[7] Other scholars have bolstered this thesis by demonstrating that economic inequality fosters selective solidarity, leading citizens to support redistribution policies but only when the perceived beneficiaries are native-born citizens.[8]

Nonetheless, when analyzing the economic grievances hypothesis (and later, the cultural backlash thesis), it is crucial to underscore that many scholars of populism also underline the importance of *perception*. That is, when examining populism, empirical data have shown the stark contrast between subjective and objective market labour threats.[9] They consistently reveal that it is not necessarily the most economically disadvantaged who turn to populism; on the contrary, those in the lowest socio-economic strata often abstain from voting altogether. Indeed, support for right-wing populist parties tends to come from voters who are relatively better off and moderately educated, albeit still situated within the working or lower-middle classes.[10] The difference is whether or not they perceive these conditions and whether that engenders anxiety. This element merits close attention as it illustrates that *perceived* threats often carry more political weight than material realities. The following

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[6] Hanspeter Kriesi et al., "Globalization and the Transformation of the National Political Space: Six European Countries Compared," *European Journal of Political Research* 45, no. 6 (2006): pp. 921-956, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00644.x, 929.

[7] Céline Teney, Onawa Promise Lacewell, and Pieter De Wilde, "Winners and Losers of Globalization in Europe: Attitudes and Ideologies," *European Political Science Review* 6, no. 4 (November 23, 2013): pp. 575-595, https://doi.org/10.1017/s1755773913000246, 577.

[8] Gabriele Magni, "Economic Inequality, Immigrants and Selective Solidarity: From Perceived Lack of Opportunity to in-Group Favoritism," *British Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 4 (2020): pp. 1357-1380, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123420000046, 2.

[9] Zhen Jie Im et al., "The 'Losers of Automation': A Reservoir of Votes for the Radical Right?," *Research & Politics* 6, no. 1 (2019): pp. 1-7, https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168018822395, 2.

[10] Im et al., "Losers of Automation," 2.

section will further make the case that cultural backlash exists insofar as many of the voters who support right-wing populist parties *perceive* that cultural conflict exists and renders them more anxious based on both sociotropic (focused on the nation's trajectory) and *egotropic* (centered on personal circumstances) evaluations.

The Cultural Backlash Model

The economic shock model should not be taken in isolation, as for any political phenomenon, there is always a confluence of factors at play. As Catherine de Vries posits even though scholars on both sides of the debate have provided a host of evidence for their respective arguments, many have lost track of the salient interaction of both economic and cultural grievances.[11] In the last five years, a host of scholars have begun to intervene in this debate and attribute the rise of populism to *cultural* factors. Pipa Norris and Inglehart, notably, take centre stage in investigating radical-right populism through their works "Cultural Backlash" and "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash." As a response to growing cosmopolitanism, their thesis of a counter-revolutionary backlash contends that not only pure economic insecurity but also a reaction against the sweeping shift to progressive cultural and post-material values can explain changes in political behaviour, namely the rising popularity of right-wing populist parties.[12] Instead of magnifying the long-standing right-left cleavage that has been salient in most countries across the West, Norris and Inglehart endorse a new cultural divide between populists and liberal cosmopolitans. They investigate 268 parties in 31 countries in Europe through factor analysis to prove that value change is predicted by birth cohort, and they unpack empirical data on both the demand-side and supply-side,

The heart of Ingelhart and Norris' "Cultural Backlash" is not entirely new. They base their work on the "Silent Revolution," which was presented in 1992 by Italian political scientist Piero Ignazi. The Silent Revolution, four decades ago, examined the implications of advanced welfare states during the postwar era, and Norris and Inglehart hoped to draw parallels between the past and today's 'Artificial Intelligence Society' that affords us opportunities but endorses a winner-takes-all economy that ultimately increases inequality.[13] Ingelhart and Norris do not discount the importance of economic insecurity and globalization but they particularly cast light on some nuances of their effects. Economic insecurity is not as proximate a cause of the right-wing populist (or authoritarian) vote, as scholars had presupposed: while it figures prominently in the causal process and explains the rise of the populist right-wing vote today, even advanced, stable, economically secure, and tolerant countries with strong welfare nets (Denmark, Sweden, Germany) have still been susceptible

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[11] Catherine de Vries, "The Globalization Backlash: It's Both Culture and the Economy, Stupid," *Social Europe*, July 5, 2018, https://socialeurope.eu/the-globalization-backlash-its-both-culture-and-the-economy-stupid.
[12] Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, July 2016, pp. 02-53, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2818659, 2-3.
[13] Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 2.

to “an authoritarian reflex linked with in-group conformity and xenophobia” because of the rapid and massive influx of immigration that accelerates changes in the cultural landscape.[14]

Ignazi brought a new argument that had not been quite fully examined in the post-materialist world. When there is security, many inevitably take up divergent cultural and post-materialist positions, such as individual free choice, self-expression, the environment, and gender issues, to name a few.[15] Three forces—education, urbanization, and growing ethnic diversity—drive *post-materialism*, but not everybody is concerned, so once-dominant groups (usually older and more conservative cohorts) may start to feel threatened. The latter perceives that they are shifting from a majority to minority status, and there is a tipping point. Such a tipping point works differently depending on one’s generation. Norris and Inglehart distinguish four generations in the book and contend that older generations ultimately resent such changes more palpably. Such cultural backlash stemming from the salience of postmaterialist and self-expression values (instead of economic factors) mainly accelerates support for populist authoritarian parties as we have witnessed firsthand. Exit polls in the US elections and in the ESS data further bolster this: only “one of five economic variables tested— employment status—strongly predicted support for right-wing populist parties” but all five *cultural* factors turned out to be clear predictors for said parties.[16]

Rethinking Cultural Backlash: Why Qualitative Research Matters

The theoretical implications of Inglehart and Norris’ thesis seem to make for a compelling case and can be further observed in the discourses of various populist politicians and their adherents. But does the empirical data fully support their claim? Armin Schäfer attempted to cast light on the flaws in their argument. Schäfer analyzes ESS data and posits that the generational value change that Ingelhart and Norris initially bring to the foreground must come under more critical scrutiny. Shafer’s empirical analysis illustrates that there are only a few signs of polarization among old and young cohorts and that there is even barely any difference between the Interwar generation and Millenials when it comes to political distrust. Even on topics such as gay and lesbian rights, among a wealth of other questions, the majority of the people were actually very similar because the gap was very minimal.[17] Shafer’s data do not support Inglehart and Norris’ main positions that in European societies, there is a bifurcation between younger and older cohorts with regard to cultural conflict in which the old espouse authoritarian, and the young libertarian, values.[18]

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[14] Ronald Inglehart, “The Silent Revolution in Reverse: The Rise of Trump and the Authoritarian Populist Parties,” in *Cultural Evolution: People's Motivations Are Changing, and Reshaping the World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 173-199, 185.
[15] Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 32.
[16] Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, “Trump and the Populist Authoritarian Parties: The Silent Revolution in Reverse,” *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 2 (June 2017): pp. 443-454, https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592717000111, 446.
[17] Armin Schäfer, “Cultural Backlash? How (Not) to Explain the Rise of Authoritarian Populism,” *British Journal of Political Science*, September 24, 2021, pp. 1-17, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123421000363, 5.
[18] Schäfer, “Cultural Backlash?,” 7.

Schäfer's research helped accelerate the debate on cultural backlash, yet one aspect can certainly grip our attention and push the debate further. He mentions that younger cohorts are more likely to vote for populist leaders than the older ones and that even though millennials are depicted as anathema to populism, they actually have the highest probability to vote for populist leaders and parties. We can indeed see how in Poland, for instance, about a fifth of voters under 30 against 1% of those over 60 chose the radical right and supported Konfederacja's leader Janusz Korwin-Mikke.[19] In France, "Génération Z," many of those who were campaigning for presidential candidate Éric Zemmour in 2022, were young adults and many of whom were highly educated.

But despite the loopholes in Inglehart and Norris' data, it is not fair to discount the theory of cultural backlash altogether. My argument is two-fold. First, the sharp wedge between economic and cultural factors as alternative and distinct explanations to explain the rise of right-wing populism and authoritarian figures receive the lion's share of attention in the populism literature, but such lenses only render the scholarly debate as reductive and binary when it is not. Political scientists Miguel Carreras, Yasemin Carreras, and Shaun Bowler are some of the few scholars who have started to jettison such a dichotomy. In their study of economic distress and cultural backlash in the UK, they highlight how individual-level studies conclude that cultural values are better predictors of support for Brexit than economic variables, but that these analyses are not always consistent with aggregate-level data.[20] The electoral analyses of Brexit illustrate that economic fallout and increasing insecurity as a result of globalization have been better predictors of citizens wanting to leave the European Union. Carreras et al, therefore, posit that the interplay between the larger economic model and the individual-level cultural attitudes must be highlighted as the former leads to different strands of the latter. The cultural backlash thesis, despite some of the argument's shortcomings, and the economic inequality perspective are, therefore, not mutually exclusive.

Secondly, drawing from Mudde, populism is a thin ideology, and so it inevitably attaches itself to other ideas. There may indeed be a cultural backlash, but I will make the case that we can square the tension between Inglehart and Norris' research and the apt criticism of Schäfer by examining how the demographics of cultural backlash may be more diverse than we had expected, which has been the crux of my qualitative research and many others in the past few years. Given that Inglehart and Norris, among other scholars, focus only on a few countries for their comparison and usually posit that such reactionary right-wing populists are, by and large, uneducated, white, and uncouth men, other researchers can perhaps cast light on other demographic groups in different countries, such as how young

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[19] Frédéric Schneider, "Why Did Young People Vote for the 'National-Liberals'?," VoxEurop, October 24, 2019, https://voxeurop.eu/en/why-did-young-people-vote-for-the-national-liberals/.

[20] Miguel Carreras, Yasemin Irepoglu Carreras, and Shaun Bowler, "Long-Term Economic Distress, Cultural Backlash, and Support for Brexit," *Comparative Political Studies* 52, no. 9 (March 4, 2019): pp. 1396-1424, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414019830714, 1397.

adults and even LGBT communities (such as the "sexually modern nativist voters"[21] whose positions can be understood through "realistic conflict theory" and symbolic threat) can turn to populist parties not for economic grievances, but as a staunch and antagonistic reaction to what they perceive as sweeping cultural changes.

Inglehart and Norris highlight traditional values and a nostalgic reaction among older cohorts of the electorate, but such reactionary posture need not be constricted to older generations. Just in the case of France and Poland, what interweaves many radical-right groups among the youth (Génération Z, l'Action Française, Génération identitaire) are traditional values; though many may be part of the elite and have never been economically disenfranchised, their distrust of the cultural elite can also compel them to go against those in power. Furthermore, these reactions to the cultural landscape and consequential influence on attitude and/or voting behaviour need not be constricted to the old or those traditionally in the right. After all, even traditionally left-leaning public thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic such as Mark Lilla, Caroline Fourest, Jonathan Haidt have criticised the progressive tides of cultural changes and arguably the myopic lenses of post-materialist, identity politics that the last decade has seen.

Qualitative studies can further shed light on the complexity of different reactions toward cultural changes among younger generations. While these methods do not seek to be representative but highlight societal significance,[22] a host of insights illuminate the complexity and trajectory of cultural reaction. A more thorough understanding of the development of radical-right movements demands close attention to issues of micromobilization, particularly the motivations driving individuals to align with highly controversial groups.[23] And despite the electoral and organizational gains of these movements, ethnographic research on them remains limited. Pertinent studies on the French context, such as Martina Avanza's « Comment faire de l'ethnographie quand on n'aime pas ses indigènes ? Une enquête au sein d'un mouvement xénophobe »[24] and Daniel Bizeul's « Faut-il tout dévoiler d'une enquête au Front national ? Réflexions sur le partage des données et le devoir éthique en sociologie »[25]—provide a glimpse of the methodological and ethical difficulties of studying radical-right or xenophobic movements ethnographically.

In a recent master's thesis (2022) and a current academic article under peer review for the Journal of Right-Wing Studies (UC Berkeley), I employed a fully qualitative research design drawing on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork and open-ended interviews with young

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[21] See Niels Spierings, Marcel Lubbers & Andrej Zaslove's "'Sexually modern nativist voters': do they exist and do they vote for the populist radical right?"

[22] Mario Luis Small, "`How Many Cases Do I Need?'," *Ethnography* 10, no. 1 (March 2009): pp. 5-38, https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138108099586.

[23] Kathleen M. Blee, "Ethnographies of the Far Right," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 36, no. 2 (April 1, 2007): pp. 119-128, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241606298815, 2.

[24] Martina Avanza, "Comment faire de l'ethnographie quand on n'aime pas « ses indigènes » ?," *Les Politiques de l'enquête*, January 2008, pp. 41-58, https://doi.org/10.3917/dec.fassi.2008.01.0041.

[25] Daniel Bizeul, "Faut-il tout dévoiler d'une enquête au Front National ? Réflexions sur le partage des données et le devoir éthique en sociologie," *Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique* 150, no. 1 (December 28, 2020): pp. 70-105, https://doi.org/10.1177/0759106320960887.

French militants and/or voters who supported Éric Zemmour in the 2022 presidential election. Conducted between 2021 and 2022, my life-history interviews shed light on how many of these students—often entering university with broadly left-liberal orientations—began to gravitate toward populist figures in response to what they perceived as sweeping progressive tides. Several interviewees were raised in middle-class households yet had gained access to elite institutions and networks. However, disappointment with the perceived prioritization of post-materialist values within these spaces led them to adopt, to varying degrees, populist ideologies as a reaction to cultural change.

Even young cosmopolitan and highly educated students who have been part of the elite and are the so-called "winners of globalization," it seems, can be against what they claim are the now culturally salient aspects of the elite (politically correct, identity politics, cancel culture). In a right-wing populist conference for elite schools (Grandes Écoles avec Zemmour), French right-wing journalist Gabrielle Cluzel, stepped up to the rostrom and began her incendiary speech with a call to the demographic whose paradox I seek to magnify:

> You are the elite not only because you are in these prestigious schools, but also because you know how to resist these politically correct institutions. You had sufficient critical skills, perspective, intelligence and logic. Don't let them indoctrinate you, and it's true that your generation is a challenge, so bravo….[26]

Cluzel went further, invoking the populist thesis of the elite and the people, and even reframing the image of the "true elite" as one willing to defy the cultural consensus: "You are the winners of globalization… You are from the city, yet you can still finish your studies and engage in a noble cause, which can be complicated today."[27]

My ethnographic findings echo this narrative. Across life-history interviews I've conducted, many young French adults—particularly students at elite institutions—described feeling alienated by what they perceived as the dominance of progressive moralism in academic and political life. Some expressed frustration with the elevation of post-materialist concerns, while others longed for order, rootedness, or continuity—values they felt were dismissed or pathologized in their institutional environments. These students were neither economically marginalized nor politically inexperienced; in fact, some continued to hold progressive beliefs. Yet their turn toward right-wing populism reflected a deeper cultural disaffection—a sense of estrangement not from access to elite spaces, but from the ideological consensus that governed them. In this sense, their testimonies complicate the conventional view of cultural backlash as the domain of older, uneducated, and uncouth

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[26] Dans vos écoles, on vous dit, vous êtes l'élite de la nation et vous êtes l'élite non seulement parce que vous êtes dans des écoles prestigieuses, mais aussi parce que vous avez su résister dans ces écoles prestigieuses et dans la préparation à ces écoles prestigieuses au politiquement correct. Vous avez eu assez de sens critique, de recul, d'intelligence, de situation, de logique. Il ne faut pas vous laisser endoctriner et c'est vrai qu'à votre génération, c'est vraiment une gageure.

[27] L'autre mérite que vous avez, c'est que vous êtes finalement des gagnants de la mondialisation. Quand je vous regarde. Non, mais c'est vrai. Vous êtes, vous êtes plutôt de la ville. Vous n'êtes pas paysan en Corrèze, ouvrier dans le nord.... Et vous pourriez finalement mener tranquillement vos études, aller aux réunions…. bravo parce que vous avez décidé de vous engager dans une cause belle et noble et peut-être compliquée. Mais en tout cas, c'est vrai que je vous félicite.

voters. Instead, they point to a growing cohort of young, educated, and socially mobile individuals who experience a form of ideological homelessness within their own class.

This is precisely why new avenues of research, especially qualitative, must turn their attention to this emerging demographic. Political scientists like Pippa Norris and Inglehart make the case of a cultural backlash and drive a wedge between the compolitian and well educated elite vs. the uneducated, provincial, mostly white demographic to explain the rise of populist right-wing and far-right leaders. While this framing captures some important dynamics, it overlooks the growing appeal of the populist radical right among segments of the young elite—those who, despite their social and educational capital, feel culturally and politically alienated by the perceived progressive orthodoxies of their institutions.

CONCLUSION

The key question is not whether or not cultural reactionaries vote for the populist right point blank. Rather, what matters is how populism has become a fertile ground for a broader spectrum of antagonisms. Whether these antagonisms stem from cultural or economic grievances—or some combination of both—remains a matter of ongoing debate. Schäfer, for example, limits his quantitative analysis to voting behavior for authoritarian-populist parties. Yet I find it equally important to consider the role of attitudes, trajectories, and affective dispositions. Some may paradoxically react strongly to cultural shifts, espousing more populist radical-right views, without ever expressing those views at the ballot box, just like many voters may still espouse some progressive values but ultimately vote for populist radical-right figures by virtue of some dissatisfaction.

Nonetheless, while the cultural backlash thesis has its limitations, it still holds a kernel of explanatory power that merits close attention, particularly when examined through a more nuanced lens that integrates both symbolic and material grievances and that qualitative methods permit. Only by tracing and observing how these tensions play out at the granular level of generation and social class can we begin to grasp some of the deeper tremors of the populist upheaval reshaping and fueling the West and beyond.

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