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# Creeping racism: a cultural conception of politics

My piece endeavours to explain why the new far right is likely here to stay, in Europe, by focusing on its fundamentalist, racist understanding of culture. My argument is

that the far right's culturalist conception of politics circulates well beyond these parties' immediate constituencies. Indeed, it is sedimenting into a new culturalist common sense, a form of everyday racism. I want to draw attention to the far right's basic idea that functioning political communities are based on solid ethno-religious-cultural peoples, with a solid, shared cultural heritage. Its corollary is that cultural differences, multiculturalism, lead to political antagonism and destroy the social bond.

Despite being a prominent feature of right-wing populism, this use of culture and the vicious cultural racism that accompanies it have gone largely ignored by scholars of populism and heritage. Anthropologists like Verena Stolcke and Douglas Holmes, Philomena Essed and Mahmoud Mamdani spotted this early on. Given anthropology's subject and the increased political urgency of the topic, this (mis)use of culture should be of primary concern to us today. Yet, studying it poses problems for a discipline predicated on localised, in-depth intersubjective research. How are we to study a discursive formation so ubiquitous and tentacle-like, so mundane, pervasive and multifaceted, as this culturalist conception of politics? How are we to grasp the accelerated circulation of this conception at multiple scales and the complex processes through which it is becoming vernacular in diverse locales and political cultures?

I was compelled to research far-right populist culture by the lack of engagement with it in studies of populism (and heritage), combined with an acute sense that ideas of culture and heritage play a distinct and hugely significant role in populist ideology. To investigate this, I teamed up with a group of sociologists led by Ayhan Kaya, who conducted over 80 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with supporters of right-wing populist parties across Europe (De Cesari and Kaya 2019). I was struck by the common-sensical quality of what the interviewees said – the fact that populists' ideas of culture and cultural heritage have slipped into everyday common sense. To a significant extent, their simplistic, Manichean, but undoubtedly compelling cultural theory of politics has ossified into the taken for granted.

The interviewees made multiple references to multiculturalism – seen as a 'dead end' – and 'foreign cultures' threatening national and European 'norms and values'. Openly racist interviewees stated explicitly what their peers had alluded to: that 'Blacks and Arabs' or just 'Muslims' are the invading cultural others. They largely understood culture as cultural heritage, involving deep-seated, quasi-biological inherited traits that one cannot easily dispense of, if at all. The interviewees articulated a set of assumptions that underpin right-wing theories of culture such as ethnopluralism: that people are naturally rooted in their birth culture, that cultures are isomorphic with specific territories and that incommensurable cultures are destined to clash in the context of a Huntingtonian culturalised geopolitics. This emphasis on culture, though not new, is a central feature of today's forms of racism, especially Islamophobia, in that it allows racists to deny that they are racist on the grounds that they favour the separation of cultures, not of races. Ironically for anthropologists, this notion of culture resembles the old anthropological idea of a people's unique way of life. Having long lost its legitimacy in the discipline, it is now gaining widespread traction in public culture and policy.

Here we espy the seeds of a racism that is as vicious to the same extent that it appears trivial, even benign in the guise of common sense. Denunciations of racism resurgent, often in rhetorics asserting the exclusivity of cultural identities and heritages, date back to the 1990s if not earlier. Such rhetoric is now extremely widespread, not least in the language of opposition to immigration and politicians' talk of the 'failure

of multiculturalism'. It also pervades everyday parlance. The populist far right construes the us/them distinction around profoundly racialised cultural divides. A glaring example of this rhetoric is found in the current EU commission's practical imagination of Europe, which overlaps with the populists'. One of its priorities for 2019–2024 is 'Promoting our European way of life: Protecting our citizens and our values.' A specific commissioner is dedicated to this project, which centres on policing and securitising 'strong borders' and migration.

The world's deadliest border (along which 'Blacks and Arabs', as our interviewees called them, are left or made to die while attempting to cross the Mediterranean) has been erected under the banner of protecting liberal Europe's values and way of life. This scandalous necropolitics is the flip side of our interviewees' cultural biopolitics. It is the deadly effect of a creeping racism disguised as the studious culturalisation of geopolitics and citizenship.

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