POPULISM AND IDENTITY

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It is very clear that the rise of populism in many parts of the world is related to assertions of identity. One of the common themes among citizens who voted for Brexit, Marine Le Pen's National Front, Donald Trump, and the AfD party in Germany, was the desire to "take back our country." Prime Minister Viktor Orban has explicitly argued that in his view Hungarian national identity should be based on Hungarian ethnicity, which constitutes a shift from liberal to illiberal democracy since it excludes Hungarian citizens who are not ethnically Hungarian.

The policy issue that is the most closely linked to identity is immigration, and the closely linked issues of refugees and citizenship. Contemporary populist parties have mobilized around opposition to immigration. But national identity is the larger frame within which the immigration issue exists. Hungary has very low levels of immigration relative to other countries in the EU; nonetheless, Orban and his Fidesz party have consolidated power around the issue of protecting his version of Hungarian national identity.

Identity is a modern concept built around three components.[2] The first is a distinction between the inner self and outer social reality, and a belief that the authentic inner self is being suppressed by the larger society. The second component is the belief in a collective identity based on tradition and shared experience, which distinguishes nationalist identity

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[2] Nationalism is a subset of the larger category of identity politics, which includes Islamism and the kinds of demands for individual and group recognition that exist in liberal democracies. For a fuller account, see the author's forthcoming book, *Identity* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

from expressive individualism, another form of identity politics in liberal societies. And the third characteristic is the demand for recognition, that is, the intersubjective acknowledgement of the dignity of the inner self which in the case of nationalism is a collective one. The demand for recognition makes identity politics inherently political, since recognition is granted primarily through political action.

All of these components are visible in contemporary populist movements: they paint a broad-brush attack against external elites—"globalists," "the swamp," the EU, the mainstream media—who are suppressing the authentic expression of the people's true national identity. That collective identity tends to be built around the traditional dominant ethnic identity that once existed in the country, which has been threatened by newcomers and increasingly diversity. Populists feel that political correctness makes it impossible to even articulate their concerns over this shift, and demand that the traditional identity be recognized publicly.

IDENTITY AND ECONOMICS

It is very difficult to disentangle identity and economic motivation, since many phenomena we categorize as economic are actually based on concerns over identity and dignity. This is ultimately due to the fundamental limitations of the modern neoclassical economic model of behavior, that does not encompass what Plato labeled *thymos*, the part of the human psyche that demands recognition of one's dignity. Especially in rich industrialized societies, demands for "economic justice" or "equal pay for equal work" are not rooted in concern over resources; rather, resources are a marker for status and the dignity accorded to a particular person or activity by the surrounding society.[3]

[3] For an extended discussion of this issue by an economist, see Robert H. Frank, *Choosing the right pond : human behavior and the quest for status* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

This explains why economic concerns play out in identity terms in contemporary populist politics. Many observers have noted that core voters for Brexit, Trump, Le Pen, and other populist politicians have come from lower middle or working classes that have faced job loss in the face of technological change and globalization. They do not come from the poorest of the poor, who have tended to vote, when they do vote, for traditional left-wing parties.

Samuel Huntington pointed out long ago that the most politically destabilizing socioeconomic class is often not the poor, who are too preoccupied with daily life to mobilize politically, but rather those middle classes whose expectations of social advance have been disappointed.[4] This group—the middle three quintiles in the income distribution—have not fared well in the United States and other industrialized countries over the past generation.[5] This group is neither starving nor economically desperate, but they have seen a huge loss of relative social status, and fear being sucked into an underclass as maladies like drug addiction and family breakdown spread. In the meantime, economic elites—in a modern democracy, those with a college education or higher—have walked away with the lion's share of the economic gains that has taken place in recent decades. The declining middle and working class believed themselves to be the very personifications of national identity; now they perceive that other groups like recent immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities, women, the LGBT community, and

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[4] Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies. With a New Forward by Francis Fukuyama* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. ?.

[5] See Ali Alichi, Kory Kantenga, Juan Solé, "Income Polarization in the United States," (Washington, DC, IMF Working Paper WP/16/121); Branko Milanovic, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalizaton* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016), pp. 41-45.

others, have received special favors from a government that is controlled by those same elites.[6]

In the three or four decades following World War II, middle and working-class voters tended to support traditional left-wing parties that sought economic redistribution and protective social policies. Many of these same voters now facing downward social mobility have shifted their allegiance to right-wing populist parties that may or may not have a commitment to social protection, but assert the centrality of their identity concerns. This may explain why many Brexit voters wanted to leave the EU even understanding that this would cause job loss and economic setbacks, or why Trump voters remain loyal even as the Trump administration threatens to cut social benefits that they themselves depend on.

The observation about the relationship between economic decline and social status also helps distinguish between different political movements that have been labeled populist. In Latin America, Hugo Chavez found his strongest support among the poor; the middle classes tended to side with elites in opposition to Chavismo. This reflects Latin America's different social structure: there has been a higher degree of inequality overall, and a smaller middle class that has not experienced the same sort of economic decline as their counterparts in Northern Europe or North America. Chavismo has consequently not been built around hostility to immigrants or ethnic pride.[7]

POLICY RESPONSES

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[6] For an illustration of this perception, see Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in their own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: New Press, 2016), p. 143.

[7] Bolivia is different; former president Evo Morales built his Movement towards Socialism around indigenous identity. However, in Bolivia this group overlaps with the poor almost entirely; the middle classes there have by and large been hostile to Morales.

The ability to disentangle economic from identity motives in the current wave of populist politics will greatly affect the kinds of remedies that political actors will pursue to either mitigate or exacerbate the problem. For starters, if populist voters are more concerned with identity than with economic issues, it follows that they will not necessarily be mollified by the traditional redistributive policies traditionally offered by the Left, like stronger safety nets, drug treatment programs, and the like. One needs a language and set of practical measures that will address the identity issue head-on.

The most important of these policy areas concerns immigration policy, and its close cousins, refugee and citizenship policy. It is clear that the AfD and other populist parties in Europe were given a huge boost by the Syrian refugee crisis that exploded in 2015. In the United States, Zoltan Hajnal and Marisa Abrajano have argued that immigration has displaced race and economic issues as the main reason for the growth of the Republican Party in recent decades.[8] Beyond separating economic and identity issues, we also need to disentangle the different motives for opposition to immigration. In particular, we need to move beyond the view of many critics of populism that concern over immigration is driven by simple racism, xenophobia, ethnic prejudice, or ignorance.

While racism and prejudice may indeed motivate certain populist voters, there are several other possible reasons for their choice. First, they may object not to immigration per se, but to illegal and uncontrolled immigration on rule of law grounds. Second, they may worry that immigrants will not assimilate into the dominant culture, and will either change that culture by their numbers, or form disaffected pockets with very different values from the old mainstream. Third, they may worry simply about the pace and rate of

[8] Zoltan L. Hajnal and Marisa Abrajano, *White Backlash: Immigration, Race, and American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

change; there is a point at which quantitative changes become qualitative ones. Many countries have experienced high and in some cases unprecedented levels of immigration in the last generation (see Table I below). This concern dovetails with the second one; it is harder to assimilate large numbers than small. Fourth, voters may worry that immigrants are consuming welfare benefits out of proportion to their contribution to the tax base—a greater concern in European countries with large welfare states relative to the United States. And finally, there may be partisan concerns: if immigrants are more likely to vote for a party opposed to one's own, then letting in larger numbers will ultimately shift the electoral balance.

We have plenty of anecdotal evidence and some survey data supporting each of these alternative explanations.[9] Understanding the relative weight of these different concerns will help in focusing policy: if the problem lies more in fears of non-assimilation rather than immigration per se, then governments should pay more attention to programs that specifically address this issue, for example through language policies or changes to citizenship laws. If hostility to immigration is driven by simple prejudice and ignorance, then a committed cosmopolitan liberal can only resist that tide. On the other hand, if the driving concerns are about future assimilation, numbers, or rule of law, then certain adjustments to current policy may mitigate populist pressures without compromising the basic principles underlying modern liberal democracy.

[9] For example, Hajnal and Abravanel (2016) point to survey data showing that conservative voters are far more worried about Hispanic than Asian immigration, and more worried about Muslim immigration than Hispanic. This suggests the issue for them is not race per se, but expectations of the likelihood of cultural integration.

Table 1

Foreign born as percentage of population, selected OECD countries[10]

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2013	2015	2016
Australia	…	…	…	22.769	23.037	27.713	…	…
Austria	10.57	9.06	9.54	10.33	10.395	16.704	18.2	…
Belgium	…	…	…	…	10.328	15.508	16.3	…
Canada	…	…	…	15.234	17.36	19.993	…	…
Denmark	…	…	…	3.689	5.781	8.478	…	…
Finland	…	0.705	0.811	1.27	2.631	5.594	6	…
France	7.49	8.31	10.64	10.4	10.13	12.04	…	…
Germany	…	…	…	…	12.402	12.776	13.3	…
Greece	6.3	10.19	1.798	6.06	10.28	…	…	12.7
Hungary	…	3.89	3.45	3.35	2.885	4.525	5.1	…
Ireland	2.58	4.41	6.54	6.49	8.665	16.42	16.9	…
Italy	0.915	1.6	1.97	2.52	3.73	9.457	9.7	…
Japan	0.56	0.587	0.65	0.871	1.02	…	…	1.4
Korea	0.316	0.42	1.23	0.1	0.321	…	…	2.6
Netherlands	…	2	3.47	8.14	10.143	11.625	12.1	…
New Zealand	14.08	14.57	15.11	15.56	17.187	22.406	…	…
Norway	…	…	…	…	6.792	13.868	14.9	…
Poland	…	…	…	7.75	5.6	…	1.6	…
Spain	0.696	0.95	1.31	2.12	4.891	13.439	12.7	…
Sweden	…	6.55	7.52	9.22	11.314	15.973	17	…
Switzerland	…	13.41	16.87	20.73	21.864	28.303	27.9	…
United Kingdom	…	5.29	5.96	…	7.925	12.261	13.3	…
United States	…	…	…	7.919	11.024	13.079	13.44	…

[10] Source: OECD