

Has Populism Won the Culture War?

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Core theses:

- *Populism is a form of political rhetoric, constructing a division of society into a small elite and a vast homogeneous mass, depicting the elite as conspiring to deceive the masses, and promising a savior who will with quick action restore the interests and well-being of the popular mass to its well-deserved place. It locates the source of mass grievances at the origin of short causal chains, typically by scapegoating a minority in society (immigrants, cultural minorities, etc.). Economists characterize populism as myopic, applying high discount rates to the future, simplifying reality and thereby offering false solutions to complex problems.*
- *But populism is a vessel without content: Different substantive political appeals can fill up that vessel. Victory and defeat of populism depend on that content. There are currently different populisms—on the right, on the left—and they fight different “Culture Wars.”*
- *Populisms thrive in periods of societal uncertainty and crisis. New economic and sociocultural challenges have appeared in Western democracies that have inflicted a crisis of (social) liberalism that surfaces in declining social trust and low confidence in the institutions of democracy. These crises concern technology and occupational markets, demography and migration, media and social atomization, global warming, and the shadow of new military threats originating from autocratic regimes.*
- *Neither right-wing nor left-wing populisms in Western democracies have shown evidence that they might be seriously capable of tackling any of the major challenges and grievances in these democracies that have generated political disaffection and receptiveness to populist appeals.*
- *Western countries are thereby caught up in the paradox of a weakened social liberalism, but also a failure of populist alternatives to impose their hegemony. Much will depend on demonstration effects of right-wing populist regime performance, such as those of Hungary and the United States. Most importantly, the fortunes of European populism may rise and fall with the outcome of the American model.*

What is “populism” and what is the “culture war”? There are many interpretations of these terms and my interpretation of them predestines my answer to the subject of this panel: Populist parties indicate a crisis of liberalism and especially social and democratic liberalism. But populist rhetoric is not enough to confront that crisis. That crisis has multiple material-economic and social psychological roots, and liberalism has few ready answers to cope with them. But populists do even worse. Populist rhetoric is an empty vessel that rival populist politicians fill with different content and aspirations for social change. They are not fighting one, but multiple “culture wars” with different stakes and objectives. But none of that content materially confronts and alleviates the actual empirical grievances and anxieties at the heart of the crisis of liberalism. As a consequence, none of the strands of populism can win their version of the “culture war.” The manifest failure of populisms to cope with the challenges of 21st century knowledge societies either leads to the revival of a transformed social liberalism or to something entirely novel we may still have a hard time to imagine currently.

In some manner, I follow the social theorist Emile Durkheim’s lead in his analysis of socialist movements and socialist thought at the beginning of the twentieth century. He saw socialism, in its multiple variants, as a cry of grievance, a social fact, but diagnosed socialists as unable to provide a valid theory of society that would enable contemporaries to resolve the deprivation of emerging industrial capitalism.

Inspired by Durkheim I will say: Contemporary populist movements signify an articulation of anguish about the current state of affairs in Western democracies but offer only false leads to resolve and relieve any of the grievances that propelled populisms to prominence in the first place. This is why these movements may fail, although they may cause a great deal of damage to liberal democracies in the course of their trajectories.

I will first clarify my understanding of populism and its varieties. Next, I will itemize the current challenges contributing to the crisis of liberalism and social liberalism. Then, finally, I will offer a scorecard of how populisms—in the plural—fail to address the grievances that have mobilized populist sentiments across broad swaths of the electorates in Western democracies.

What is Populism?

Populism divides society into a small elite and a vast homogeneous mass of the people. Elites are conceived as having different interests than the masses and systematically betraying their promises to raise the welfare of the masses by pursuing their own self-interests. Populists perceive liberal constitutional checks and balances as well as institutionalized political parties as devices created by the elites to hobble the articulation of mass interests even in regimes that maintain the veneer and rhetoric of democracy. Populists advocate to sweep away these constitutional obstacles to the true articulation of the people and replace them by an unbridled majoritarianism and plebiscitarianism asserting the will of “the people.” Populists typically elevate a single charismatic leader to impersonate the symbolic embodiment and articulation of the people’s volitions ... a first step to autocracy. Populist leaders promise to relieve their followers from the ills of the status quo by measures that require only short chains of causation to relieve pain and deliver pleasure. Populists have high discount rates and short time horizons: Gratification of populist politics is promised to arrive immediately and with striking force. No incremental muddling through here!

Scapegoatism and conspiracy theories are key operating procedures of populist rhetoric: There are evil agents in clandestine networks—immigrants, aliens, ethnic minorities, domestic corporate tycoons or foreign companies—who are purported to cause the misery that aggrieves populist followers. And the swift defeat or removal of those sinister forces from the public realm would provide instant relief from all that ailed the common people. On its flipside, populist predilections to designate scapegoats comes with

an intense yearning to endorse closed particularist identities that separate “us” from “them.” As the fascist political theorist Carl Schmitt posited, politics is, at its core, the delineation of “friend” and “foe:” Shared ethnic, national, gender, linguistic, religious, or geographical attributes may serve as focal points for the mobilization of particularistic identities that subordinate the individual and become mobilizational vehicles to stake out distinctive political claims. These yearnings for closed particularist collectivist identities are diametrically opposed to liberal universalism and assertion of dignity and autonomy of individual citizens.

When do populist templates resonate with mass audiences? This typically happens in times of societal uncertainty or sudden loss of gratifications, when many feel threatened to see their economic, political and sociocultural endowments deteriorate. People sense that the expected benefits of life will not continue on the tracks that prevailed in the recent past but are giving way to a future with downward social mobility and declining quality of life rather than stability or improvement. Populist leaders ride high, when they can prime a sense in people of being backed against the wall, finding themselves in the domain of losses (Kahneman), being stripped of the comforts of group solidarity and no longer commanding the recognition and dignity of their fellow citizens. Pessimism finds its expression—among other ways—in low trust and confidence in institutions.

Western democracies have entered a phase of heightening uncertainty and fear of loss that provides fertile ground for populist appeals. And it is well documented that trust in social institutions and the societal fabric, but especially mainstream political parties, politicians and the capacity of parliaments and governments have been precipitously declining over the past several decades, albeit in strikingly different cross-national patterns that I do not have the space to account for here. A brief illustration may help.

A most roundabout measure of public malaise is people’s declining trust in their fellow citizens. It captures personal wellbeing, the economy, social and political relations. The table below shows that compared to 1990-94, by 2017-22, trust in fellow citizens has fallen everywhere, albeit from different levels and at different speeds. It has fallen the furthest in France and Italy, but Japan, the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom are not far behind. Only Sweden, as representative here of the Nordic countries, has experienced comparatively mild declines.

Belief that Most People Can be Trusted.
 (% in the affirmative)
 (source: World Values Surveys 1990-4 (V341) and 2017-22 (Q57))

	France	Italy	Japan	United States	Germany	United Kingdom	Sweden
1990-94	57.5	38.6	48.9	73.0	70.7	77.3	73.2
2017-22	26.3	26.6	33.7	37.0	41.6	43.3	62.8
change	-31.2	-12.0	-15.2	-36.0	-29.1	-34.0	-10.4

The fall in interpersonal trust relates to declining confidence in political institutions, here tracked by confidence in legislatures (see figure below). The latter has never been as high as social trust, and for a variety of reasons: Even ardent supporters of democracy may assert that the appropriate attitude to democratic institutions is one of mistrust, demanding accountability from their representatives. Nevertheless, the fall of confidence in legislatures over the past thirty years to unprecedented lows in most countries is closely intertwined with the general decline of social trust. Of course, there is a range of variance across countries and across time that would need to be examined. The severity of decline in social trust and institutional political confidence is most pronounced in the Anglosaxon democracies.

Confidence in One’s Country’s Parliament.
“Quite a lot” or “A great deal” (% of respondents)
 (source: World Values Surveys 1990-4 (V279) and 2017-22 (Q73))

	United States	United Kingdom	Italy	Japan	France	Germany	Sweden
1990-94	42.4	45.7	31.6	28.3	43.4	48.5	45.4
2017-22	14.8	26.6	27.5	31.1	33.1	36.9	63.3
change	-27.6	-19.1	-4.1	+2.8	-10.3	-11.6	+17.9

So, populists can draw on a vast reservoir of popular dissatisfaction and anxiety. They advance strikingly simple and easily communicable narratives about the villains that brought about the current predicament. Do they address any of the actual social, economic and political problems that aggrieve people in contemporary democracies? In other words, can they fill their populist frames with content—policies that resonates with a large share of aggrieved citizens? And—upon coming to political office—will they be able to deliver on their promises and create a durable powerful electoral coalition that delivers victory in the “culture war?”

What are the Grounds of Grievance and the Stakes of “Culture Wars” that Animate Populist Mobilization Today?

So, what is the crisis of liberalism to which populisms respond as a cry of despair? Let me advance here a contrarian’s claim: The crisis of democratic and social liberalism is not driven by the failure of the political economy of advanced capitalism restrained by social liberalism, but by the internal dynamism of its success and expansion. Social liberalism has by and large mastered the “old” problems of industrial capitalism but generated “new” problems that politicians have hitherto failed to cope with.

Precipitated by the defeat of fascism and crafted under the shadow of Cold War Soviet communism, the democratic class compromise of the post-World War II Golden Era combined a model of productive capitalist development with unprecedented levels of collaboration between capital and labor. These arrangements generated improvements in societal quality of life and security to the less-well-off not only through rising wages and diminishing inequality. This social liberalism also created a sense of security and protection, giving people a peace of mind, anchored in social insurance systems covering old age, health, unemployment and family support. Culturally, this promoted a sense of individual empowerment that promoted claims to individual expression of lifestyles and political self-governance. Most importantly, and something never politically appreciated: In the course of modern liberal democracy, life expectancy since the 1960s has risen on average by more than 10 years, or by 4-6 weeks every year!

Yet over the course of several decades, the political economy of social liberalism has generated new challenges not foreseen and addressed by political actors when crafting erstwhile successful institutions and policies. These challenges involve a material side of experienced or anticipated deprivations, but also a cultural side of loss and conflict about appropriate norms and institutions regulating social and political conduct.

- The unleashing of technological progress in the era of information technology and now artificial intelligence has *fundamentally changed the occupational structure since the 1970s*, with a collapse of manual industrial working-class employment and a rise of higher education credentialed professionals. On the material side, accelerated by the erosion and marginalization of industrial labor unions, these changes have generated new disparities and divisions of class, education, occupation and gender. They have induced tremendous anxieties about job displacement, occupational obsolescence, and declining wages, particularly among less-educated citizens. These anxieties are now exacerbated by the advent of Artificial Intelligence and have also affected the previous winners of technological innovation. On the political and cultural side, they are giving rise to struggles about whether and to what extent an epistemic of engineering and technological imperatives should dominate economic and political life, or a logic of interpersonal communicative construction of social objectives.
- The demographic transition towards expanded life expectancy combined with (very) low fertility rates—precipitated by the success of health technology and the liberation of women from patriarchal single wage-earner households through full access to education and labor markets—has generated *profound anxieties about the viability of pension system as well as evolving conflicts about gender relations and the vagaries of raising children*, particularly in a world of ballooning urban housing costs, ratcheting up requirements for children’s education and uncertain occupational prospects for the next generation. In the demographic challenge, material and cultural concerns are closely intertwined. Both concern the role of gender, family, and investment in raising future generations. These challenges are exacerbated by societal controversy on both cultural or economic grounds about immigration that might alleviate and smoothen the negative material consequences of the demographic transition.
- Changing forms of interpersonal and political communication through electronic social media that pervade all aspects of social existence from economic production to the fabric of social ties in family and civic life have contributed to an enormous de-solidarization, if not atomization of social relations that has hollowed out practices of civic voluntarism and collaboration and contributed to *the spread of a profound sense of anomie and loneliness among many members of society*. These conditions intensify a sense of existential precariousness and vulnerability of people’s lives that affect the magnitude, the modes and the ideological thrust of citizens public engagements. Once again, material and cultural concerns are tightly linked. Should technological capabilities and imperatives structure modes of human interaction or should cultural modes of communication regulate what technological facilities may achieve?
- Greenhouse gas induced climate changes are imposing tangible and increasingly catastrophic losses on society rendering it impossible to treat global warming simply as an abstract, theoretical and elusive externality of modern civilization. Through heat waves and cold spells, wildfires and hurricanes, droughts and floods, pests and pandemics, and the exhaustion of biodiversity, global warming and climate change mitigation policies have become a focal point of distributive conflict. What used to be a question of science and theoretical projections has become a material concern of everyday wellbeing. Once again, material questions of how humans can live are closely intertwined with cultural aspirations of how humans wish to live in their natural environment.
- These four economic and sociocultural challenges are now exacerbated by *the military und cultural threat emerging from illiberal autocracies*, typically invoking backwards looking templates of social organization, such as the reconstitution of male prerogative in conjugal relations as well as in social institutions at large, and the obligation of women to procreate. A new International of autocrats instrumentalizes religious and cultural belief systems across doctrinal

differences—from Evangelical Christianity in North and South America via Christian Orthodoxy, Islam, Hinduism to Confucianism—in the service of attacking individualist liberalism insisting on the autonomy and equality of each individual member of society and tolerant of individuals adopting diverse creeds and lifestyles and thereby dangerous to autocratic rule. And the ideologues of illiberalism put their finger on a critical vulnerability of social liberalism, namely that individual autonomy, stripped of secure social moorings and defenses, may expose a precariousness of individual human existence, an atomization of social relations unbearable to most humans.

For Western polities, to address this whole roster of novel challenges on terms preserving liberal democracy would surely require enormous new additional fiscal resources and institutional and organizational capabilities unless heroic assumptions were borne out that the rapid diffusion of AI would precipitate imminent solutions to most of these challenges. There is no space to go into details, but let me just assert here some back-of-the-envelope fiscal magnitudes that provide some perspective:

- Dealing with transitional unemployment and retraining of working age people to continue employment in the AI economy: ~4-6% annual GDP, in addition to current active labor market policies of 0.5-1.0% of GDP? This compares to current pension expenses of between 7% (USA) and 16% (Italy) of annual GDP and current public health expenses of 5-10% of GDP.
- Extending financial assistance (housing!) to parents with older children, paying for relief time from work to attend to their children, and to young adults for continued education: ~5% of GDP, in addition to current family support transfers and services of 1-3% GDP?
- No additional net expenditures on old-age retirement pensions.
- Coping with climate change mitigation: additional ~1-3% of GDP?
- Rearmament program for democracies: additional ~2-4% of GDP beyond 2010s 1-3% baseline of defense expenditures?
- No expense figures here added for efforts to reconstitute civil society and direct social interaction between individuals, something that no one knows how to accomplish, although starting with urban planning to create more communicative spaces uninhibited by automobile traffic may be a promising (and expensive) beginning.

Adding up these fiscal magnitudes, the total additional expenditure effort democracies may face to deploy liberal-democratic policies to cope with the changes of people's risk exposure amounts to roughly 12-18% of GDP. Well-designed programs may dampen populist dispositions in the population. But how does this expenditure stack up against the historical record?

The welfare states of Western democracies expanded from an average of 7-8% of GDP in 1950 to an average of ~16% by 1970 in an environment of annual average per capita GDP growth of 4%+ and accumulated public debts declining to an average of 30% of annual GDP. Social policy programs expanded further from 1970 to 2010 to an average of 23% of GDP, in an environment of 2.1% average per capita annual GDP growth and public debts rising to an average of 103% of annual GDP by 2010. Since the beginning of the 2010s, in an environment of only 1.1% average annual per capita economic growth, social expenditures have levelled off near 23-25% of GDP, with the exception of spikes in the covid-19 emergency, while public indebtedness has risen to an average of 120%+ of annual GDP.

Hence, over sixty years, with an average annual per capita economic growth of 2-3% GDP, welfare states **expanded by roughly 16% of GDP**, while general government expenditure went from an average of about 23% (1950) to an average of about 44% in the early 2020s. Could Western democracies cope with **an additional expenditure of 12-18% of GDP to address new challenges**—and the grievances articulated by populist forces—while starting from a public sector size near one half of the annual GDP and

accumulated public debts of more than 100% of annual GDP? What kind of policy imagination and political coalitions will it take to deal with this situation?

What this list of grievances and the fiscal policy challenges to mitigate them still does not convey are *the intangible changes of social relations and institutions that all efforts to alleviate popular grievances may need to entail*. These changes cannot be ordered top-down but may emerge only from a lengthy trial-and-error process with bottom-up innovations and activism both through social movements and civic associations as well as through market developments involving a myriad of participants: entrepreneurs, employees, customers and consumers. Public policy can at best nudge them in certain directions by offering incentives and setting constraints, but mastering the challenges and relieving widespread grievances eludes the powers of a hierarchical and coercive political planner.

How Do Populists Address the Challenges of Contemporary Western Democracies and Position Themselves in the “Culture Wars”?

All populisms develop narratives that are profoundly incommensurable with the nature of the challenges pervading contemporary Western democracies. Moreover, populists fill their rhetorical vessels with sharply different content. We witness a struggle of competing populisms (“polarization”) none of which may prevail over the others or over what is left of social liberalism.

The fundamental antagonism between populist thinking and contemporary challenges to Western democracy can be captured in four contrasts:

- Populists prefer ***simple solution with short and well-understood causal chains*** connecting actions to preferred outcomes. But all novel challenges of 21st century democracy are extremely complicated, involving multiple causal channels and evading easy shortcuts. Moreover, causal channels may be shrouded by uncertainty. It takes trial-and-error and experimentation to find avenues that will relieve any of the major problems.
- Populists express ***high discount rates and promise to resolve grievances quickly***. But the actual societal problems that drive popular misgivings can be addressed only with tenacious, long-term activities. What makes things even more forbidding from a populist vantage point is that efforts to identify solutions often incur high upfront costs, while benefits accrue to citizens only incrementally and with considerable time lags. Nothing is less popular (and populist!) than to promise policies that incur costs first and deliver benefits much later.
- Populists intend ***to solve problems within the national arena or even in local settings***, but most challenges of contemporary democracy are of a supra-national regional or global nature. National policies may facilitate certain outcomes, but in most instances decisive relief from grievances cannot occur without international coordination: think of AI regulation, climate change mitigation, or maintaining world peace in the face of threatening autocracies. The only grievance possibly addressed by primarily national (or local?) domestic policy-making is that of demographics and the political economy of the family, but even here the denial of international considerations—such as treatment of immigration—carries heavy penalties.
- Finally, populists purport ***to solve problems by imposition, preferably by decree powers exercised by an authoritarian leader acting upon plebiscitarian acclaim***, not by lateral negotiations among many social groups, their decision-makers and decentralized coordination through a process of checks-and-balance. But to alleviate grievances created by 21st century major challenges involves myriads of little decision-makers most of whom cannot be coerced into any particular course of action.

Against this backdrop, let me briefly stylize and appraise two currents of populism in contemporary democracies, a “right-wing” and a “left-wing” strand, each filling the empty vessel of populist rhetoric with distinctly different content.

The contemporary right-wing strand of populism defines the stakes of populism more in terms of culture—understood as fabrics of social norms and cognitive templates—than material terms of economic distribution. Its cultural template is one of nostalgia, advocating a return to the social construct of an imagined past that never existed as empirical fact: a culturally homogeneous and solidary community, governed by consensual compliance with patriarchal authority and acquiescing to hierarchical political rule as well as to time-honored unquestionable collective norms valid within a nationally bounded realm. An operational implication of this regulative is opposition to free trade, immigration, gender equalization, and tolerance to most cultural and religious diversity. It is averse to science as an engine of change and suspicious of empirical rationalism that questions the authority of doctrines. It expresses sympathies with autocratic rulers who endorse the nostalgic paternalist agenda. And it opposes the subordination of national sovereignty under multilaterally negotiated regional political integration by democratic polities like the European Union.

Right-wing populism addresses none of the challenges that contribute to the sense of malaise in contemporary democracies. Foremost, this concerns the economic issues of occupational change and corporate governance as well as that of regulation of artificial intelligence and other novel disruptive technologies. In principle, however, right-wing populists may be closer to the mode of thinking expressed by engineers, aiming for indisputable solutions to clearly formulated questions, than that of sociocultural professionals debating both objectives and procedures of their undertakings with clients and receptive to different courses of action.

Right-wing populism has also no clear theory of fiscal policy, as it tends to be divided between business advocates demanding policies of budgetary austerity, while labor advocates in the parties demand expansive fiscal policies, with benefits disbursed to core constituencies, but without having to redistribute resources from the rich to service the middle. Ultimate resort of populist fiscal policy-making tends to be the increase of budget deficits and the use of the money printing press, provided Central Banks do not have the clout to make such policies too painful.

In as much as right-wing populists have a response to the demographic challenge, it is the reassertion of the paternalist heterosexual family as the primary model of conjugal relations. But only vanishing minority shares of survey respondents follow their lead, and they are concentrated among older age cohorts and men. Strong majorities of women everywhere in the West oppose the radical right-wing vision of a reconstituted male family dominance.

Right-wing populists face cross-pressures when addressing questions of economic inequality, whether between households or generations. They uphold private property and endorse economic redistribution only in exceptional circumstances. In terms of welfare state social insurance systems, they embrace those serving overwhelmingly elderly recipients, i.e., public pension and health care systems, while arguing for austerity on social policies that include more immigrants among their beneficiaries, such as unemployment insurance and family support, including housing. But they lack concrete policy proposals when it comes to confront the need for pension reform in light of demographic changes and the inter-generational distribution of financial insurance burdens.

With regard to climate change and autocratic military threats to liberal democracies, right-wing populists tend to deny the societal harm to Western democracies resulting from such developments. They also tend

to invoke the freerider problem that small and medium sized states can achieve little in producing a collective good, when major players defect. Hence, defection and inactivity are the preferred routes to deal with—or more accurately: ignore--both existential challenges to liberal democracies.

But intellectuals of the radical right, particularly in America, accusingly point their fingers at the disappearance of civic community spirit and the retreat of many people into a self-referential and lonely solipsism in Western liberal democracies, and they have done so lately in highly effective and persuasive manner. They invoke a need to recreate a sense of the “common good” beyond the selfish individualism they see worshipped in modern liberalism. But examining their practical proposal to correct social anomie, behind a veneer of soothing language yearning for societal consensus overcoming the divisiveness of liberalism, many times lurks an endorsement of vertical, centralized authority in religion, state, and family.

In contrast to right-wing populism, the *contemporary left-wing strand of populism* argues more in economic than cultural terms yet also endorses definite positions on cultural matters as well. Left-wing populism places the question of class distribution of income and wealth front and center and argues for increased vertical redistribution in favor of the less affluent through income, property, and corporate taxation. But in contrasts to previous generations of socialist thinking, from Marx via early 20th century revisionist Marxists to the social democratic programs of the 1950s, populist leftism fails to link its *theory of redistribution* favoring low-income citizens (from whom and how much?) to a *theory of production* that generates the resources available for redistribution what answer the following question: How can firms be incentivized to produce efficiently and embark on innovative, quality-of-life and ecology promoting improvements, although equality norms restrict the ability of innovative entrepreneurs and their core cadre of collaborators to amass vast fortunes?

The redistributive fixation on wealth accumulation in big corporations and on their owners has also blinded the populist left to addressing what center-left U.S. Democrats call the “abundance” agenda, namely the streamlining of regulatory administrative reviews of corporate investment decisions as a way to unleash investments hitherto blocked by veto-players with narrow self-interests but entrenched in key political institutions, such as local governments. Likewise, on AI, the left-wing populist approach has hitherto been one of demanding restrictions and prohibitions, albeit without yet exploring how AI could also become a positive force to unleash creative advances that promote concerns with inequality, safety, and domination.

On questions of demographics and family fertility, left-wing populism has taken diametrically opposite positions to right-wing populism on economic and cultural grounds. It demands ample family support through fiscal family entitlements, endorses strict equality between conjugal partners, irrespective of the gender composition of family unions, and embraces multiculturalism. Left-wing populism is mostly receptive to highly permissive immigration policies, but cracks in the veneer have appeared, with left populists calling for more restrictive policies in light of fiscal balance sheets.

While the positions of left-wing populism are certainly closer to the population mainstream on gender and family relations, they are decidedly further from the median voter on immigration. This also applies to an identitarian group agenda that does not abide by the liberal principle of equal treatment of all competent citizens, but by an effort to create protected group categories—whether defined in terms of gender, gender orientation, or ethnic attributes—that enjoy quotas in certain competitive labor markets or political and cultural institutions.

Left-wing populists seemingly have an easy time uniting around a strict climate change mitigation policy. But with growing costly impact of global climate change, distributive conflicts about how to fight

greenhouse gases may enter even such political parties. Effective and efficient strategies to lower fossil fuel demand through carbon consumption taxes and fossil fuel pollution vouchers are anathema to many left populists.

Finally, the populist left is increasingly divided over the military rearmament of democracies. While there is some recognition of the threat of autocracies, left populists are steeped in a long tradition of pacifism. Internal divisions over the rearmament effort designed to ready Western democracies for potential military invasion by an autocrat divides radical left populism.

Why Right-wing and Left-wing Populisms are Bound to Fail in “Culture Wars”

What unites both left and right-wing populism—other than their parallel use of populist argumentative templates are two aspects that put them on a course of conflict with popular majorities and their countries respective business and labor constituencies. First, neither populist strand observes fiscal constraints. They are both receptive to printing money, loosening Central Bank monetary regulations, and increasing their polities’ fiscal indebtedness. This works in the short run but triggers tremendous economic dislocations in the long run. Second, both left- and right-wing populisms, when in government office, have acted on their declared propensity to intervene in their countries’ economies by creating crony capitalisms with high levels of corruption and nepotism. Third, both left-wing and right-wing exclusionary identity politics have resulted in the disaffection and alienation of considerable parts of their electorates.

Are populists, then, winning or losing “culture wars?” As evidenced by the checklist of the populist parties’ treatment of the five challenges of contemporary Western democracies, left-wing and right-wing populists are fighting culture wars on opposite sides of the aisle. While they can upset anti-populist liberal democrats and threaten the viability of Western democracy, they are mostly united in their destructive capacity, while impaired in their constructive drive to create alternative pathways. Both strands of populism have contributed to undermining the electoral support of political mainstream parties that wish to engage the challenges of the 21st century with evidence-based, incremental, slow, trial-and-error-prone policies. Not only does much of the electorate perceive these modest policy initiatives with their small departures from the status quo as boring and ineffective. But it is also the mainstream parties’ internal bickering that contributed to their reputational decline.

We are thus facing a paradox: While Western social liberalism is deeply wounded by popular dissatisfaction originating in a multiplicity of challenges that have been developing in recent years, there appears to be no alternative that can credibly claim to lay out an exciting set of actions to address these conditions. While left and right-wing alternatives have attacked the social liberal status quo, their own appeals evidence little understanding of the challenges of contemporary society, let alone proposals to resolving some of its features that generate profound grievances in mass electorates. Moreover, left- and right-wing populisms are on opposite sides of the aisles in culture struggles and may mutually paralyze their respective breakthrough. Nevertheless, to extend the paradox, as long as populists remain confined to the opposition benches, there is little reason to believe that their electoral support will suffer due to their ailing capacity to offer alternatives to the status quo. They will continue to thrive in the difficulties liberal democratic parties encounter in dealing with the challenges of current knowledge capitalism.

A decisive defeat of populism itself may only arrive through the demonstration effect of populist governments themselves revealing their ineptitude in handling the challenges of 21st century societies.

Populist parties of the left and the right have frequently failed in the Global South. Examples of recent decades include Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, or Venezuela. But these countries are too far removed from the heartland of Western democracies to leave a demonstration effect on West European and North American audiences.

The failure of Viktor Orbán's Hungarian regime hits closer to home. Here a right-wing populist party entrenched itself in displacing what was a liberal democracy and ventured to deliver "illiberal" change that resulted in a spectacular run of corruption and crony capitalism. Its rule also precipitated economic stagnation and the decline of social services such as that of the Hungarian health care system. Now, following the spectacular defeat of Orbán's party the revelations concerning the inner workings of Orbán's kleptocratic regime certainly can serve as a warning against similar populist forces aiming to follow Orbán's Hungarian trajectory in other democracies. But even so, Orbán's Hungary is a small country with little global visibility, no matter how much it had become a site of pilgrimage for right-wing ideologues during Orbán's rule.

The most striking and consequential demonstration of the failure of populism to assert cultural hegemony, or any societal and political hegemony at all, would be the case of Donald Trump's USA experiencing an economic and political crisis that laid bare the ineptitude of populist regimes to cope with the challenges of the time. Trump's regime has undermined institutional moorings of liberal democracy even faster than Orbán did in the initial years of his rule. And Trump has critically weakened the economic and scientific prowess of the United States through numerous policy decisions and changes of political governance.

At the same time, the exogenous force of unprecedented AI related capital investments, in some measure doubtlessly magnified by Trump's unconditional support for the industry's quest to evade public oversight and regulation, have kept the American economy afloat and thriving for the time being. So, the jury remains out concerning the economic viability of American right-wing populism, although public opinion and anxiety about economic developments has clearly moved against the Trump administration. Public dissatisfaction with the current regime, now penetrating all the way deep into the Trumpist core electorate and rural heartland, reveal the precariousness of populism's grip of political power in America.

In many regards, the fate of right-wing populism in Europe may be closely associated with that of its more radical counterpart in office in the United States. Where Trumpist America will go, European countries may follow: toward defeat or victory of right-wing populism in its cultural war? My own bet currently is that neither right-wing nor left-wing populism are quipped to deliver lasting victories to their present constituencies. But it may take tremendous economic, social, political and even military crises to reveal the inability of populist programmatic templates to cope with the challenges of 21st century technological and societal developments and relieve the widespread public grievances associated with them.