

Culture Wars and the Rise of Postmodern Fascism

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Abstract *This paper aims to examine both the contemporary manifestations and potential future trajectories of fascism, with a particular focus on its organizational structures and the tools it employs in its pursuit. Central to this exploration is the concept of the “Culture Wars,” which serves as a pivotal unifying weapon within the fascist project. Further, this paper aims to explore the underlying causes and the societal dynamics that contribute to the rise of culture wars, particularly within European contexts. I will trace the historical roots of such conflicts, examine the economic and social conditions that exacerbate them, and discuss potential ways to address the tensions they generate.*

Culture Wars and the Rise of Postmodern Fascism

Before delving into these themes, it is essential to contextualize the emergence and proliferation of these new forms of fascism. To understand their rise, it is important to recognize that right-wing extremism, authoritarian ideologies, and fascist movements are not merely products of crises but rather symptoms of broader socio-political and economic transformations. Over time, these movements may evolve into full-fledged crises in their own right. However, they did not emerge spontaneously; their roots can be traced to earlier historical developments that paved the way for their contemporary proliferation. A crucial event in this regard is the economic and financial crisis of 2008, which acted as a significant catalyst for the political dynamics we observe today.

The 2008 financial collapse represents a sharp societal and political rupture, which marked the onset of a profound shift, particularly among capitalist elites (Crouch, 2020). While capitalists do not form a monolithic or coherent group, and their interests and ideologies vary significantly, this period saw heightened tensions and conflicts within the capitalist class. The crisis exposed underlying fractures and competing interests, particularly among financial capitalists. Prior to the crash, the dominance of financial capital was largely unquestioned, as evidenced by the prominence and wealth of hedge fund managers and bankers.

The 2008 financial crisis marked a profound turning point in global economic and political structures, particularly for the financial capital that had previously dominated the economic landscape. The crisis, precipitated by the very actors responsible for its occurrence, unleashed catastrophic consequences across the world, echoing the events of 1929 in some respects. Central to the causes of the 2008 crash was the dismantling of regulatory frameworks, such as the Glass-Steagall Act and the Bretton Woods system, which had previously served to curb the excesses of financial capital (Crouch, 2020). The neoliberal era, which championed deregulation, played a significant role in enabling the conditions that led to the collapse. In this regard, the failure to maintain adequate regulatory oversight was a key factor in the financial meltdown, exposing the vulnerabilities inherent in a system that had become increasingly unmoored from its regulatory foundations.

The Rise of Tech Capital

In the aftermath of the crash, a new form of capital – “tech capital”¹ – emerged as a dominant force in both the economy and politics. Fueled by rapid technological advancements, tech companies experienced a meteoric rise, positioning themselves at the forefront of global economic power. This rise was not merely economic, but also political, as tech entrepreneurs began to exercise increasing influence over public discourse and policy. One of the most notable figures in this transformation was Peter Thiel, the German-born entrepreneur and co-founder of PayPal and Palantir. Beginning in 2009, just months after the financial collapse, Thiel and his allies began to channel substantial resources into political causes aligned with their economic interests. Notably, Thiel contributed millions of dollars to support the presidential bids of Libertarian Ron Paul in 2008 and 2012, signaling the early political ambitions of the tech elite. This political investment only grew in subsequent years, culminating in Thiel’s prominent support for Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign. Thiel’s role as a key speaker at the Republican National Convention in 2016 underscored his newfound prominence within the Republican Party and his close ties to Trump and other like-minded figures such as Josh Hawley and J.D. Vance.

The ascent of tech capital, while often overlooked in discussions of the post-2008 political landscape, represents a critical shift in the distribution of economic and political power. Though not the primary cause of the financial crisis, the rise of tech capital was significantly accelerated by the failure of financial capital. As the financial sector’s legitimacy faltered in the wake of the crash, the tech industry was able to

1 The term “tech capital” or “Big Tech” refers to the dominating seven most valuable and powerful technology companies, all based in the USA (Levy, 2020).

position itself as a more stable and innovative alternative, leveraging its newfound political influence to further its own interests.

Climate Crisis as a Political Accelerator

In addition to the economic and political ramifications of the 2008 crisis, the global climate crisis has emerged as another major force reshaping contemporary society. However, the climate crisis is not merely a singular, isolated event; rather, it functions as a catalytic agent, accelerating and exacerbating existing social, political, and economic crises. One of the most significant impacts of the climate crisis is its compression of the timeline for addressing other pressing issues. As climate-related disruptions intensify, the urgency of addressing global economic inequality, social justice, and political instability becomes ever more apparent. Moreover, the climate crisis poses an existential threat to democratic systems, as it exacerbates social inequalities and catalyzes political polarization, potentially leading to the erosion of democratic institutions.

The climate crisis is already contributing to a range of social crises, such as energy shortages in Central Europe following the invasion of Ukraine, inflation and rising costs of living, and global healthcare challenges. While these crises are among the most visible and immediate, it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore each of them in detail. However, it is crucial to note that the climate crisis not only exacerbates existing vulnerabilities but also creates new pressures that further destabilize political and social structures around the world.

Democratic Crisis

Another pressing issue is the crisis in democratic representation. This dual crisis manifests in two keyways: First, many citizens in urban centers in Central Europe are effectively excluded from participating in formal democratic processes. This exclusion is often a result of legal and bureaucratic barriers, which prevent individuals – particularly non-citizens – from voting or running for office, despite meeting the age and residency requirements for political participation. A striking example of this disenfranchisement can be found in Vienna, Austria, where, according to the latest statistics, 1,5 million eligible residents are unable to vote in national elections due to citizenship restrictions (Kurier, 2024; ORF Wien, 2025). In summary, the interplay of economic, political, and environmental crises has created a highly volatile and unpredictable global landscape. The financial collapse of 2008, the rise of tech capital, and the intensifying climate crisis all contribute to a moment of profound transformation, one in which existing political structures are being reconfigured in

ways that pose significant challenges to democracy and social stability. The issue of political disenfranchisement is not solely a matter of migration status or individual migration histories but is intricately tied to issues of class and labor. This demographic, which is disproportionately impacted by barriers to citizenship, finds that their interests are rarely represented in electoral politics. As a result, the political system largely neglects the concerns of unskilled workers, further eroding the democratic process. This situation exacerbates democratic deficits, particularly in Central European countries and cities, where the path to citizenship has become increasingly arduous and restrictive in recent decades. In many cases, obtaining citizenship in a Central European nation is now either prohibitively difficult or near impossible, reinforcing social exclusion and political marginalization.

A second crisis of representation pertains to the growing erosion of trust in democratic institutions. Among those who are eligible to vote – those who possess citizenship and meet the age requirements – there is a pervasive lack of confidence in the state and its institutions. In some instances, this mistrust extends to a broader disillusionment with democracy itself. Colin Crouch's concept of "post-democracy," introduced first in 2000 and further developed in the following years, offers a framework for understanding this phenomenon. Crouch contends that the weakening of democratic institutions and practices can be traced to the effects of neoliberalism, which began to dominate political and economic life well before the 2008 financial crisis (Crouch, 2005). Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on individualism and market forces, led to a diminishing role for the state and formal political representation. In this context, the belief that 'only you can help yourself' increasingly took hold in society, leaving little room for meaningful political difference. This ideological shift culminated in the erosion of substantive political choices, with many governments adopting similar policies, primarily oriented around economic imperatives. This Crouch stressed in later publications (2020). A clear example of this trend can be seen in the German Social Democratic Party's (SPD) implementation of the Hartz reforms in the early 2000s, which were driven by neoliberal principles (Biebricher, 2012, p. 141).

A Pandemic of Distrust

While the decline of trust in democratic institutions became more pronounced following the financial crisis, the outbreak of the COVID-19-pandemic in 2020 further deepened this distrust. Although the crisis momentarily heightened public engagement with state institutions, the overall trajectory has not been one of restored confidence. Studies conducted in Germany, where data on public trust is more readily available, illustrate the persistence of this trend (Leibniz-Institut für Bildungswissenschaften, 2025). This lack of trust is not confined to Germany alone; it is part of a broader

pattern that affects most Western democracies. Notably, the Scandinavian nations stand in contrast, maintaining higher levels of trust in their political and welfare systems, which remain somewhat insulated from the broader global trends (OECD, 2024).

Importantly, this lack of trust does not affect all institutions uniformly. Some state institutions continue to enjoy relatively high levels of public confidence. For instance, the police and military forces are among the most trusted institutions, suggesting that while citizens may be disillusioned with political elites, they retain a degree of trust in institutions associated with public safety and security (Wolf-Doettinchem, 2025). Similarly, civic organizations, particularly those representing labor, such as trade unions, continue to command significant public support (Bachmayer, 2024). This trend is not limited to Europe but extends to the United States, where unions have witnessed a resurgence in activism in recent years (Holt & Schmid, 2024). Furthermore, the judicial system remains a pillar of public trust, an encouraging sign that certain aspects of the rule of law continue to resonate with the public.

However, the erosion of trust is most acutely felt within institutions directly linked to representative politics. Government bodies, parliaments, political parties, and opposition groups now rank among the least trusted institutions in Western democracies. These institutions are fundamental to the functioning of representative democracy, as they are tasked with making decisions that affect the lives of citizens and with ensuring that citizens' interests are adequately represented. The decline in trust in these institutions presents a significant challenge for democratic processes, as trust is a necessary precondition for political participation. Without trust in the political system, citizens are less likely to engage in the electoral process, undermining the legitimacy of democratic governance and exacerbating the crisis of representation.

The Age of Insecurity and the Loss of Hegemony

The aforementioned crises represent only a subset of the multitude of challenges confronting contemporary society. There are, of course, numerous other crises – some more pressing than others – that permeate our daily lives. These crises, whether economic, political, or environmental, are inextricably linked, and together they paint a picture of a society grappling with profound instability. What has become increasingly evident in recent years is the loss of hegemony, a process that extends far beyond the immediate crises of the past few years. Rather, this erosion of hegemonic consensus has been building gradually over the last two to three decades, if not longer. The dissolution of what was once considered 'normal,' coupled with the disintegration of widely accepted social and political consensus, is emblematic of this broader shift.

A particularly glaring symptom of this loss of hegemony is the rise of the far right within both parliamentary systems and public discourse across the Western hemisphere. The far right's increasing visibility in national parliaments, its growing influence in public debates, and its physical presence on the streets signal a profound transformation in the political landscape. In contrast, the political situation in Western Germany remains somewhat unique, as it has yet to witness a far-right right party securing a majority in a national election or participating in government coalitions.

Social media - a new Socio-Political Arena

At this juncture, it is essential to consider the role of social media in the current political landscape. Social media cannot be understood merely as a digital space that individuals can leave behind with the click of a button. Unlike traditional forms of media, social platforms have become a pervasive form of reality, deeply integrated into the fabric of contemporary political and social life. These digital spaces do not exist in parallel to the 'analogue' reality in which we live; rather, they interact with it in complex ways, influencing and shaping public opinion, political discourse, and social organization. Social media, in this sense, has become a significant site of political reality, one that demands critical attention as an arena for political mobilization and organization.

When understood as a form of political reality, social media can be analyzed as a medium for political organizing and the formation of new kinds of movements. In this context, it is evident that far-right groups and fascist organizations are actively using social media platforms to organize, recruit, and amplify their messages. These digital spaces provide far-right groups with the ability to bypass traditional media filters, build networks of like-minded individuals, and engage in decentralized forms of political activism. The extent to which social media has facilitated the rise of fascist movements cannot be overestimated; it has become an indispensable tool for the coordination of far-right activism, contributing to the increasing normalization of extremist ideologies.

In conclusion, the multiple crises facing contemporary societies – from economic instability to the erosion of political trust – are symptomatic of a broader loss of hegemony. This dissolution of consensus has created fertile ground for the rise of far-right movements, many of which are leveraging new technologies, particularly social media, to further their political aims. As these movements continue to gain traction, both within formal political structures and through informal networks online, it is crucial to understand the role that social media plays in their organization and dissemination of far-right ideologies. Social media, far from being a neutral platform, has become an active agent in the political dynamics of the

present moment, one that must be critically examined if we are to understand the future trajectory of political extremism.

The Fascist Online Mob

The dynamics of political violence in the contemporary context cannot be understood solely through the lens of physical confrontations or street-level activism. As we confront the rise of fascist movements, it is essential to recognize that political violence today manifests in complex and multifaceted ways, particularly within digital spaces. One of the common critiques of contemporary fascism is that it ostensibly lacks the physical violence characteristic of historical fascist movements, especially those of the 1920s and 1930s. This argument suggests that, due to its absence of classic forms of violent action, contemporary political movements cannot be considered fascist (Matthews, 2020). While it is important to exercise caution when drawing comparisons to past political formations, I contend that the absence of physical violence or rather its comparably smaller scale does not preclude the existence of violence in the modern era. In fact, we are witnessing a form of violence that occurs primarily within the realm of social media – an increasingly potent and pervasive form of political violence that, though not physical, is nonetheless profoundly impactful and destructive.

While it is undisputed that physical violence remains the most immediate and visceral form of harm, the psychological warfare waged on social media platforms is increasingly comparable in its intensity and consequences. This phenomenon, though less tangible, carries significant psychological, social, and political repercussions. There have been several recent examples in German-speaking countries – particularly in Germany and Austria – that illustrate the devastating effects of online political violence. One such case is that of Dr. Lisa-Maria Kellermayr, a general practitioner in Austria who, after being targeted by a sustained online harassment campaign, tragically took her own life in July 2022. The catalyst for this campaign was a social media post she had made nearly two years prior, in which she had criticized a protest held by conspiracy theorists in front of a hospital. Despite the correctness of her position, Kellermayr became the target of extreme online vitriol, which ultimately led to her suicide (Connolly, 2022). This case exemplifies how online harassment can escalate to a form of violence that is as real and damaging as physical harm, if not more so in certain contexts.

Similarly, in recent months, another high-profile case has underscored the virulent nature of online political violence. Alexandra Förderl-Schmid, a prominent journalist with 'Süddeutsche Zeitung,' was subjected to a vicious online campaign after being falsely accused of plagiarism. The accusations, which were entirely fabricated, were amplified through social media, leading to significant personal and

professional harm. The main instigator of this campaign was a former head of the online edition of 'Bild,' the biggest German yellow press newspaper, who had been dismissed from his position (Women Press Freedom, 2024). This example highlights how social media platforms can be weaponized to destroy individuals' reputations, influence public perception, and facilitate the spread of disinformation – all key elements of modern political violence.

These examples, though tragic, are not isolated incidents. They are part of a broader pattern of political violence being orchestrated online, often with the intent to intimidate, silence, or discredit those who challenge the prevailing political narrative. In many ways, social media has become a fertile ground for the organization and perpetuation of fascist ideologies and practices. The ability to anonymously harass, threaten, and isolate individuals has allowed these movements to function in a decentralized yet highly coordinated manner. The strategic use of disinformation, targeted harassment, and online surveillance are all part of a broader effort to undermine democratic values and intimidate political opponents.

To fully understand how contemporary fascism operates, it is crucial to recognize the role of social media as a space for political organization and activism. The digital sphere has become an essential terrain for the dissemination of fascist ideologies, the coordination of violent actions, and the creation of online communities that reinforce extremist views. Social media platforms, with their vast reach and ability to facilitate rapid communication, serve as an effective tool for radicalizing individuals, organizing protests or demonstrations, and inciting violence. The increasingly blurred lines between online and offline political engagement mean that the consequences of digital violence are no less significant than those of physical violence. Indeed, the digitalization of political violence represents a significant shift in how fascist movements operate, one that warrants serious attention and analysis.

In conclusion, while the absence of physical violence in contemporary fascism may be seen as a distinguishing feature of its modern form, it is important to recognize that political violence is not confined to the streets. The rise of online harassment, disinformation campaigns, and psychological warfare on social media constitutes a form of violence that is no less real and impactful than traditional forms of physical violence. As fascist movements continue to adapt to the digital age, understanding their organizational strategies and tactics on social media is critical to addressing the political violence they perpetrate. The intersection of social media and political violence is an emerging challenge that requires urgent academic and political attention if we are to adequately respond to the evolving threats posed by contemporary fascism.

The Erosion of Traditional Political Parties and the Rise of Far-Right Movements

Over the past three decades, a significant shift has occurred within the political landscape of the Western hemisphere, particularly with respect to the most established post-war political parties. Both social democratic and conservative/Christian democratic parties, which once provided a stabilizing force in the political and economic systems of many Western nations, have been steadily losing support. This decline is not a novel phenomenon; rather, it represents a long-term trend that has been ongoing for over thirty years. The historical role of these parties, especially in the aftermath of World War II, was to maintain a delicate balance between political and economic systems. On the one hand, the social democratic parties promoted a political framework based on equality – embodied in the welfare state and human rights – and on the other hand, the conservative and Christian democratic parties supported a capitalist economic system founded on inequality, market dynamics and traditional values. Despite the inherent contradictions between these systems, there existed a tacit understanding and mutual recognition between the two camps that allowed for a degree of stability. However, this balance was significantly disrupted with the rise of neoliberalism, which, over time, eroded the foundational principles of both political traditions.

As these traditional political forces lose their influence and popularity, they have been increasingly supplanted by new political movements, most notably those on the far right. The emergence of these movements, particularly in Europe and North America, represents a fundamental shift in the political terrain. The decline of the mainstream parties and the simultaneous rise of far-right factions is emblematic of a broader transformation in the political, social, and economic landscape, one marked by instability and uncertainty. This shift is not merely a matter of political competition but reflects deeper cultural and ideological divisions that have been exacerbated by the crises of the last few decades. It is within this context that we must examine the contemporary forms of fascism, particularly in their organizational and ideological manifestations.

The Root Causes of Contemporary Fascism: Culture Wars as a Tool of Political Agitation

The current form of fascism, as it exists in the Western world today, is still in a relatively loose organizational state. It has not yet coalesced into a unified or formalized structure akin to the fascist movements of the early 20th century. However, the key unifying feature of these contemporary movements is their use of ‘culture wars’ as a means of political agitation and mobilization. To understand the mechanics of these

movements, it is crucial to first define what is meant by 'culture wars' and how they function within the broader context of contemporary politics.

Culture wars refer to the emotionalized, often exaggerated or perceived, divisions within societies on socio-political or cultural issues. These divisions are typically framed as existential battles over the values and norms that define the social fabric. What makes culture wars particularly effective as a tool of political mobilization is that they do not rely on rational, fact-based debate. Instead, culture wars are built on anecdotes, sensationalized examples, and narratives that appeal to emotion rather than reason. These narratives often hinge on extreme, out-of-context examples of events or actions, such as an isolated incident at a university in the United States, which is then presented as emblematic of a much larger societal threat. The core of these narratives is the creation of a perceived 'truth' that, regardless of its veracity, becomes widely accepted among those who feel threatened or alienated by broader societal changes (Strobl, 2021).

The effectiveness of culture wars lies in their ability to tap into feelings of discomfort and insecurity within society. As people experience increasing anxiety due to economic instability, political upheaval, and social change, they are more vulnerable to the emotional appeals of those who promote divisive, culture-based narratives. The political movements that champion culture wars thrive by channeling this discomfort into targeted forms of political action. They exploit societal fears, often exaggerating or fabricating the consequences of changes in social policy, such as those related to gender rights, racial equality, and environmental protections. In doing so, they construct an 'us versus them' framework that encourages individuals to view these social changes as existential threats to their way of life.

The Psychological Mechanisms of Culture Wars

The primary mechanism through which culture wars operate is the construction of a perceived conspiracy. This involves framing social changes as part of a broader, often nebulous plot aimed at undermining the interests or rights of a specific group. For example, issues such as LGBTQ+ rights are not merely framed as civil rights concerns, but as the result of an intentional effort to disrupt traditional societal structures. The rhetoric surrounding such issues often suggests that these changes are driven by a coordinated effort to redistribute power in a way that disadvantages the 'rightfully' empowered groups. This perception of a conspiracy serves as a powerful motivator for political mobilization, as it positions the group in question as being under attack and thus justifies extreme measures in defense of their perceived interests.

Culture wars also exploit the broader sense of societal loss that many people experience in the contemporary moment. The promises of upward mobility, stable em-

ployment, and social advancement that characterized post-war Western societies have largely unraveled in recent decades. For many, the notion that hard work, education, and dedication will lead to a better future – a promise that once defined the ‘American Dream’ and similar narratives in Europe – has been revealed as increasingly untrue. As these societal promises fail to materialize, individuals are left with a profound sense of discomfort and disorientation. This discomfort is particularly acute in times of crisis, such as during economic downturns or social upheaval. In such contexts, the political right, particularly the far right, capitalizes on these feelings of unease by framing culture wars as a means of addressing these anxieties. Through divisive narratives about gender, race, and environmental issues, they offer scapegoats for the failures of the broader socio-economic system, directing public anger toward marginalized groups rather than addressing the root causes of societal malaise.

Key Issues in Culture Wars: Gender, Anti-Racism, and Climate Change

The issues most commonly associated with culture wars are those that challenge traditional notions of identity and social order. These include debates over gender rights, anti-racism, pluralism, and environmental sustainability. Each of these issues represents a potential battleground in the ongoing struggle for social and political dominance. For example, debates about LGBTQ+ rights are often framed not as a question of civil rights but as part of a broader agenda to undermine the traditional family structure. Similarly, anti-racist movements are depicted as part of a plot to marginalize ‘native’ populations in favor of immigrants and ‘racial minorities’. Environmental activism, particularly in relation to climate change, is often portrayed as a form of elite-driven control that disregards the needs of working-class communities.

The success of these culture wars is contingent upon the widespread belief in a conspiracy against the status quo, where traditional social hierarchies are under threat. It is within this environment that far-right movements find fertile ground, as they promise to restore order and protect the interests of those who feel disenfranchised by these societal changes. Ultimately, culture wars offer a potent mechanism for fascist movements to gain traction, by framing these issues as existential threats that require urgent and often extreme political responses.

Conclusion

The contemporary form of fascism, though not yet fully organized into a cohesive movement, is intricately tied to the dynamics of culture wars. These ideological bat-

ties, which center on perceived threats to social and cultural norms, serve as a primary tool for political mobilization among far-right groups. By exploiting societal discomfort and framing issues like gender, race, and climate change as existential crises, these movements are able to galvanize support and advance their political agendas. To understand the trajectory of contemporary fascism, it is essential to grasp the role of culture wars in shaping political discourse and organizing movements. The success of culture wars depends not on rational debate, but on emotional manipulation and the construction of perceived threats, which in turn drive political engagement and, ultimately, political violence.

The Dynamics and Transnationalization of Culture Wars: A Contemporary Examination

Culture wars, as a concept, are not a recent development. Rather, they have a long historical trajectory, originating in earlier conflicts over cultural and ideological control. The term itself has roots in the German word “Kulturkampf” (‘culture struggle’), which first emerged in the context of the young German Empire during the 1870s. The ‘Kulturkampf’ described a political struggle between the predominantly Protestant Prussian conservatives, led by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, and the Catholic Church, as represented by the Zentrum party. In this struggle, the education system played a central role, as it did in later cultural conflicts. Today, education continues to be a pivotal battleground in the so-called culture wars, reflecting the enduring importance of cultural institutions in shaping societal values and political power dynamics.

In contemporary discourse, the far right has adopted a strategic use of Antonio Gramsci’s concept of ‘hegemony’ to further their cultural agenda (Buckel & Fischer-Lescano, 2007). In the post-Cold War period, particularly after the 1990s, a narrative emerged that framed capitalism as the victorious economic system, effectively declaring the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992) with the defeat of ‘socialism’. This ideological shift led to the widespread assertion that, with the economic questions settled, the primary political struggle would now revolve around cultural issues – questions of rights, identity, and societal values. However, this simplistic framing obscured the ongoing economic tensions that continue to shape society. Economic discomfort, rather than being addressed directly, was reframed and displaced into the cultural sphere. As a result, the cultural conflicts that now dominate political discourse are inextricably linked to broader economic forces, even if these connections are often rendered invisible in mainstream discussions.

The Mechanics of Culture Wars

Culture wars today manifest in various forms, ranging from debates over religious symbols and public holidays to more divisive issues surrounding identity, gender, and immigration. A prominent example of a contemporary culture war can be observed in the annual debates surrounding Christmas in the United States and Europe. In the USA, the conflict between those who say, “Merry Christmas” and those who opt for the more inclusive “Happy Holidays” serves as a symbol of the larger cultural battle between secularism and religiosity. Similarly, in Austria and surrounding Central European countries, debates over the celebration of Saint Nicholas’ Day in kindergartens become charged with political significance, often framed as an issue of Muslim children allegedly rejecting the gifts of Saint Nicholas (News.at, 2024). This narrative, despite being largely unfounded, capitalizes on the tensions around immigration and the perception of Islam as a cultural threat. In reality, children of all faiths, including Muslim children, typically enjoy the cultural traditions associated with Saint Nicholas. However, the politics of culture wars thrive on such symbolic battles, magnifying minor cultural practices into existential conflicts.

This recurring focus on holidays and religious symbols illustrates how culture wars function as a form of symbolic politics, where trivial cultural differences are weaponized for political gain. Culture wars exploit perceived threats to national or cultural identity, often overstating or fabricating conflicts in order to rally supporters and discredit perceived adversaries. As such, the stakes in these wars are rarely about the specific issue at hand but are more concerned with the broader political and ideological struggle for dominance in society.

Transnationalization of Culture Wars: Social Media as a Facilitator

What is new about contemporary culture wars is their transnational dimension. Historically, culture wars were largely confined to national boundaries, with each country developing its own specific conflicts based on local cultural, religious, and political contexts. However, the rise of social media has eroded these boundaries, creating a transnational space where culture war issues can rapidly cross borders. Social media platforms, by providing a shared space for discourse, allow political movements, particularly those on the far right, to learn from and reinforce each other’s tactics and rhetoric.

A prime example of this transnationalization can be seen in the phenomenon of ‘drag queen story hours,’ a cultural practice that originated in the United States but quickly gained attention in other countries. In the USA, the practice was initially promoted as a means of encouraging inclusivity and literacy, where drag queens would read stories to children in public libraries. However, as the contro-

versy surrounding this practice grew, it became a focal point for far-right activists, who framed it as a sign of moral decay and the imposition of a liberal agenda on children. The debate over ‘drag queen story hours’ quickly spread to Europe and beyond, where similar arguments were deployed, and in some cases, such events were banned or protested (ORF Wien, 2023). This example demonstrates how culture wars are not bound by national borders but instead circulate globally, with each conflict feeding into the next and amplifying the divisive rhetoric of cultural and moral conflict.

The Viral Nature of Culture Wars: A Laboratory for Far-Right Agitation

The transnational character of culture wars makes them particularly effective as a tool for political mobilization. Far-right groups have adopted a highly pragmatic approach to culture wars, often treating them as a kind of experimental laboratory for political agitation. Just as a performer might toss multiple balls into the air and see which ones the audience catches, the far right throws various cultural issues into the public sphere, testing which ones resonate most strongly with the public. Topics that provoke the greatest emotional responses – whether through outrage, fear, or moral panic – become the next battleground in the culture war.

In this sense, culture wars operate as a form of political public relations (PR), where the primary goal is not to address substantive issues but to generate a sense of crisis, discomfort, and division. The far right, through the manipulation of social media, can amplify these issues, turning them into viral topics that dominate public discourse. The use of sensationalized language, exaggerated claims, and emotional appeals ensures that these issues remain in the public eye, fueling anger and resentment toward perceived enemies. In this way, the culture war becomes a self-perpetuating cycle, where each new issue feeds into the next, creating a continuous loop of cultural and ideological conflict.

Conclusion

The culture wars, far from being a new phenomenon, represent a long-standing and evolving aspect of political struggle. Emerging from the historical context of the ‘Kulturkampf’ in the 19th century, contemporary culture wars are characterized by their use of symbolic politics, the displacement of economic anxieties into cultural conflicts, and the transnationalization of divisive issues through social media. As these wars evolve, they become increasingly sophisticated in their tactics, with the far right treating culture wars as a laboratory for political agitation. By manipulating public sentiment through emotional appeals and sensational narratives,

the far right seeks to create a sense of crisis and mobilize support for their agenda. The global circulation of culture war topics further amplifies this effect, creating a transnational network of cultural conflict that transcends national borders. To understand the contemporary rise of far-right movements, it is essential to recognize the central role that culture wars play in shaping political discourse and mobilizing political action in the digital age.

The Business Model of Culture War Exploitation

A crucial shift in the dynamics of modern culture wars is the evolution of these issues from ideological crusades to profit-driven business models. What was once viewed as the province of ideologically driven right-wing movements has increasingly become a commercially viable strategy. In the digital age, culture wars are no longer solely the purview of political extremists but have been co-opted by influencers, media outlets, and political operatives who see financial and political gain in stoking conflict.

Social media, in particular, has played a pivotal role in transforming culture wars into a form of business. Rather than representing pure journalistic inquiry or genuine ideological struggle, many outlets now function as platforms for promoting outrage and division. Influencers and media figures – many of whom possess little journalistic training – profit from the attention that culture war topics generate. These outlets often operate under the guise of reporting, but in reality, they are more akin to political campaign machines that seek to capitalize on public outrage. While it would be an exaggeration to label these efforts as journalism, their effectiveness in shaping public opinion and influencing electoral cycles cannot be overstated. The cycle of outrage is self-sustaining: a topic is raised, amplified by influencers and media outlets, which generates widespread emotional reaction, drawing in both the public and political actors who use it to further their own interests.

The Escalation of Emotions and the Formation of a Political Mob

One of the most concerning aspects of contemporary culture wars is their ability to generate intense, negative emotions – primarily fear, anger, and resentment – which can mobilize individuals into organized, sometimes violent, action. As these negative emotions circulate on social media, they have a profound effect on the wider social fabric. The more emotional the discourse, the more likely it is that individuals will organize around it, leading to the formation of online mobs. These mobs, while not fully organized or directed by any singular entity, often act as a collective force that is driven by outrage rather than rationality.

The transition from an emotional reaction to organized mobilization can escalate further, particularly when the emotional energy generated by culture war topics is harnessed by political figures or media influencers who seek to capitalize on it. As the mob becomes more organized, it can be steered toward specific targets, often leading to acts of political violence or the persecution of marginalized groups. The cycle of outrage, mobilization, and radicalization ultimately feeds into the escalation of social and political conflicts. The dynamics at play in these culture wars resemble a spiral of emotional intensification, in which individuals are continually drawn into deeper levels of anger and alienation, making them more susceptible to extreme political ideologies and more likely to engage in radical forms of activism.

The Feedback Loop: From Outrage to Political Influence

The interplay between online outrage and political influence forms a self-reinforcing cycle that sustains the culture war machine. Once a topic gains traction on social media, it often draws the attention of influencers and media outlets, who see an opportunity to stoke further outrage and profit from it. As the topic circulates, it generates increasing levels of emotional reaction, prompting political actors to intervene and use the issue as a means of consolidating electoral support. This is particularly evident in the way politicians adopt culture war issues into their campaigns, often warning of greater societal consequences if their ideological opponents are allowed to gain power.

The role of influencers and media outlets in this cycle is critical. They are not mere bystanders or passive commentators; they are active participants in the creation and perpetuation of outrage. By continually introducing new issues or amplifying existing ones, these figures ensure that the cycle of division remains intact. The fear of losing public attention or influence drives them to constantly escalate the stakes of the culture wars. In this way, culture war media outlets resemble political campaign machines, consistently stoking conflict to maintain their relevance and financial viability.

As this cycle progresses, the line between media outlets, political actors, and the public becomes increasingly blurred. Politicians, who may initially adopt culture war rhetoric for strategic electoral purposes, often find themselves caught up in the very dynamics they helped create. They become part of the cycle, using increasingly radical rhetoric to maintain their appeal to the base, while also fueling the divisive discourse that sustains their political careers.

Conclusion

Culture wars represent a complex intersection of emotional mobilization, political exploitation, and media manipulation. While these conflicts may begin with genuine cultural concerns, they are increasingly used as tools for political gain and financial profit. The ability of culture wars to unify disparate groups and generate significant emotional responses makes them powerful forces in modern political and social life. However, the very nature of these wars – their reliance on outrage, their potential to mobilize online mobs, and their capacity to escalate into real-world violence – poses serious risks for democratic societies. As such, understanding the dynamics of culture wars is critical for comprehending the rise of far-right movements and the growing polarization in contemporary political landscapes. The challenge, therefore, lies in addressing the underlying causes of cultural division while mitigating the negative emotional and political consequences of these increasingly powerful cultural conflicts.

Conclusion: The Future of Culture Wars

The rise of culture wars is not a passing phenomenon but rather a structural feature of modern political conflict. The intertwining of economic hardship, cultural change, and political instability creates fertile ground for the spread of extreme ideologies, particularly those rooted in xenophobia, nationalism, and reactionary cultural politics. In order to address the tensions generated by these conflicts, we must develop a nuanced vocabulary that acknowledges the complex interrelations between economic, political, and cultural factors. Additionally, it is essential to confront the emotional toll of these conflicts and recognize the impact they have on individuals and societies. Ultimately, the challenge lies in creating a new political and cultural framework that can provide a coherent, inclusive response to the issues driving contemporary culture wars.

Reframing Political Engagement: Strategies for Countering the Rise of Culture Wars

One of the most straightforward, yet challenging strategies for combating the current culture wars is to not engage in them. This approach is particularly difficult, as it requires resisting the urge to react emotionally to the provocative actions and rhetoric of those who seek to escalate societal divisions. Culture warriors are adept at understanding the dynamics of outrage, deliberately targeting groups or individuals in ways that provoke strong emotional responses. These reactions are, in fact,

part of the strategy. Culture warriors thrive on the indignation that their tactics generate, recognizing that the more we engage with these issues, the more we inadvertently strengthen their position. Each instance of emotional reaction sets the stage for the next wave of outrage, creating an ongoing cycle that weakens democratic opposition.

This tactical calculation by right-wing and far-right groups is central to the broader strategy of pushing public opinion toward the extremes. By consistently drawing attention to divisive cultural issues, they manipulate democratic discourse and subtly shift the political center toward more radical positions. To counter this, it is essential to avoid treating these issues as the primary focus of political discourse. Instead, we must deliberately pivot to discussions that transcend the immediate provocations of the far right. When culture warriors make no meaningful contributions to critical societal debates, it becomes an opportunity to engage in topics they ignore. If their platform is silent on an issue, it can serve as a moment to redirect the conversation toward policies or values that foster solidarity and inclusivity, thus undermining the narrow, exclusionary agendas of the far right.

A crucial component of this strategy involves resisting the temptation to make the far right the focal point of media narratives. Mainstream media, particularly traditional outlets, often perpetuate the very dynamics of polarization that culture warriors aim to exploit. By ceasing to position the far right as the central point of discourse, we can begin to reclaim the narrative and encourage a more substantive, nuanced discussion of societal challenges.

The Interrelation of Material Conditions, Social Policy, and Cultural Identity

The far right often exploits feelings of discomfort and frustration by providing simple, scapegoat-driven explanations for broader societal problems. They link this discontent to cultural and identity-based issues – such as the perceived erosion of traditional gender roles or the growing influence of ‘minority groups’ – presenting these as the root causes of societal instability. In doing so, they divert attention from the more complex and systemic economic issues that underpin these frustrations.

In reality, the issues at the heart of culture wars – questions of social policy, civil rights, and material conditions – are deeply interconnected. Economic inequality, for instance, cannot be fully understood without considering the cultural narratives that shape public discourse about wealth and class. Likewise, struggles for civil rights and gender equality intersect with material conditions such as access to education, healthcare, and employment. To focus on one sphere alone – be it economic, cultural, or political – without acknowledging the others is a mistake that oversimplifies the complexity of contemporary social conflict.

It is therefore essential to recognize the interrelatedness of these issues when addressing the root causes of culture wars. Politicians and social actors must acknowledge the full scope of the problems at hand and avoid reducing them to simplistic ideological struggles. Failing to do so only exacerbates the alienation felt by large segments of society and opens the door for more extreme movements to gain influence.

The Need for a New Vocabulary and Acknowledging Societal Change

In order to effectively address the forces driving contemporary culture wars, a new vocabulary must emerge – one that reflects the shifting realities of our societies. Many of the traditional political and social categories that defined previous generations no longer capture the complexities of contemporary life. For example, the economic dislocations caused by globalization and technological change have created new forms of material insecurity, while ongoing struggles for civil rights, gender equality, and minority protections have fundamentally altered societal dynamics. The traditional narratives of the 1970s and 1980s no longer suffice to address these issues comprehensively.

Politicians, policymakers, and public intellectuals must avoid the trap of dismissing these shifts or telling citizens that nothing has changed. A prime example of this occurred during the COVID-19-pandemic, when politicians downplayed the effects of inflation and supply chain disruptions, framing these as temporary or exaggerated problems. Such dismissals erode public trust, especially when people can feel that something is wrong, even if they cannot articulate it precisely. When the discomfort caused by economic shifts and cultural changes is ignored or minimized, it leads to a deep sense of alienation, further fueling the rise of far-right movements that offer easy explanations and solutions for complex social problems.

As societal changes unfold, especially regarding gender equality and the rights of marginalized groups, the language we use to describe these transformations must be inclusive and reflective of the complexities at play. For example, the ongoing struggles for women's rights – though still essential – have shifted in important ways. Women, who constitute a demographic majority in many societies, have fought for legal equality, but the discourse around women's rights needs to acknowledge the ways in which societal norms around gender are evolving. The question of masculinity, in particular, has become a crucial issue: the old models of male identity – based on dominance, power, and traditional gender roles – are increasingly questioned, but which positive alternatives exist is often unclear.

The contemporary discourse around masculinity is in a state of flux. We no longer need or desire a society where men are the sole providers or where toxic masculinity dominates. Yet, there remains a critical question: What form of mas-

culinity is desirable? This question is rarely addressed directly, but it is essential to the broader discussion of gender relations in contemporary societies.

Addressing the Emotional Toll of Cultural and Political Conflict

The emotional toll of contemporary culture wars cannot be underestimated. The flood of crises – economic, political, and cultural – has overwhelmed many individuals and communities. This constant state of flux, coupled with an underlying sense of instability, drains both individual and collective energy. The sense that ‘things are not right’ is pervasive, but the lack of clear solutions and the overwhelming scale of the challenges we face creates a sense of helplessness. This feeling of being overwhelmed must be recognized and addressed in any effort to resolve the current political and cultural impasse.

One potential way to cope with the emotional and political exhaustion wrought by culture wars is through humor. As seen in recent elections, particularly in the United States, adopting a posture of mockery and light-heartedness toward the exaggerated claims of culture warriors can serve as a powerful tool for disarming their rhetoric. Humor can provide a counter-narrative to the polarization and divisiveness that defines the culture wars, offering an alternative, more rational perspective on the issues at hand. By framing the culture war topics as absurd or illogical, we can discredit their underlying premises and regain the public’s attention for more substantive discussions.

Conclusion: The Far Right and the Rise of Culture Wars as a Unifying Force

In conclusion, the far right is experiencing a significant diversification in terms of its ideological stances, organizational structures, and modes of operation. This diversification manifests itself through varying degrees of transnational coordination and disorganization, with some factions maintaining a more coherent structure while others exhibit a looser, less centralized organization. While comparisons to the Socialist International have been made, these are not entirely appropriate. The far right does not operate in the same manner as past leftwing internationalist movements, as its networks are often fragmented, opportunistic, and fluid.

A key feature of the current far right is its exploitation of widespread societal discomfort – both psychological and material. This discomfort is rooted in tangible issues such as economic insecurity, racial and gender inequality, and cultural alienation. However, the discomfort itself is often instrumentalized and channeled into narratives of grievance and victimhood that are deeply intertwined with real, pervasive forms of racism, antisemitism, misogyny, and other forms of discrimination.

These sentiments serve as foundational elements that fuel the ongoing culture wars, which in turn become a unifying force for various factions of the far right.

What we are witnessing is the emergence of culture wars as a central organizing principle for the far right. These wars are not merely incidental or superficial; they represent a deeper ideological and political shift towards what, in its more extreme manifestations, amounts to a fascist project. This project is unified not only by a shared set of reactionary values but by the strategic use of cultural issues as a tool for galvanizing support and legitimizing increasingly authoritarian and exclusionary policies.

While it would be preferable to conclude on a more optimistic note, the reality of the current political landscape demands a sober assessment. The developments we are witnessing – ranging from the increasing prominence of far-right ideologies in mainstream politics and policies to the instrumentalization of culture wars as a means of social division – represent serious threats to democratic institutions and social cohesion. These phenomena may still be in their nascent stages, but the trajectory suggests a potential escalation into a more dangerous and far-reaching political movement. The extremism we see today, in its various forms, is not merely an anomaly or transient event; it has the potential to evolve into a more formidable and destructive force in the future.

In light of these observations, it is necessary to label this phenomenon for what it is: a fascist project in formation. Whether it is already a fully realized danger or a nascent threat, the trajectory of these movements indicates that their impact on the future political landscape could be profoundly destabilizing. As such, it is imperative that we approach the issue with the seriousness and urgency it demands, acknowledging that the forces currently at play pose significant risks to democratic values and social stability.

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