

AMERICAS

Behind 2016's Turmoil, a Crisis of White Identity

The Interpreter

By AMANDA TAUB NOV. 1, 2016

Call it the crisis of whiteness.

White anxiety has fueled this year's political tumult in the West: Britain's surprising vote to exit the European Union, Donald J. Trump's unexpected capture of the Republican presidential nomination in the United States, the rise of right-wing nationalism in Norway, Hungary, Austria and Greece.

Whiteness, in this context, is more than just skin color. You could define it as membership in the "ethno-national majority," but that's a mouthful. What it really means is the privilege of not being defined as "other."

Whiteness means being part of the group whose appearance, traditions, religion and even food are the default norm. It's being a person who, by unspoken rules, was long entitled as part of "us" instead of "them."

But national and racial identity were often conflated for the white majority. That identity felt to many white people like one of the most important pillars holding up their world — and now it seems under threat.

There are, of course, complicated contours to 2016's unusual politics. In Britain, immigrants from South Asia voted heavily to leave the European Union, citing hopes that curtailing European migration might open space for more people from Asia. In the United States, frustration with and alienation from status quo politics have helped drive Mr. Trump's rise.

There has also always been a certain fluidity to this concept of whiteness. Irish and Italian immigrants to the United States, and Jews in Britain, were once seen as separate from the white national majority, and are now generally considered part of it, benefiting from racial privilege. At the same time, Jews' white skin did not protect them from being cast as outsiders by some of Mr. Trump's supporters who have circulated anti-Semitic memes on social media.

Still, experts see a crisis of white identity underlying much of the West's current turmoil.

"It's fundamentally about 'who are we?'" said Eric Kaufmann, a professor of politics at Birkbeck College, University of London. "What does it mean to be part of this nation? Is it not 'our' nation anymore, 'our' meaning the ethnic majority?"

"These kinds of questions are really front and center, even though they're not necessarily verbalized."

The questions can seem like a sudden reversal after decades of rising multiculturalism, through the civil rights movement in the United States and the European Union's opening up of borders.

In fact, academic research suggests that other economic and social transformations unfolding at the same time have led many people to anchor themselves more fully in their whiteness — even as whiteness itself has lost currency.

"When I look at the data, I keep coming back to this issue that it's really about identity politics," said Elisabeth Ivarsflaten, a professor at Norway's University of Bergen who studies Europe's far-right parties. "This is the most powerful predictor of support for the populists."

Gains and losses in a changing world

Identity, as academics define it, falls into two broad categories: "achieved" identity derived from personal effort, and "ascribed" identity based on innate characteristics.

Everyone has both, but people tend to be most attached to their "best" identity — the one that offers the most social status or privileges. Successful

professionals, for example, often define their identities primarily through their careers.

For generations, working-class whites were doubly blessed: They enjoyed privileged status based on race, as well as the fruits of broad economic growth.

White people's officially privileged status waned over the latter half of the 20th century with the demise of discriminatory practices in, say, university admissions. But rising wages, an expanding social safety net and new educational opportunities helped offset that. Most white adults were wealthier and more successful than their parents, and confident that their children would do better still.

That feeling of success may have provided a sort of identity in itself.

But as Western manufacturing and industry have declined, taking many working-class towns with them, parents and grandparents have found that the opportunities they once had are unavailable to the next generation.

That creates an identity vacuum to be filled.

"For someone who is lower income or lower class," Professor Kaufmann explained, "you're going to get more self-esteem out of a communal identity such as ethnicity or the nation than you would out of any sort of achieved identity."

Focusing on lost identities rather than lost livelihoods helps answer one of the most puzzling questions about the link between economic stress and the rise of nationalist politics: why it is flowing from the middle and working classes, and not the very poor.

While globalization and free trade have widened economic inequality and deeply wounded many working-class communities, data suggests that this year's political turmoil is not merely a backlash to that real pain.

In Britain's referendum on membership in the European Union, low education was a much stronger predictor of people voting "leave" than low income, according to an analysis by Zsolt Darvas, a senior fellow at the Bruegel research group.

A recent Gallup study found that Mr. Trump's supporters tend to earn above-

average incomes for their communities, but also tend to live in majority-white areas where children are likely to be worse off than their parents.

Arlie Russell Hochschild, the author of “Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right,” describes a feeling of lost opportunity as the “deep story” of the rural Louisiana communities she spent four years studying.

Her subjects felt like they were waiting in a long line to reach the top of a hill where the American dream was waiting for them. But the line’s uphill progress had slowed, even stopped. And immigrants, black people and other “outsiders” seemed to be cutting the line.

For many Western whites, opportunities for achieved identity — the top of the hill — seem unattainable. So their ascribed identity — their whiteness — feels more important than ever.

Whiteness is becoming less valuable

Michael Ignatieff, a historian and former Liberal Party leader in Canada, said that in much of the West, “what defined the political community” for many years “was the unstated premise that it was white.”

The formal rejection of racial discrimination in those societies has, by extension, constructed a new, broader national identity. The United States has a black president; London has a Muslim mayor of Pakistani descent.

But that broadening can, to some, feel like a painful loss, articulated in the demand voiced over and over at Trump rallies, pro-Brexit events and gatherings for populist parties throughout Europe: “I want my country back.”

The mantra is not all about bigotry. Rather, being part of a culture designed around people’s own community and customs is a constant background hum of reassurance, of belonging.

The loss of that comforting hum has accelerated a phenomenon that Robin DiAngelo, a lecturer and author, calls “white fragility” — the stress white people feel when they confront the knowledge that they are neither special nor the default; that whiteness is just a race like any other.

Fragility leads to feelings of insecurity, defensiveness, even threat. And it can trigger a backlash against those who are perceived as outsiders.

Even some conservative analysts who support a multiethnic “melting pot” national identity, such as the editor of *National Review*, Reihan Salam, worry that unassimilated immigrants could threaten core national values and cultural cohesion.

The effect of rapid change

Social scientists, after crunching data from both sides of the Atlantic, have discovered something surprising: It's not the amount of racial or ethnic diversity in a community that predicts white resentment and support of anti-immigrant policies, but the pace of change.

Denmark, for instance, is 88 percent white Danish today — hardly a majority in jeopardy. But a generation ago, in 1980, it was 97 percent white. The anti-immigrant Danish People's Party is now the second-largest party in the Danish Parliament. In Germany, where the foreign-born population shot up by approximately 75 percent between 2011 and 2015, the anti-immigrant, populist Alternative for Germany party is now drawing record support.

Britain saw a 66 percent increase in its foreign-born population between 2004 and 2014. Voters who chose “leave” in the recent referendum overwhelmingly cited immigration as their main concern.

Professor Kaufmann and a colleague, Gareth Harris, found that white Britons who lived in areas that are rapidly diversifying became more likely to vote for the right-wing British National Party. Daniel Hopkins, a professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania, found a similar pattern of ethnic change leading to anti-immigrant politics in the United States.

Immigrant populations in Arkansas, North Carolina and Tennessee have more than tripled since 1990, noted Lee Drutman, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, in an analysis for *Vox*. Anxiety over those changes may explain why the Republican Party became so much more focused on limiting immigration over that period — and why white voters in those states overwhelmingly support Mr. Trump.

The whiteness taboo

For decades, the language of white identity has only existed in the context of white supremacy. When that became taboo, it left white identity politics without a vocabulary.

If you are a working-class white person and you fear that the new, cosmopolitan world will destroy or diminish an identity you cherish, you have no culturally acceptable way to articulate what you perceive as a crisis.

Some of these people have instead reached for issues that feel close to their concerns: trade, crime, the war on drugs, controlling the borders, fear of Islamist terrorism. All are significant in their own right, and create very real fears for many people, but they have also become a means to have a public conversation about what society's changes mean for white majorities.

Professor Ivarsflaten cited the U.K. Independence Party, whose official platform focused on Brexit but whose pitch to voters emphasized immigrants' effects on the economy and culture, as an example of an effective hybrid populist pitch.

The approach has in some cases moved from the political fringes into the mainstream. Some leaders from Britain's center-right, governing Conservative Party, for example, helped push a British exit, and since the referendum the new Conservative prime minister, Theresa May, has signaled sympathy with white identity politics.

Mrs. May's government proposed a rule that would publicly shame employers who hired foreign workers. And her first major speech was full of barbs directed against multiculturalism, including a jab against people who claimed to be "citizens of the world," whom she called "citizens of nowhere."

But the struggle for white identity is not just a political problem; it is about the "deep story" of feeling stuck while others move forward.

There will not likely be a return to the whiteness of social dominance and exclusive national identity. Immigration cannot be halted without damaging Western nations' economies; immigrants who have already arrived cannot be expelled en masse without causing social and moral damage. And the other

groups who seem to be “cutting in line” are in fact getting a chance at progress that was long denied them.

Western whites have a place within their nations’ new, broader national identities. But unless they accept it, the crisis of whiteness seems likely to continue.

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