

Against Anti-Pluralism

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

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Citizens are voting for candidates hitherto considered unlikely; the future of the EU, and indeed the post-war international order is in question. It is unsurprising that the current fin de siècle atmosphere, and many citizens' sense of precarity, uncertainty, and loss of control, would produce the current outpouring of scorn in response to perceived political immobilism in the face of burgeoning challenges. A few weeks ago Roberto Orsi [contributed](#) to the expansive debate about the causes, consequences and appropriate responses to these political ruptures emerging across the western world. Orsi's piece is helpful because it identifies important symptoms and systematic failures in western policy, but he willfully pushes a uni-causal account of events, and points us towards fallacious solutions. Though this piece is at least in part a response to Orsi, having read his piece (which can be found [here](#)) is by no means a prerequisite for following this one.

Competing narratives



The Ratification of the Treaty of Münster, 15 May 1648 (1648) by Gerard ter Borch.

It is undeniable communities have changed. They have become more diverse in their ethnic makeup, languages spoken, and in some communities immigrants form majority sub-cultures that can make natives feel unwelcome. This may not be apparent to those with the means to move to cities in search of the best jobs, or to the neighborhoods with the best schools and amenities. The best paid jobs usually draw from a global talent pool, involve airport lounges, and the kind of cosmopolitan culture in which nationality as a relevant marker of distinction is all but irrelevant. The failure to understand the concerns of many voters, goes hand in hand with the so-called 'elite's' failure to relate to experiences of those whose economic lives are more precarious, whose regions have lost stable jobs, and for whom national identity still holds significant purchase. As the economic and cultural experience of urban (or in the US, coastal) populations diverged ever more starkly from the experience of rural, small-town, deindustrialising parts of the West, the public

narrative contrived by politicians and the news media lost resonance with large parts of the public who's lives are clearly shaped by a sense of decline. British tabloids, Breitbart, InfoWars, Trump and UKIP have filled this narrative void. The story Orsi tells is distinctly in this vein. It was prescient to recognize that there was a need for an alternative narrative where prevailing stories rang hollow to many. These narratives fill the gap, characterizing the struggle as one of elites against the people, returning the scorn many citizens have felt themselves exposed to (let's be honest, those living in urban centres of prosperity, where political, media, and economic power is concentrated have had little patience or regard for the culture, concerns and views of the population outside these melting pots). But these narratives are also wrong, and their moral arc leads to conflagration.

This isn't all about identity

It is, for instance, true that politicians failed to properly articulate the wider challenges and risks that the refugee influx brought, which is not to say that admitting refugees was wrong (the frequently peddled idea that [Merkel invited a million refugees](#) is, in any case, a rhetorical device of the right which suggest that there was some simple and obvious alternative which politicians, conspiring against their own people, declined to pursue.). But for those, who

for decades were on the receiving end of the neoliberal mantra of individual responsibility, to whom the political system signaled that they must make their own fortune, calls for solidarity with refugees must have rang cruelly dissonant.

Taking his cue from such mistakes, Orsi interprets our political rupture in terms of identity and culture. He describes political upheavals across the West as a response to the willful destruction of national communities. This story appears to be premised on a belief that the natural place of persons is within communities defined above all by a shared and sharply demarcated identity—a departure from this unity-in-identity spells doom. Immigrants, refugees, and others, disrupt this cultural order, the hierarchy of identities, that social peace depends on. As Orsi puts it, western policy has sought to do away with itself by pushing “for the obliteration of any sense of difference and the deconstruction of any collective identity or hierarchy (civilisational, religious, national, local, relational, sexual).” Here identities are rivalrous, and zero-sum. He describes Merkel’s refugee policy as “complete insanity”, as an undoing of Germany itself. The current backlash is cast as a brave defense by ‘the people’ against enemies, extraneous and internal (read: everyone else, elites, experts or Muslims). And the narrative is compelling because it identifies a culprit for the prevailing sense of precarity and insecurity. But this story is also woefully incomplete.

Centering an interpretation of our times on identity and culture is only achieved by systematic omission. In order to make sense, the story demands that everything must be explained in terms of the threat ‘others’ pose to ‘us’. But what about rising inequality, economic stagnation, the decline in reliable public services, all those things that brought a level of welfare and stability to people’s lives? How about an account of economic governance, the feckless and shambolic response towards the culprits of the financial crisis, the way automation is replacing ever more jobs, and other factors which have wrought a sense of decline and precarity? What about the fact that most parents now [expect](#) future generations to be [worse off](#) than current ones? What about the observation that in an increasingly interconnected world, where governance requires closer international coordination, citizens will feel besieged by a sense of their powerlessness (as Giddens [observed](#))? What about all the [evidence](#) of the economic benefits immigrants bring to the places they make their home? If automation leads to the loss of stable jobs, then how would banning immigrants help? Orsi does not even hint that such causes could be lurking behind the outpouring of scorn that we are witnessing, instead elevating culture and identity as the beating heart of the problem. Indeed many populists on the right and the left brazenly ignore a whole range of obvious factors that only inconvenience their preferred narrative.

Of course identity and culture play into the wider crisis we are facing. However, we are not facing only one crisis, but an amalgamation of different crises, each with different causes, and distinct consequences. A uni-causal explanation in terms of identity lends succor to populists everywhere (both on the left and the right). But a uni-causal explanation is also a recipe for failure. An account of our rupture that omits the broader picture is either ill informed, or willfully peddles a narrow interpretation for political ends.

Pluralism isn’t the problem, but the unavoidable baseline

Orsi’s uni-causal account, like others with a similar thrust, takes aim at a ‘misguided’ pluralism as the fungus that ails our societies. He reads events as an understandable response to “a suppression of meaningful pluralism,” the suppression of those who believe their countries are being disfigured, and who seek to end this havoc. This suppression of pluralism, he argues, can drive polarization to the point where violence becomes inevitable. The solution is restoring the privileged status of the identities of those who rose up, those who supported Brexit, Trump, Le Pen, AFD, etc.. But this line of argument naturalises, and comes uncomfortably close to actively advocating the kind of anti-pluralism that is barely disguised in much of the discourse on the right. It views identities as zero-sum, where there is a limit to the diversity that a community can bear. [Such accounts](#) are not anti-elitist, as they often claim, but anti-pluralist. They are not advocates for a uniquely oppressed and under-represented ‘people’, but advocates for a hierarchy of identities, in which some people should be uniquely privileged. Their aim is greater homogeneity, not a fairer pluralism. Follow their logic, and it will march you inexorably towards violence, while doing exactly nothing to address the underlying causes of precarity.

None of this is to say that identity should not matter. I am not disputing that citizenship should confer rights that are denied to others. But we must remember that the most successful political arrangements of intra- and inter-state order were those that accepted pluralism as a necessary given, rather than a problem. They were political arrangements that explicitly sought to accommodate pluralism, accepting it not so much as a virtue, but a means of avoiding violence. The treaties of Münster and Osnabrück accepted religious pluralism in Europe, not out of virtue, but because exhausted and depleted by 30 years of war in which a third of Europe's population had perished, pluralism was recognized as an unavoidable feature of human community. Civil wars end similarly, not out of virtue, but because eventually parties come to the realization that accepting difference is less costly than achieving purity. Unfortunately too many of us appear to have forgotten these lessons of history. They may condemn us to learn them all over again.

Taking aim at pluralism itself is not only a sign of a deeply inadequate account of the political present, but the doctrine of anti-pluralists it advances can only lead to calamity. This is not to say that immigration reform, internal and external security aren't serious issues to discuss. They are. But the anti-pluralist line of thought inevitably will require one side to achieve dominance, and that, invariably, requires violence. The real task of the present is not to undo pluralism, but to urgently find a way of renewing arrangement which can sustain political order amidst pluralism. The line of thought espoused by Orsi and others does nothing to advance that aim.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog nor of the London School of Economics.

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This post is a reply to: [President Trump and the Politics of Tragedy](#)

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