
The New Language of European Populism

Why "Civilization" Is Replacing the Nation

Rogers Brubaker



CHRISTIAN HARTMANN / REUTERS

The Sacre Coeur Basilica in Paris, February 2015.

Anti-immigrant populist parties have been a familiar feature of European politics since at least the 1980s, but they have [gained new prominence](#) in recent years. In May, the National Front leader [Marine Le Pen](#) was a serious contender in France's presidential election; in the run-up to the Dutch parliamentary elections in March, [Geert Wilders'](#) Party for Freedom was long in the lead; and last year, [Norbert Hofer](#) of

the far-right Freedom Party came very close to winning Austria's presidency. Anti-immigrant populists have also achieved breakthroughs in countries where they had previously failed to gain traction, notably Germany and Sweden, where the Alternative for Germany and the Sweden Democrats, respectively, have made big electoral gains.

Observers ordinarily characterize these parties as nativist, nationalist, and far right. But although these parties do champion nativist and nationalist themes, and although their rhetoric is indeed sometimes extreme, it would be a mistake to see them as simply the heirs of Europe's long tradition of far-right nationalism. Unlike the Nazi Party or the fascist parties of interwar Europe or the small neo-Nazi or neofascist parties of postwar Europe, these are not anti-system actors; they do not reject the democratic constitutional order. Nor are they even consistently right-wing. Unlike her conservative opponent François Fillon, for example, Le Pen presented her party as "neither right nor left" and promised to defend workers against "savage globalization."

Rather than force them into ill-fitting old categories, we should recognize that many anti-immigrant parties today have developed a new political discourse, one that I term "[civilizationism](#)." Civilizationism has been adopted by the Netherlands' Party for Freedom, Denmark's People's Party, Norway's Progress Party, Finland's True Finns, Sweden's Sweden Democrats, France's National Front, and, to a certain extent, Belgium's Vlaams Belang, Austria's Freedom Party, and Italy's Northern League (although not by the Alternative for Germany, which remains closer to the traditional nationalist far right). The new civilizationism is a paradoxical combination of "identitarian" Christianity, secularism, philo-Semitism, Islamophobia, and even some elements of liberalism such as support for gender equality and gay rights. It posits a pan-European civilizational identity that it asserts is threatened by, and in fundamental conflict with, Islam,

understood as a separate and alien civilization. This new discourse is more subtle than that of explicitly extreme-right movements and parties, but it, too, poses grave dangers to liberal democracy.



Fabrizio Bensch / Reuters

Supporters of the German anti-immigration movement PEGIDA at a rally in Dresden, April 2015.

FROM CHRISTIANITY TO CHRISTIANISM

Civilizationist populism was first pioneered a decade and a half ago by the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn. A stylish, openly gay, former Marxist sociologist, Fortuyn transformed himself, in the months before his 2002 assassination, into a stunningly successful politician by breaking taboos and challenging the dull, consensual style of Dutch politics. Fortuyn was of course not the first to tap into popular anxieties about immigration or to blame immigrants for crime and urban disorder. But he innovated in joining anti-immigrant (and specifically anti-Muslim) rhetoric with liberal positions on social issues, especially gay rights. Proudly [calling himself](#) “the Samuel Huntington of Dutch politics,” Fortuyn invoked the specter of a [“clash of civilizations”](#) within Europe between what he referred to as “Judeo-Christian humanistic culture,” which

was liberal and open, and Islamic culture, which he characterized as backward and oppressive, especially in the domains of gender and sexuality.

Throughout northern and western Europe, anti-immigrant populists have similarly positioned themselves as defenders of a Judeo-Christian European civilization rather than only their own national culture. For instance, although Europe is the most secular region of the world, with extremely low rates of church attendance, in recent years, populists have increasingly referred to Europe's Christian foundations. Le Pen has emphasized the ["Christian roots" of France](#), and in Austria, Hofer included the words ["so help me God"](#) on his campaign posters. But the Christianity they invoke is not a substantive religion; rather, it is a marker of shared culture and identity. This secular, culturalized Christianity differs sharply from the Christianity invoked in eastern Europe, especially in Poland, where religious belief and practice remain much more robust, and where nationalism and Catholicism are deeply intertwined.

The Christianity—or "Christianism," as I term it—invoked by populists of northern and western Europe is a matter of [belonging rather than believing](#), a way of defining "us" in relation to "them." If "they" are Muslim, then "we," the Europeans, must in some sense be Christian. But that does not mean that we must be religious. In fact, the ongoing erosion of Christianity as a religion makes it easier to invoke Christianity as a cultural and civilizational identity, understood in terms of shared values that have little or nothing to do with religious doctrine or ritual.

At the same time that they invoke Christian identity, the civilizationists also stress their secularism. But there is no contradiction between the populist right's Christianity and its secularism, since both derive from a preoccupation with Islam. The new secularism does not target religious symbols,

arguments, or practices in general; rather, it targets the symbols, arguments, and practices of Muslims. In France, for instance, secularism has been used to justify bans on [pork-free menu options in public schools](#), the ritual slaughter of animals without prior stunning, and the provision of halal food in public institutions. Populist secularism has also informed the passing of restrictions on Muslim women's clothing, including the [bans on burkinis](#) introduced by some French localities in 2016 and those on [full-face veils](#) enacted in Austria, Belgium, and France. In short, civilizationists selectively embrace secularism in order to push Islam out of the public sphere, while excluding or delegitimizing Christian arguments for compassion toward migrants and refugees.

In a further break from the old European right, which was generally anti-Semitic, the new civilizationists take pains to underscore their philo-Semitism and support for Israel. For instance, Wilders has described Israel as close to his heart and "the West's first line of defense against Islam." For the traditional far right, Jews represented a threat to the ethnocultural homogeneity of the nation. But today, as attacks by Muslims on Jews have become more frequent, especially in Belgium and France, anti-immigrant populists have redefined Jews as [exemplary victims](#) of Islam. Instead of excluding Jews from the national community, parties such as the National Front are courting them as a newly vulnerable minority. Addressing French Jews in a 2014 interview, Le Pen argued that her party was "without a doubt the [best shield to protect you](#) against the one true enemy, Islamic fundamentalism."

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The new populists have also embraced the rhetoric of gender equality. In Scandinavia and the Netherlands, where gender equality is a defining national value, this embrace has a nationalist dimension. But even in less liberal countries, such

as France, right-wing populists claim gender equality as a European value with roots in the Christian tradition, which they contrast with the gender inequality and oppression they assert to be inherent in Islam. Populist [rhetoric](#) represents Muslim women, for instance, as victims of alien cultural practices, such as enforced covering, arranged marriages, domestic violence, polygamy, and genital cutting, while casting Western women as vulnerable to sexual assault at the hands of Muslim men. This maneuver allows the civilizationists to present their opposition to Islam as a defense of women, as well as to exonerate Europe by redefining gender inequality as an exclusively Muslim problem.

The embrace of gay rights, at least outside the Netherlands, has been more tentative. Most anti-immigrant populist parties continue to [promote traditional models of the family](#), and only Norway's Progress Party unequivocally supports gay marriage. Yet at the same time, these parties have underscored their opposition to discrimination against gay men and women while criticizing Islam as homophobic. And the National Front and other anti-immigrant parties have discreetly sought to attract the support of gay voters.

REPRESSIVE TOLERANCE

Philo-Semitism, the promotion of gender equality, and support for gay rights are used in strikingly similar ways in the civilizational discourse of the populist right: to highlight Islam's backwardness in relation to Europe's modernity and to cast the anti-immigrant right as the defender of the continent's liberal and progressive values. The irony of populists' intolerant, illiberal, and exclusionary celebrations of Europe's tolerance, liberalism, and inclusiveness will be lost on nobody.

Yet the populists' selective embrace of secularism and of

Jews, women, and gay people is not only a rhetorical strategy; it is also an electoral one, a way for populists to reach out to new constituencies and gain mainstream acceptance. The populists argue that these groups are all threatened—physically and culturally—by the so-called Islamization of Western societies. They further allege that mainstream parties and cultural elites have ignored this threat. Thus, in the populists’ telling, the interests of Jews, women, and gay people are best served by those who are unafraid to tell it like it is—the populists themselves. There is some evidence that this strategy has helped anti-immigrant populists attract more [women](#) and voters who are [strongly supportive of gay rights](#).



*Charles Platiau / Reuters
French National Front leader Marine Le Pen in Paris, November 2016.*

The new populists’ fusion of formerly disparate strands of thought challenges prevailing understandings of populist xenophobia, which is often characterized as fundamentally nationalist. Parties such as the National Front in France, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, and the Freedom Party in Austria are of course nationalist. But they are not just nationalist: they are at the same time civilizationalist. They

draw the most fundamental boundaries between self and other along civilizational lines—between the Judeo-Christian West and Islam—not national lines.

What explains this redrawing of boundaries? On the one hand, national differences have been attenuated by deepening European integration and globalization. At the same time, the growing visibility of Muslim religiosity in an otherwise irreligious environment highlights the contrast between secularized Christianity and apparently secularization-resistant Islam. And of course, the populist preoccupation with Islam as an alien and threatening civilization has gained additional traction from the spectacular and symbolically resonant attacks committed in recent years in the name of Islam in a series of European capitals.

The rise of civilizational populism is a story laced with ironies and reversals. Secularism, long an ideology of the left, is now being claimed by the right. The deeply illiberal populist right proclaims its liberalism and commitment to philo-Semitism, gender equality, and gay rights. As Europe becomes more secular, it is rhetorically depicted as Christian. Christianity, in turn, is celebrated as the source of liberalism, secularism, and gender equality. And even as the European project has begun to falter, pan-European identity, defined in religious and civilizational terms, has come to figure more centrally in the continent's discourse.

A SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY?

The chief danger of Europe's civilizational populism, especially insofar as its themes come to be echoed in mainstream political discourse, is that it may be self-fulfilling. By representing Islam as fundamentally alien to all that Europe stands for—by characterizing it as “the greatest threat to the survival of our civilization,” [as Wilders has done](#)—the civilizationists encourage and legitimize a

reciprocal rejection of Europe and the West by Europe's Muslim citizens. Such an uncompromisingly anti-Western stance is, to be sure, already a core element of certain strands of Islamist discourse that exist independently of anti-Muslim talk. But Europe's civilizational populism risks making these radically anti-Western strands more credible and attractive to Muslims. By proclaiming in ever-harsher terms the incompatibility of Europe and Islam, the new civilizationism cannot help but deepen the alienation of Europe's Muslims and the mistrust between them and the continent's nominally Christian majority. In this way, it may contribute to creating the very division that it claims to describe.

In the face of this danger, it is important to insist—against the vulgarized Huntingtonian perspective adopted by the civilizational populists—that civilizations are not unified entities with timeless essences that stand irreconcilably opposed to one another. They are vast, varied, unruly, and evolving fields of practice and discourse. To posit a clash of civilizations is to neglect the more important clashes within civilizations.

Civilizationism's caricature of Islam must therefore be challenged. The anthropologist John Bowen, for example, has [shown the flaws](#) in sweeping arguments about Islam and gender inequality. But civilizational populism's attempt to cloak its exclusionary vision in the respectable mantle of liberalism must also be challenged. There is nothing liberal about the instrumentalization of philo-Semitism, gender equality, and gay rights by anti-immigrant populists; rather, it is a cynical attempt to broaden their electoral base by playing on anxieties about the alleged Islamization of European societies. In this respect, there is not all that much distance separating the Islamophobia of the civilizationalists from that of U.S. President Donald Trump, whose recent retweeting of inflammatory and misleading anti-Muslim videos posted by a [radical fringe British group](#)—giving the group an enormous

publicity boost—was only the latest in a series of symbolic provocations. Ultimately, the civilizational and pseudo-liberal framing of the anti-immigrant populists of northern and western Europe is a thin ideological veneer; the hostility to Islam is fundamental.

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