# From Private Unhappiness to Public Outrage: The Emotional Origins of Twenty-First-Century Populism

## A Review Essay by Vera Michlin-Shapir

*Empathy in Politics and Leadership: The Key to Transforming Our World*
Claire Yorke. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2025.

*Don't Talk about Politics: How to Change 21stCentury Minds*
Sarah Stein Lubrano. London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2025.

*The Emotional Life of Populism: How Fear, Disgust, Resentment, and Love Undermine Democracy*
Eva Illouz. London: Polity Press, 2023.

**About the Author**

Dr Vera Michlin-Shapir is Director of Education at the Sympodium Institute for Strategic Communications, specialising in how states work to shape international perceptions to pursue strategic goals. Her work spans the domains of security studies, political communications and foreign policy, with Russia serving as a key case study. Dr Michlin-Shapir was a Lecturer of Strategic Communications in the War Studies Department at King's College London. She is the author of *Fluid Russia: Between the Global and the National in the PostSoviet Era* (Cornell University Press, 2021).

*'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.'*

Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (1878)

In today's global politics, one might borrow Tolstoy's insight and say that 'Happy countries are all alike; every unhappy country is unhappy in its own way.' It's a maxim that captures the diverse grievances driving the rise of populism across the twenty-first century. Mainstream media regularly publish international indices—the Corruption Perceptions Index, the Democracy Index, the Edelman Trust Barometer, and the World Happiness Report. At the top of these rankings, the same countries tend to appear: the world's happiest places.[1] Interestingly these are not necessarily the world's richest nations. In many cases they are smaller countries with strong education and healthcare systems, small inequality and gender pay gaps, and high levels of trust in politicians and public institutions. Further down the rankings, however, we begin to see the countries that struggle with unhappiness.

Unhappy countries are not necessarily at the very bottom of these rankings. Those lowest positions are typically occupied by the eternally miserable—failed or pariah states living in political and cultural isolation and economic destitution. Unhappiness, however, often hides in plain sight. Such countries may be well placed in the top half of the rankings, or even in the top ten. They are relatively prosperous, yet alarming developments emerge from these locations. In the Netherlands, a 'veteran anti-Islam populist leader' secured a parliamentary majority;[2] in Germany, there has been a 'dramatic surge by the far-right', with sentiment spreading

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1. The World Happiness Report, an UN-endorsed initiative, defines happiness as a reflective assessment of one's life, using a standardised scale (0–10) asking people where they stand in terms of the best/worst possible life for themselves. They identify six key factors (GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity as social behaviour, perceptions of corruption) that contribute to a subjective self-evaluation of happiness in individuals.

2. Paul Kirby and Anna Holligan, 'Dutch Election: Anti-Islam Populist Geert Wilders Wins Dramatic Victory', *BBC News*, 23 November 2023, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-67504272.

from the poorer East westwards;[3] in Slovakia, voters supported a 'populist pro-Moscow party';[4] and in Britain, a major poll has predicted that a populist party could form a government if an election were held today.[5]

Many liberals, myself included, greet such news with a mixture of dread and resignation. We are 'shocked but not surprised'.[6] Until recently we regarded these countries as happy and stable, yet it has become increasingly clear that political discontent is spreading like wildfire across the liberal world. Nearly a decade has passed since 2016, when the UK voted to leave the EU and Donald J. Trump was elected president of the United States of America for the first time, events that now feel like heralds of a broader transformation. We understand the landscape better now, but pressing questions remain: first, what exactly is populism and why are those who consider themselves to be liberals so dismayed by it? Second, while each nation may be unhappy in its own way, are there common threads that draw voters to populist movements, or is every case unique? And, last, if patterns do exist, should we try to reverse this rising tide?

Three accomplished female authors—Claire Yorke, Eva Illouz, and Sarah Stein Lubrano—offer thoughtful and sophisticated analyses addressing the last two questions. Before drawing on their insights, however, it is important to consider certain aspects of populism that unsettle liberals—a concern central to their three books.

3   Anja Koch, 'Far-Right AfD Surges in Poverty-Stricken Western German City', *DW*, 26 February 2025, www.dw.com/en/far-right-afd-party-surges-in-poor-western-german-city/video-71754048.

4   Lili Bayer, 'Slovakia Election: Pro-Moscow Former PM on course to Win with Almost All Votes Counted', *The Guardian*, 30 September 2023, www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/01/slovakia-election-pro-moscow-former-pm-on-course-to-win-with-almost-all-votes-counted.

5   Patrick English, 'YouGov MRP Shows a Reform UK Government a Near-Certainty if an Election Were Held Tomorrow', *YouGov*, 26 September 2025, https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/53059-yougov-mrp-shows-a-reform-uk-government-a-near-certainty-if-an-election-were-held-tomorrow.

6   Claire Yorke, *Empathy in Politics and Leadership* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2025), p. 4.

## Why Does Populism Dismay Liberals?

Populism is a contested and often misunderstood term. In 1967 Isaiah Berlin warned researchers of populism not to suffer from a 'Cinderella complex'.[7] That is, to think that 'somewhere there lurks true, perfect populism' of which 'all other populisms are derivations of'.[8] Berlin did not think of this approach as 'very useful'.[9] For the purposes of this essay, I will speak of twenty-first-century populism as a political style that addresses sociopolitical problems by dividing populations into unambiguous camps of 'us' (ordinary people) and 'them' (corrupt elites/foreigners/migrants).[10] When I speak of a political style, I refer to what political theorist Benjamin Moffitt defines as 'a repertoire of embodied, symbolically mediated performances … stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life'.[11]

Populism is neither inherently left wing nor right wing, and because its political outcomes vary so widely, it is easily employed as a pejorative label against political and ideological opponents of any hue. At its core, populism rejects the technocratic, bureaucratic, and positivist-scientific political styles that are widespread in liberal democracies. These styles problematise issues and defy simple and quick solutions. By contrast, populism connects with supporters through emotions and energises public discontent in populations to demand immediate and straightforward results.

Populism's appeal lies in the fact that, while mainstream politicians struggle to fix the complexities of a globalised and neoliberal, Western

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7   Isaiah Berlin, 'To Define Populism' (Verbatim report of conference held at the London School of Economics and Political Science, 20–21 May 1967), *Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/bibliography/bib111bLSE.pdf.

8   Ibid.

9   Ibid.

10  J. Harsin, 'Post-Truth Politics and Epistemic Populism: About (Dis-)trusted Presentation and Communication of Facts, Not False Information', in *Post-Truth Populism: A New Political Paradigm*, ed. S. Newman and M. Conrad (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), pp. 25–64, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-64178-7_2.

11  Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford University Press, 2016), p. 38.

system of nation-state governance that is underperforming, and the rule-based international order, populists almost always speak to ordinary people in ordinary, accessible terms. Complex questions find simple answers. They attack what they call liberal elites, accusing them of diverting power from the people into the hands of unelected bureaucrats and experts whose priorities ignore the needs of ordinary citizens. From this perspective, one might reasonably ask: are these elites simply incompetent, or are they, as populists claim, deliberate saboteurs? Is there a hidden agenda of the 'deep state'? Or an unseen, foreign hand at play? All questions, and by extension all theories, are legitimised in the populist online political media space. In that way, populism forms an epistemological space of alternative knowledge and its own truth-bearers and truth-tellers (influencers, podcasters, bloggers, and conspiracy theorists).

Liberals detest such political style primarily because its success relies on an antagonistic approach towards their own political styles. But not only because of that. Liberal political thought and writing consistently warn that framing politics in polarised 'us versus them' terms threatens to undermine both the rights and the basic dignity of individuals. If we take the thought of nineteenth-century philosopher John Stuart Mill, whose ideas influenced and inspired perhaps the broadest spectrum of current political interpretations of liberalism, schisms between liberals and populists of every creed and affiliation are quickly revealed.

Mill articulated social and civic liberty as a principle that seeks to regulate the nature and limits of the power that can be 'legitimately exercised by society over the individual'.[12] His understanding of liberalism is grounded in the 'liberty of tastes and pursuits […] without impediment of our fellow-creatures, so long as what we do does not harm them, even if they should think our conduct foolish'.[13] For Mill, such freedom is 'one of the principal ingredients of human happiness'.[14] These ideas influenced libertarians on the right, as they did social liberals on the left.

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12    John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Collected Works by John Stuart Mill*, ed. J.M. Robson (1859; University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 217.

13    Ibid., p. 226.

14    Ibid., p. 261.

Yet Mill's important qualifications, and his warnings about potential transgressions in political life, reveal his conception of liberty and liberalism as fundamentally opposed to the populist style in politics.

This is most evident in Mill's review of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, which he admired and described as a book that addressed 'the question of democracy'.[15] In his essay Mill joined Tocqueville's stark warning of the tyranny of the majority,[16] further elucidating the danger of a populace that is distinctly divided along religious, economic, or political fault lines, and might seek to override minority rights. Mill cautioned that 'the tyranny of the majority would not take the shape of tyrannical laws, but that of a dispensing power over all laws'.[17] He cites examples from contemporary America, where the rights of religious minorities, like Catholics in Massachusetts, and political minorities, like abolitionists in New York, were violently suppressed, though no laws were enacted to suppress these rights.[18] Persecution, such as church burning or property destruction, was permitted because the majority acted with impunity, as 'no jury would be found to redress the injury'.[19] Applied to twenty-first-century populist politics, Mill's examples reveal dangers that are both clear and alarming.

In many instances populists on the right and on the left seek to do exactly what Mill and Tocqueville warned against. They seek to remain within the realm of democratic procedural practice, but to remove or weaken the constraints that mitigate the occurrence of tyrannical transgressions in the name of the 'people' whom they stylise as a constitutive majority. Tocqueville called out such behaviour when he wrote that 'a majority taken collectively is only an individual, whose opinions […] are opposed to those of another individual, who is styled as a minority'.[20] In 2025, when Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orbán tried to ban the pride

15  John Stuart Mill, 'De Tocqueville on Democracy in America I', in *Collected Works by John Stuart Mill*, ed. J.M. Robson (1859; University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 49.

16  Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1 (1835; Everyman's Library, 1994), p. 258.

17  Mill, De Tocqueville on Democracy in America II, p. 177.

18  Ibid.

19  Ibid.

20  De Tocqueville, Democracy in America 1 1835, p. 259.

march in Budapest, he stated that 'the left […] want to force a rejected ideology onto the *majority* instead of listening to the real voice of the Hungarian people'.[21] Whatever Orbán may claim as his ideological conviction,[22] this articulation of gender relations represents a rejection of the fundamental tenets of liberalism—regulating authorities to protect individuals' ability to exercise their freedoms and to pursue happiness.[23]

Liberals are rightly alarmed by the rise of this political style, but can we discern which sociopolitical patterns fuel this wave?

## Twenty-First-Century Patterns of Discontent

All three books reviewed here share a liberal apprehension regarding the rise of populism and the prospects for the liberal project. While their analyses emerge from distinct vantage points, each seeks to uncover the deeper conditions underlying the 'patterns of disconnect' that threaten liberalism.[24] All three boldly place emotions at the centre of their inquiry, deciphering the nuanced landscape of feelings that fuel the current populist wave. They also consider, in various ways, how liberals might navigate and withstand the challenges posed by populist movements.

British political scientist Claire Yorke focuses on the role that empathy, sympathy, and compassion can play in healing societies and bringing people back together.[25] She argues that 'the growing disconnects

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21  'Orbán: Opposition United behind the Pride's Rainbow Flag but Hungarians Reject That Ideology', *Daily News Hungary*, 30 June 2025, https://dailynewshungary.com/hungarian-opposition-behind-pride-flag-orban/?utm_source=chatgpt.com (emphasis mine).

22  Orbán stated that he is building an 'illiberal state', although he 'does not deny foundational values of liberalism, as freedom'. See 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Free Summer University and Student Camp, 26 July 2014, Tusnádfürdő (Băile Tuşnad)', *Prime Minister's Speeches*, 30 July 2014, https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp.

23  In the context of liberal thought, happiness can be defined as individual fulfilment; according to Mill, 'happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain'. See John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1863), chapter 2.

24  Yorke, *Empathy in Politics and Leadership*, p. ix.

25  Ibid., p. 112.

from politics and mistrust of politicians and political institutions' are symptomatic of their failure 'to speak to the real day-to-day issues affecting ordinary people'.[26] She shows how mainstream politics sidelined empathy in favour of sleek, professional, and well-rehearsed campaigning, while leadership has adopted a managerial style that is devoid of emotions. Most mainstream politicians from left and right rarely attempt to display deep understanding of the 'experiences, perspectives, interests, beliefs, motivations, and feelings' of their voters.[27] Meanwhile, populist leaders are doing just that. They connect with voters' feelings and make them feel heard. Yorke's analysis looks primarily at English-speaking countries—the United Kingdom, United States, and Australia. Yet, she manages to show how similar dynamics 'are replicated in different forms around the world'.[28]

Israeli sociologist Eva Illouz provides a theoretical analysis of populism. She characterises populism as an emotional state and identifies the types of feelings that populist politicians use to connect with voters—fear, disgust, and resentment.[29] In her book she describes the 'structure of feelings' as 'a shared way of thinking and feeling that influences and is influenced by the culture and way of life of a particular group'.[30] She uses Israel as a case study.[31] This is not an obvious choice, as Illouz admits. Israel's geography and inner vulnerability make its right-wing populist surge uniquely Israeli. Nevertheless, Illouz illustrates that social discontent is fuelled by certain emotional patterns that can be traced and analysed.

Last, in her highly engaging analysis, Sarah Stein Lubrano provides a novel contribution to the debate on the rise of populism based on her study of political theory and cognitive psychology. She argues that while the liberal democratic project is deeply entrenched in Western political theory and market-economy logic, it ignores pertinent findings from

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26    Ibid., p. xii.

27    Ibid., p. 4.

28    Ibid., p. ix.

29    Eva Illouz, *The Emotional Life of Populism* (Cambridge; Polity, 2023), p. 2.

30    Ibid., p. 8.

31    Ibid., p. 16.

cognitive psychology about how people form opinions that inform their political choices.[32] Lubrano puts forward the most convincing and well-argued thesis about the danger of characterising liberal politics via the metaphor of a 'marketplace of ideas'.[33] The assumption that we are 'sellers' of ideas is flawed because our political views are grounded in our broader beliefs, identifications, and our sense of self.[34] In short, emotions shape our politics far more then we care to admit.

Informed by these analyses, and while I accept that each country experiences unhappiness in its own unique way, I would suggest three ways in which nations might share patterns of discontent.

### 1. Post-2008 Economics: Fear of Loss and the Politics of Privilege

Since 2016, experts have explained the populist wave as a consequence of the 2008 financial crisis. After the financial crash, political power appeared to abandon its obligation to protect the public from the excessive risk-taking of financial sector leaders—such as through sub-prime lending—as it did not hold them accountable for their reckless decisions.[35] It also became evident that left-wing social democrats were unable to achieve 'a new political settlement or new economic paradigm' to supplement or replace the failing neoliberal economic model.[36]

The three writers here do not deal with purely economic explanations of populism. Yet, they provide some insight into the emotional responses to the economic downturn. The most compelling analysis of the relationship between worsening material and economic conditions and

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32   Sarah Stein Lubrano, *Don't Talk about Politics: How to Change 21st-Century Minds* (London, Bloomsbury; 2024), p. 10.

33   Ibid., pp. 21–22.

34   Ibid., p. 24.

35   Vera Michlin-Shapir, 'The Long Decade of Disinformation', *Defence Strategic Communications* 9 (2020): 221. DOI: 10.30966/2018.RIGA.9.5.

36   William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition* (London: SAGE Publications, 2014), p. 5.

the rise of populism is offered by Illouz, drawing on Seymour Martin Lipset's theory of political responses to perceptions of economic loss.[37] She links this rise to the interplay between material circumstances, human imagination, and emotions, noting that a central motivation driving voters towards populism is the *perception* that their privileges are under threat.[38] This means that poor or worsening economic conditions alone do not necessarily cause drift towards populism. Rather it is an *imagined*, intangible potential loss of prospects that evokes negative emotional responses and benefits the rise of populist politicians. This explains why populism spreads not among those who are desperately poor at the very bottom of the 'happiness' ladder, but among many who are seemingly well off.

Real material losses have occurred in post-2008 economies, as stagnant median incomes and rising living costs have placed many social classes under economic pressure.[39] High-income individuals saw weak income growth, while lower- and middle-income households struggled to afford mortgages or heat their homes.[40] Such losses often generate frustration over declining material well-being. Lipset argued that responses to these losses depend on social class and institutional context, so not all frustrated groups react politically in the same way.[41] Illouz, who emphasises emotional sensitivities, notes that frustrations extend to anticipated or imagined losses—fears about future expenses or maintaining status—that, although not yet realised, shape political attitudes. She warns that these perceptions create ripe conditions for a relatively peaceful, but nonetheless dangerous, support of populist ideas and politicians.

Illouz also notes that the role of perceived or imagined losses contributes to the greater prevalence of nationalist, right-wing populism in the

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37    Illouz is basing her analysis on Seymour Martin Lipset's *Political Man* (1960), whose sociological analysis linked perception of relative economic loss to voters' attraction to authoritarian ideas and its facilitation of backsliding from liberal democracies.

38    Illouz, Emotional Life of Populism, p. 2.

39    Jonathan Cribb and Tom Waters, 'Past 15 years Have Been Worst for Income Growth in Generations', *IFS*, 31 May 2024, https://ifs.org.uk/news/past-15-years-have-been-worst-income-growth-generations.

40    Ibid.

41    Lipset, *Political Man* (1960).

twenty-first century compared with its left-wing counterpart. This raises a sensitive ethical issue: many scholars who study populism—including the three authors reviewed here—come from the liberal left, which can lead to skewed interpretation of populism as primarily a right-wing phenomenon.[42] Yet analysis should still account for empirical evidence that suggests that right-wing actors are embracing populist strategies at a markedly faster pace than those on the left.[43]

Illouz puts forward an explanation which does not involve judgemental labelling. She notes that 'populism is mostly a politics of identity' which plays identities off against each other, strengthening a specific identity with the promise to 'repair symbolic injuries (real or imagined)'.[44] These emotional dynamics exist both on the right and on the left, but overall have better traction with nationalist right-wing audiences because it is easier to coalesce them around a national majority identity. This results in the more rapid growth in support for right-wing nationalist populism and it being 'far more widespread in the world'.[45]

Hence, deteriorating economic prospects in post-industrial, liberal democratic countries create the material backdrop against which nationalist, right-wing populist emotions are stirred. Yorke suggests that 'there needs to be a more honest conversation about wealth, how it is distributed, what is "earned", and what is fair'.[46] But honesty or honest conversations are in the eyes of the beholder where emotional connections play a great role. As Yorke herself notes, 'many of these populist leaders are attractive precisely because they appear to be speaking to people about their concerns'. She underlines that populists

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42  For instance, French economic theorist Thomas Piketty denies the spread of populist tendencies among the political left. See Thomas Piketty and Michael Sandel, interview, 'Globalization, Populism, & the Politics of Resentment: How Did Hyper-Globalization Fuel Populist Backlash?', *Institute for New Economic Thinking*, 12 February 2025, www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/videos/globalization-populism-the-politics-of-resentment.

43  Yochai Benkler, Faris Robert, and Roberts Hal, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190923624.003.0014.

44  Illouz, *Emotional Life of Populism*, p. 17.

45  Ibid., p. 18.

46  Yorke, *Empathy in Politics and Leadership*, p. 22.

are making their constituents '*feel* seen in ways that other politicians do not' (emphasis added).[47] Moffitt noted that populist politicians thrive in crisis conditions and actively 'spectacularise' crisis,[48] and by doing so they increase emotional appeal to their supporters.

This provides an explanation to what may seem paradoxical political choices made by voters who opt for populist parties that do not look after their voters' economic interests. For instance, in 2024 Trump received significant support from lower-income and middle-income voters.[49] Their economic interests may seem at odds with his tax cuts from 2017 and even more so with the 'Big, Beautiful Bill' of 2025, which prioritised the very rich and cut funding to public health initiatives, such as Medicaid.[50] These supporters are accepting short-term material losses, based on emotional attachments they forge with him and the latter's promise to reinstate lost group privileges and to improve their future prospects.

## 2. Strangers at the Gate: Immigration and the Politics of Fear

'Fear,' Illouz writes, 'both imagined and real, is a potent political tool. It trumps and overrides all emotions and considerations.'[51] She describes how fears of real physical extermination, experienced by Jews in Eastern Europe, allowed fear to define Israeli society until it became an 'invisible and intrinsic part of national consciousness'.[52] Fear is a basic requisite of populist politics, Illouz argues. According to Freud, fear has to have a material object and is different from anxiety, which lacks such materiality. This means that for right-wing populists instilling fear requires an object of which one must be fearful, and which needs to be constantly recalled

47  Ibid., p. 87.

48  Moffitt, *Global Rise of Populism*, p. 121.

49  Josh Boak and Amelia Tomson-Deveaux, 'AP VoteCast: Voters Who Focused on the Economy Broke Hard for Trump', *AP*, 6 November 2024, https://apnews.com/article/trump-harris-economy-immigration-11db37c033328a7ef6af71fe0a104604.

50  Brandon Drenon and Nadine Yousif, 'What Are the Key Items in Trump's Sprawling Budget Bill?', *BBC News*, 22 September 2025, www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0eqpz23l9jo.

51  Illouz, *Emotional Life of Populism*, p. 40.

52  Ibid., p. 30.

by the majority population. In many cases it is fear of certain ethnic and racial groups, or more broadly fear of foreigners, who serve as an easily identified object. On the day of the 2015 general elections in Israel, amid reports of a low turnout from Likud voters, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu evoked fear of Arabs in Israel: 'The Arab voters are going in droves to vote. The Leftist organisations are driving them there on buses […] We only have you. Go out and vote.'[53]

Netanyahu understood one of the most enduring truths of contemporary political campaigning: elections are won by turning out supporters to vote.[54] By depicting legitimate participation by the Israeli Arab minority in the democratic process as something sinister, he wanted to rekindle his voters' fears. He aimed to pitch Jews against Arabs as well as left-wing Jews against right-wing Jews.

In the US, UK, and continental Europe, fear of immigration has been used to coalesce voters around right-wing populist causes in ways reminiscent of Israeli populist politics.[55] That is not to say that immigration does not pose a challenge to American and European societies. German sociologist Ulrich Beck noted that in post-industrialist societies risks emanating from migration are divided unevenly, which skews threat perceptions.[56] Migrants tend to settle in compact communities in poorer areas with cheaper real estate, while benefits from their labour are better felt in wealthier places. While richer dwellers of an urban metropolitan area may enjoy cheaper services powered by high numbers of incoming migrants, poorer residents feel the sharp edge of the same phenomenon in the form of higher competition for jobs and feelings of alienation in their neighbourhoods. They are more likely to experience fear of migrants, which is a consequence of the real costs associated with migration that are paid primarily by them. Hence, on policy responses to migration, where you sit is where you stand. Prosperous neighbourhoods feel the

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53  Ibid., p. 38.

54  Lubrano, *Don't Talk about Politics*, p. 67.

55  Illouz, *Emotional Life of Populism*, p. 80.

56  Beck speaks of a wide variety of risks that are unevenly distributed in late modern societies.
    See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (SAGE Publications, 1992).

benefits of migration; poorer communities suffer the costs of competition for resources.

Uneven distribution of risks in society underpins the feelings that Yorke found among Trump supporters in rural America in the run-up to the 2016 presidential elections. 'They were frustrated at the ubiquity of glossy media-ready politicians who did not listen to them or understand *their* reality', Yorke writes (emphasis mine).[57] In this context Yorke's call for an empathetic leadership style that 'compels you to confront different perspectives and experiences […] some of which you may actively disagree with or dislike'[58] can be key to addressing feelings of alienation between mainstream politicians and voters. Simply put, if mainstream politicians can emphatically communicate with their constituents a genuine understanding that migrants are imposing economic challenges and hardship on poor communities, they are more likely to connect with these voters.

This, however, is easier said than done. Economic and ideological fault lines in society make audiences immediately suspicious that empathy is inauthentic, or what Yorke calls 'performative empathy'.[59] Suspicion is partly due to widespread perceptions that liberal democratic political elites are the overall beneficiaries of the economic order and work to preserve a self-serving status quo as much as they can. Illouz provides further ideational background for suspicion of liberal politicians' ability to show any genuine connection to public fears about migration. Liberalism, she notes, abhors fear, as freedom can only be exercised if fear is 'removed from citizens' everyday lives'.[60] Consequently, fear is not welcome in liberal discussions, and those who feel fearful often look elsewhere to share their concerns.

Populist politicians welcome fearful constituents with open arms and often accentuate those fears. For instance, Reform UK's chairman Zia

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57   Yorke, *Empathy in Politics and Leadership*, p. 38.

58   Ibid., p. 6.

59   Ibid.

60   Illouz, *Emotional Life of Populism*, p. 22.

Yusuf declared 'there is little doubt that the United Kingdom is *being invaded*' (emphasis added).[61] Shortly after, he noted: 'This is a catastrophe, and simply shipping in and opening up our borders, allowing dirt-cheap foreign labour to come in and undercut those young people is simply unfair.'[62] Yusuf's relatively moderate, populist style reflects his own migrant background and Reform UK's attempt to attract supporters from diverse backgrounds. Yet, his metaphors of invasion and references to a catastrophe dramatise migration concerns. Supporters not only feel heard, but are energised to demand immediate solutions to what have been positioned as urgent promises. Elon Musk, whose populist style is considerably more blunt, went further at the right-wing 'Unite the Kingdom' rally in central London, telling attendees that 'violence is coming' and 'you either fight back or you die'.[63] Much like the economic downturn following 2008, the rise in global migration and the high number of arrivals in developed countries have provided populists with the opportunity to reshape the conversation as a 'migration crisis'.

### 3. The Populist Manosphere: Masculinity, Gender, and Emotional Reclaiming

Interestingly, Yorke notes that certain types of right-wing contemporary populists, like Musk, vehemently reject empathy in politics and argue that it is 'the fundamental weakness of western civilisation'.[64] They argue that empathy is manipulating Christian values to make people care about and endorse progressive causes, such as gay or transgender rights. As one American Christian commentator said, 'empathy becomes toxic when it encourages you to affirm sin, validate lies or support destructive

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61   'Full Speech: Zia Yusuf Blasts Starmer & Tories over Immigration | Reform UK Deportation Plan | AC1E', DWS News, *YouTube*, 26 August 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeLNfS2d7L0.

62   Georgia Pearce, '"Beyond belief!" Zia Yusuf Slaps Down Keir Starmer's Swipe at "Racist" Reform Policy—"Smearing and belittling"', *GBNews*, 29 September 2025, www.gbnews.com/politics/zia-yusuf-slaps-down-keir-starmer-swipe-racist-reform-policy.

63   Aneesa Ahmed, 'Elon Musk Calls for Dissolution of Parliament at Far-Right Rally in London', *The Guardian*, 13 September 2025, www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/sep/13/elon-musk-calls-for-dissolution-of-parliament-at-far-right-rally-in-london.

64   Elon Musk quoted in Yorke, *Empathy in Politics and Leadership*, p. 2.

policies'.[65] The attributed connection of empathy to weakness or even sinfulness derives from right-wing populists' rejection of rapidly changing gender roles and gender norms in society through diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) policies. The rejection of liberal values, which are mistakenly conflated with DEI policies, is accompanied with a particular hyper-masculine style of twenty-first-century right-wing populism.

On the eve of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin, whose political style embodies twenty-first-century populist hyper-masculinity, quoted a Soviet-era punk song about power and submission. The lyrics ran: 'Sleeping beauty in a coffin, I crept up and f***ed her. Like it, or dislike it, sleep my beauty.'[66]

Putin's style is often contrasted with that of the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Yorke identifies the latter's style as a successful model of democratic, charismatic-empathetic male leadership 'whose bravery inspired collective action, creating a strong sense of common fate'.[67] It is tempting to perceive Zelenskyy as an example of liberal democratic masculinity, whose 'bravery has made him into a tough-guy sex symbol'.[68] Nevertheless, Zelenskyy gained such popularity when he refused to leave Kyiv during the full-scale Russian invasion and said: 'I need ammunition, not a ride.' With that, Zelenskyy became a role model for liberal audiences by taking on the traditional role of a wartime president.

This reveals the most tragic consequence of a liberal agenda that allowed itself to be dominated by DEI policies. While discursive practices of DEI among intellectual and academic elites evolved rapidly, they were often out of touch with the discourse in broader society and failed to shift

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65   Tiffany Stanley, 'Is Empathy a Sin? Some Conservative Christians Argue It Can Be', *Independent*, 21 August 2025, www.independent.co.uk/news/donald-trump-empathy-jd-vance-christians-pete-hegseth-b2811686.html.

66   Leon Aron, 'What's behind Putin's Dirty, Violent Speeches', *The Atlantic*, 27 February 2022, www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/02/vladimir-putin-dirty-language-cursing/622924.

67   Yorke, *Empathy in Politics and Leadership*, p. 42.

68   'Widespread Admiration for Volodymyr Zelensky Could Upend Stereotypes about Jewish Men', *Washington Post*, 22 March 2022, www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/22/our-newfound-love-volodymyr-zelensky-could-upend-stereotypes-about-jewish-men.

fundamental perceptions and practices by rethinking the role of men and masculinity. Gender roles in liberal democracies have been shifting slowly and unevenly over recent centuries, with some significant advances in the second half of the twentieth century. However, twenty-first-century discursive practices of reimagining society in which gender plays little or no role, and where traditional gender norms are necessarily portrayed as oppressive, became the background against which populism developed as a distinct hyper-masculine style.[69]

Hyper-masculinity is particularly rife in the alternative digital media space of the 'manosphere', a powerful ecosystem of primarily American podcasters. Rejection of liberal values which they see as a 'progressive' anti-male campaign is reproduced by these online influencers and disseminated to younger supporters.[70] In this context it was no coincidence that Reform UK's Yusuf highlighted young people when speaking about immigration vows. Young people, especially male, played a key role in the electoral success of right-wing populists in recent election campaigns in the United States,[71] Poland,[72] Romania,[73] and Israel[74]—which in turn appears to have shaped a global wave of young male discontent.[75]

69   Illouz, *Emotional Life of Populism*, p. 14.

70   Caroline Haskins, 'Rogan, Musk and an Emboldened Manosphere Salute Trump's Win: "Let That Sink In"', *The Guardian*, 7 November 2024, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/07/joe-rogan-elon-musk-heterodoxy-trump-win-reaction.

71   Steven Greenhouse, 'Young Male Voters Are Flocking to Trump—But He Doesn't Have Their Interests at Heart', *The Guardian*, 3 September 2024, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/sep/03/young-male-voters-trump-harris.

72   Alicja Ptak, 'Poland's Presidential Election Run-off in Charts', *Notes from Poland*, 4 June 2025, https://notesfrompoland.com/2025/06/04/polands-presidential-election-run-off-in-charts.

73   In Romania's case, young voters supported controversial pro-Russian nationalist Calin Georgescu in the November 2024 presidential elections, which were annulled due to illegal campaign practices online and suspicions of foreign Russian interference. See Martin Muno, 'Did TikTok Influence Romania's Presidential Election?', *DW*, 7 December 2024, www.dw.com/en/did-tiktok-influence-romanias-presidential-election/a-70954832.

74   Data N12, 'Hachnasa, gil u-migdar: Mi atem, ha-matzbi'im shel kol miflagah?' [Income, Age and Gender: Who Are You—the Voters of Each Party?], *MAKO*, 31 October 2022, www.mako.co.il/news-israel-elections/election_2022/Article-a5c291142392481027.htm; Eitan Glickman, 'Ben-Gvir "shatah" et ha-shekhénim shel Bennett, aval lo rak: ha-aliyyah ha-me'te'orit shel ha-Tziyonut ha-Datit' [Ben-Gvir 'Drank Up' Bennett's Neighbours—But Not Only Them: The Meteoric Rise of Religious Zionism], *Ynet*, 2 November 2022, www.ynet.co.il/news/election2022/article/bkoec1xrs.

75   Jonathan Yerushalmy, 'What's behind the Global Political Divide between Young Men and Women?', *The Guardian*, 14 November 2024, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/14/us-election-donald-trump-voters-gender-race-data.

Voters' age is an important variable in understanding the role of gender in the increasing rejection of the liberal project in favour of right-wing, anti-establishment, populist politics. US presidential elections have demonstrated this dynamic. In 2016 Trump was favoured by older, white, male voters.[76] Here it is easy to argue that Trump's unapologetic rhetoric about traditional masculinity became a sticky emotional issue that helped them reaffirm their identity. In 2024, while Trump continued to be popular among males across all age groups, his popularity increased with those aged 18–29 and with the 30–44 age group.[77] These demographics are less likely to struggle with navigating changing gender norms as they have limited experience of previous social norms.

Illouz's analysis of how perceptions of lost privilege evoke negative emotions helps illuminate this trend. Males who came of age from the mid 2010s face diminishing employment prospects due to economic slowdown, as well as harbouring feelings that 'in the political realm nobody's advocating for them'.[78] The 'manosphere', which is populated by influencers like Joe Rogan and Theo Von, filled this gap in society. It was instrumental too in Trump's return to the White House. But it represents much more than that. It created a space made by males and for males. Interestingly it is neither a space of grievance nor a partisan experience.[79]

The manosphere advocates for the reinstatement of certain traditional gender roles, but, even more importantly, it provides a platform for holding conversations that would be frowned upon on other media platforms. In this online space one can raise doubts about virtually any established fact. For example, in the aftermath of the assassination of MAGA influencer Charlie Kirk, and despite mounting evidence that the assassin was caught by law enforcement agencies, Rogan joined the online conspiracy theory chorus. In a video that received over 7 million

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76  Hannah Hartig, 'Voting Patterns in the 2024 Election', *Pew Research Centre*, 26 June 2025, www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/06/26/voting-patterns-in-the-2024-election.

77  Ibid.

78  Daniel Cox in Yerushalmy, 'What's behind the Global Political Divide'.

79  Neither Rogan nor Von comes from a Republican background (Rogan endorsed Sanders in 2016 and Von is close to Robert F. Kennedy Jr).

views, Rogan told his audience, 'there is a lot of weird s*** going on …
none of these things make any sense to me'.[80] Rogan raised questions
about evidence from the scene, doubted the ability of the assassin to
commit the crime, and laughed at the assassin's sexual orientation.[81]

The manosphere is a space where fears (in the case of the Kirk assassination,
a fear of government cover-up) are accommodated and not berated, and
where politics can be discussed in everyday language and in a light-hearted
manner. In the absence of a liberal masculine model, masculinity in the
twenty-first century is becoming an anti-establishment project and the
backbone of the right-wing, nationalist, populist political surge.


## Conclusions—An Echo of the 1930s?

One of the strengths of all three books discussed here is their commitment
to repair some of the shortcomings of liberalism that caused the current
wave of disenchantment with the liberal project and contributed to the
rise of populism. This is a welcome trend in scholarly literature. Scholars
should not only dissect problems, but also look for solutions. Nevertheless,
when reading their plans for action one may wonder whether they can
withstand a possible major and rapid deterioration in political conditions,
like the 'fall of liberalism'[82] in the 1930s.

Illouz, Yorke, and Lubrano bring some important and practical suggestions
for liberals. Lubrano argues that the first task for liberals is to abandon the
myths of mainstream politics which stem from the flawed metaphor of
Oliver Wendell Holmes's marketplace of ideas. If politicians are imagined
as 'sellers' and voters as 'buyers', then liberalism—by virtue of having
once been widely 'purchased'—appears the most legitimate, relegating

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80  'Weird Details about the Charlie Kirk Assassination', JRE Clips, *YouTube*, 23 September 2025,
    www.youtube.com/watch?v=UY-FREo1JMM&t=1s.

81  Ibid.

82  The term was coined by Eric Hobsbawm to describe the retreat in liberal ideas in the face of
    radical left- and right-wing ideologies in Europe in the interwar period. See his *The Age of
    Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), p. 122.

other perspectives to the margins. Yet political ideas do not evolve through market logic. As Yorke observes, twenty-first-century voters are increasingly 'political nomads',[83] a view supported by evidence of long-term voter disengagement from traditional parties in the UK.[84] This suggests that most populist supporters are ordinary citizens disenchanted with ideas that no longer meet their material and emotional needs.[85] Liberals might therefore refrain from stigmatising departures from mainstream discourse and resist labelling dissenters as fascists or racists at every turn.

Yorke proposes that liberals should foster open dialogue and employ strategic empathy, as 'an asset' for 'better understanding of those for whom, or against whom, you are designing policy'.[86] She suggests how people can become more empathetic on national, communal, and personal levels to foster meaningful conversations that 'actively listen to different voices'.[87] Lubrano concurs, arguing that liberals should abandon the current culture of political debate, which involves confrontational presentation of strings of ideas. Behavioural research confirms that such debates entrench opinions and fuel polarisation.[88] This dynamic benefits populism, which thrives on spectacle and division. Instead, as Lubrano argues, policies need to be translated into collective civic action, which changes minds more profoundly than any discussion does.[89] Illouz calls for inter-faith dialogue to reaffirm commitment to values of universalism.[90]

Notwithstanding the value of this informative advice, widespread comparisons between twenty-first-century right-wing populism and the rise of fascist ideologies in Europe in the 1930s calls into question whether these steps can contain the rising tide. While populists vehemently reject

83   Yorke, *Empathy in Politics and Leadership*, p. xii.

84   Edward Fieldhouse et al., *Electoral Shocks: The Volatile Voter in a Turbulent World* (Oxford University Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198800583.001.0001.

85   Gábor Scheiring, 'Populism Can Degrade Democracy but Is on the Rise', *The Conversation*, 26 June 2024, https://theconversation.com/populism-can-degrade-democracy-but-is-on-the-rise-heres-what-causes-this-political-movement-and-how-it-can-be-weakened-222323.

86   Yorke, *Empathy in Politics and Leadership*, p. 8.

87   Ibid., p. 259.

88   Matthew Fisher et al., 'The Influence of Social Interaction on Intuitions of Objectivity and Subjectivity', *Cognitive Science: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 41, № 4 (May 2017).

89   Lubrano, *Don't Talk about Politics*, p. 78.

90   Illouz, *Emotional Life of Populism*, p. 19.

such comparisons,[91] similarities exist. First, akin to twenty-first-century populism, both German and Italian fascism 'sought to play on emotions' and did 'not rest explicitly on an elaborated philosophical system'.[92] For that reason, Zeev Sternhell famously labelled classical French fascism as 'neither right nor left'.[93] Twenty-first-century populism is a style and a very 'thin' ideology where emotional rejection of liberalism plays a central role.

Second, fascism spread across Europe as a reaction to the instability of interwar states, promoting ostensibly simple solutions based on the exclusion of minorities and foreigners from the national body.[94] A comparable logic can be observed among contemporary right-wing populist movements, which characterise liberal democratic systems as 'broken' and 'bankrupt' and blame migrants for many of its faults.[95] In short, twentieth-century fascism was populist in style and anti-liberal in nature, exhibiting certain comparisons with twenty-first-century right-wing populism.

One key difference is that twenty-first-century populists lack fascination with death and violence. The current populist wave has been limited and sporadic in the use of force by its supporters, and many populists ostensibly oppose military intervention in international conflicts. In fact Trump has repeatedly blamed liberals, such as former President Joe Biden, for starting wars.[96] Orbán has insisted that he would not assist Ukraine in its war efforts, but he is 'happy to help with organising peace talks'.[97]

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91 Konstantin Kisin in 'Why MAGA Is At War with Itself—Dinesh D'Souza', *Triggernometry* podcast, YouTube, 26 October 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCVv5cJ9k9A.

92 Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).

93 Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France* (Princeton University Press, 1986).

94 Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, p. 124.

95 Reform UK leader Nigel Farage regularly refers to 'broken Britain'. See Danielle de Wolfe, 'Nigel Farage Vows to Fix "Broken Britain" as He Launches Reform UK Election "Contract"', *LBC*, 17 June 2024, www.lbc.co.uk/article/nigel-farage-vows-to-fix-broken-britain-as-he-launches-reform-uk-election-contra-5HjcmkB_2/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

96 '"He Was Stupid": Trump Accuses Joe Biden of Starting Wars following Call with Vladimir Putin', Forbes Breaking News, *YouTube*, 16 October 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9SMDdQrRjo.

97 'Hungary Does Not Want to Go to War, and Will Not', *Viktor Orbán*, 24 October 2025, https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/hungary-does-not-want-to-go-to-war-and-will-not.

The relative peacefulness of the current trend in populism is also the likely reason for Yorke, Illouz, and Lubrano not addressing a possible violent scenario. However, many contemporary right-wing populists echo a Hobbesian worldview which assumes that society is inherently in conflict and only strong authority can restore order. Coupled with continued economic downturn, and growing political mobilisation among young males, the current relatively peaceful democratic backsliding may rapidly turn into a mass and systemic use of violence domestically and in international conflicts.

Ted Robert Gurr's work *Why Men Rebel* (1970) described how conditions of relative deprivation (a discrepancy between what people think they deserve and what they actually get), like those experienced by lower- and middle-income families, can lead to political violence.[98] While we are not yet at Gurr's scenario, we ought nevertheless to ask the essential question of what happens next. Is, as Musk suggests, violence coming? It seems that liberals do not have a solution for such an outcome.

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98    Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).