

Kaufmann, Eric:

**WHITESHIFT: POPULISM,
IMMIGRATION AND THE FUTURE
OF WHITE MAJORITIES.**

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What happened? This question has been on many minds, not just Hillary Clinton's, in the wake of the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the UK referendum to exit the European Union. Mainstream media analyses have often offered economic explanations in the form of the 'left-behind' argument, pointing to the disparities between wealthy regions benefiting from globalization, and economically depressed areas that have not benefited as much. Eric Kaufmann, a professor of politics at Birkbeck, University of London, has in his latest book *Whiteshift* provided a comprehensive and persuasive argument emphasizing the cultural factors behind the 2016 populist revolt. Backed by a wealth of quantitative evidence, Kaufmann argues that it is the ethnic majorities' fear of decline, rather than economic concerns, that drives the populist vote, and he sees the solution to this unease in a new emphasis on the expected assimilation of fast-rising 'mixed' populations into the majority society.

In June 2016 the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union and in November of that year, Donald Trump was voted the next president of the United States. These two events are often seen as manifestations of a populist revolt, and the first part of the book is devoted to explanations of these two phenomena. Rather than analysing regional disparities, Kaufmann focuses on individuals and uses them as the unit of statistical analysis, utilizing the British Election Study (BES)

and the American National Election Studies (ANES) datasets. He shows that it is in fact values, rather than income levels, that can explain most of the two votes. The crux of his explanation is in psychological attitudes – he argues that people of conservative and so-called authoritarian predisposition (both of which are partly heritable) are those that were most likely to vote for Trump or Brexit. Conservatives because they oppose change, and authoritarians because they prefer order and uniformity to dissent and diversity (p. 199). Immigration will be perceived more negatively by people of these dispositions because it brings both change and diversity.

Looking at the data, Kaufmann shows, for example, that when controlling for age and education, attitude to immigration can explain a large part of support for Trump, whereas income levels barely register. More interestingly, the ANES data show that over two-thirds of those who support capital punishment voted for Trump, whereas only 20% of those who oppose it did (pp. 121–122). In the BES, income levels explain more than in the US, but still, one of the best predictors (70%) in Kaufmann's analysis is one's support for the death penalty (p. 198). Why are views on the death penalty important? Drawing on the work of Karen Stenner and others, Kaufmann sees support for capital punishment as an indicator of authoritarian predisposition (pp. 199–200). Therefore, the 2016 populist votes can be seen as the revolt of authoritarians and conservatives against immigration and ethnic change.

This revolt is taking place now, the author explains, because of migration-led ethnic change, which is shifting the basic political divide from class to ethnicity and thus pitting those within the majority ethnicities who cherish their particularity against those of a more cosmopolitan disposition (pp. 14–17). This culture war over immigra-

tion and national identity heated up with the rapid shifts in liberals' views on issues such as gender and race, facilitated by social media, in the years prior to Trump's election. There was, for instance, a significant rise in white liberals' perception of discrimination against blacks, Hispanics, and women during that time, despite the self-reported discrimination against women and minorities being at a record low. Concepts such as 'microaggressions' and 'whitesplaining' were also becoming increasingly popular (p. 345). The 2015 appearance of Trump in the political life acted as a catalyst for these phenomena (p. 346). Kaufmann believes that such changes did not come out of the blue, but rather were rooted in a form of liberalism that has long been in the making. The second part of the book is devoted to analysis of its development.

Kaufmann came up with a term for the currently dominant form of liberalism in the West – he calls it 'left-modernism' (p. 3). Left-modernism, in his definition, is a form of liberalism rooted in cosmopolitanism which lauds ethnic minority cultures while encouraging ethnic majorities to be cosmopolitan. This trend has been gaining in prominence in the intellectual life of the West ever since the counter-cultural decade of the 1960s, which imbued liberal progressivism with the anti-majority inclinations of the beatniks (p. 54). Kaufmann sees an important distinction between left-modernism and previous forms of liberalism, such as that which powered the Civil Rights Movement, in that the latter emphasized negative liberty, whereas left-modernism utilizes positive liberty. The most important manifestation of this is the replacement of acceptance of diversity by mandating celebration of diversity (pp. 21–22). Left-modernism can be traced to the anti-traditionalism and the revolt against cultural authority, described as 'modernism' by Daniel Bell (pp. 307–308). It can be found already in the 1910s in the writing of Randolph Bourne,

who renounced his own ethnic heritage while extolling the virtues of ethnic minority cultures (pp. 309–310). In the 1960s, left-modernism spread from a small elite to a wider section of society thanks to television and the expanding university sector. In the following decades, this belief system has proliferated in the political and cultural institutions of the West (p. 21), leading to wider diffusion of its norms and taboos (pp. 297–298). The left-modernist taboos, popularly known as political correctness (p. 321), include discussion of notions such as large-scale immigration and multiculturalism (p. 347). Such 'sacred values' are policed by expanding the definition of racism and hate speech (pp. 305, 347). In Kaufmann's interpretation, this leads to repression of anxieties stemming from ethnic change, lest discussing such issues be interpreted as racism (p. 295). This has in more recent times led to the rise of universities disinviting speakers whose views are considered to be controversial from the left-wing side of the political spectrum (p. 303). With the rising salience of immigration as an issue following the increase in immigration rates after 2013 (p. 515), such taboos sharpened the polarization between the left-modernists and those who wished for lower immigration rates (pp. 228, 254).

Kaufmann also devotes a substantial part of the book to analysing the past, and predicting the future, of ethnic majorities in the West. In line with the ethno-symbolist school of nationalism studies, he views nations as being based around ethnic cores (pp. 33–34). He believes this applies to the United States as well, contrary to the popular understanding of the country as a nation of immigrants. The dominant ethnicity in the US until the 1960s was the so-called 'WASP' ethnic group, rooted symbolically in the Anglo-Saxon heritage and myth of descent of those who fled the Norman-imposed monarchy in Britain across the Atlantic (pp. 32–34). Catholic and Jewish

assimilation through intermarriage and social mobility led in the 1960s to the widening of WASP ethnic boundaries to create the white American ethnic group. Kaufmann believes that this process anticipates future developments in the Western world. He foresees that the non-white ethnic minorities will mostly assimilate into the white majorities and will come to identify with the myths and symbols of the latter, the same way that Catholics and Jews assimilated into the Protestant majority in the US in the past (p. 501). He points to the high intermarriage rates of Afro-Caribbeans in Britain and the Algerian French (p. 439), as well as the fast-rising 'mixed' populations (pp. 456–461) as evidence that this trend is already underway. To facilitate this process, as well as to alleviate the anxieties of majority populations, he offers several policy prescriptions.

Most importantly, though controversially, Kaufmann defends white identity politics, and believes that ethnic majorities should have the same group rights as ethnic minorities, as long as they accept compromises with other groups in striving for the common good of all and are open to assimilation (pp. 516–517). This would allow them to air cultural grievances, such as those over rapid cultural change. The ideal is to legitimize discussion of such grievances to the point where this is no more controversial than debate over taxes (p. 521). Further, Kaufmann suggests offering refugees asylum rather than settlement, and housing them in secure facilities without the prospect of permanent settlement. This will likely find little support amongst liberals, but Kaufmann's reasoning here is utilitarian, seeing this as a way to save more lives (pp. 236–239). Kaufmann also moots the possibility of taking into account the cultural aspect, alongside humanitarian and economic considerations, in structuring immigration policies, as an alternative to lowering total immigration levels (pp. 522–523). Thus, cul-

tural immigration points would be awarded to applicants for immigration, which would depend on their assimilability into the constituent ethnic groups of a country. He believes that this would reduce the prejudice of majority ethnicities, as they would be assured that the immigration system is designed in such a way as to facilitate assimilation (p. 525). It is this suggestion that white identity politics is a legitimate expression of group interests that has drawn the most criticism, especially from proponents of critical race theory.

These scholars argue that whites do not have the same right to employ identity politics as non-white people because of the history of settler colonialism, slavery and segregation (Holmwood, 2019, p. 2; Ford, 2019, p. 2). For Gillborn (2019, pp. 98–100), such a claim is simply an attempt to maintain 'racist status quo'. Kaufmann, however, does not advocate for pan-white identity, based on the colour of one's skin. What he talks about are the ethnic majorities in the United Kingdom, the United States, and other Western countries, which are distinguished by their myths of descent and certain cultural markers (p. 8). Admittedly, Kaufmann himself is muddying the waters somewhat by using terms such as 'racial self-interest' (p. 367) where ethnic self-interest might have been the more accurate term. Others, such as Holmwood (2019, p. 1) try to exaggerate Kaufmann's focus on the assimilability of immigrants. But for Kaufmann, assimilation is not the only mandated way for minorities. Instead, he advocates a 'multivoical' approach to nationhood, wherein people are free to connect to the nation in different ways – not necessarily only through one's ethnicity. This allows for the existence of a nation that is 'multicultural, civic and ethnic' at the same time (pp. 529–533).

One could also question Kaufmann's one-dimensional analysis of individual economic circumstances – in his statistical models he

takes into consideration income levels, but does not account for different economic measures – such as economic insecurity, which, as Halikiopoulou and Vlandas (2018) have shown examining the BES dataset, contributed to support for Brexit. Lastly, Kaufmann seems to be taking ethnic identity as a given, localizing it in evolutionary tribalism, as if it was something innate, rather than ideological. He does acknowledge that tribalism can manifest in different ways, but suggests that ethnicity is the most potent (pp. 20–21). Similar criticism has been voiced by David Aaronovitch (2018) in *The Times*, who pointed out that Kaufmann sees the “‘pro-white’ whites’ as more authentic than the ‘deracinated’ liberal whites. Still, Kaufmann considers cosmopolitan worldview just as valid as ‘ethno-traditional nationalism’ (p. 4).

This criticism notwithstanding, *Whiteshift* is a highly valuable contribution to the literature on populism for two main reasons. Firstly, it popularizes the academic definition of ethnicity, as being about the shared myths of descent and culture, and not just the colour of one’s skin. This makes it easier to decouple the notion of ethnicity from minorities, and recognize that majorities have ethnicities as well. Secondly, the book offers an antidote to populism and a way to overcome the current political polarization – a prospect of multivocal national identity, which offers those within ethnic majorities who value their ethnic heritage a vision of a future existence of their group in an inclusive ethnicity, while it leaves space in an inclusive nation for those of cosmopolitan outlook and those minorities who wish to preserve their particularity.

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Liberal democracy is not experiencing its best days. A quarter of a century ago the incarnation with its principles was turned into political inspiration for many citizens of the world. During the 1990s there was no serious and coherent alternative that could challenge it. However, this trust which was supported by citizens and intellectuals of that time, is now faded to a disturbing degree. Hope has been replaced by disappointment. Optimism is substituted by scepticism with intense nuances of pessimism.

The optimism that dominated after the collapse of communism was conditioned by a number of factors. First, the spectacular fall of Marxist ideology had discredited this system. Secondly, theoretical alternatives did not enjoy any great support, with the exception of some states in the Middle East. Third, the unique Chinese model of ‘combining capital-