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VIEWPOINT

Grasping the Fear: How Xenophobia Intersects with Climatephobia and Robotphobia and how their Co-production Creates Feelings of Abandonment, Self-pity and Destruction

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss an issue that has been on my mind for several years: the fear that fuels the rightist populist movements in Europe and America. As we all know, xenophobia is at the heart of the political rhetoric of Lega in Italy, Vox in Spain, Rassemblement National in France, UKIP in UK, Die Freiheitspartei in Austria, Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, Partij voor de Vrijheid in Holland, the nationalist parties of Eastern Europe and the Nordic countries, and, of course, the Republican Party led by President Trump in the US. In Europe, anti-Muslim sentiments have become a driver of rightist populism in many countries, and in America, Mexicans and other Latino groups are recurring targets of Trump's many tweets. But even though I agree that xenophobia is crucial to the surge of populism in the Western world, I believe other equally important sentiments of fear co-produce the image of foreigners as a threat. Two such elements are the threats that a future climate disaster and the introduction of AI (artificial intelligence) represent to our lives and livelihoods.

Keywords: *xenophobia; fear; populism; self-destruction.*

Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss an issue that has been on my mind for several years: the fear that fuels the rightist populist movements in Europe and America. As we all know, xenophobia is at the heart of the political rhetoric of Lega in Italy, Vox in Spain, Rassemblement National in France, UKIP in UK, Die Freiheitspartei in Austria, Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, Partij voor de Vrijheid in Holland, the nationalist parties of Eastern Europe and the Nordic countries, and, of course, the Republican Party led by President Trump in the US. In Europe, anti-Muslim sentiments have become a driver of rightist populism in many countries, and in America, Mexicans and other Latino groups are recurring targets of Trump's many tweets. But even though I agree that xenophobia is crucial to the surge of populism in the Western world, I believe other equally important sentiments of fear co-produce the image of foreigners as a threat. Two such elements are the threats that a future climate disaster and the introduction of AI (artificial intelligence) represent to our lives and livelihoods. My question is therefore how *xenophobia* speaks to what I call *climatephobia* and *robotphobia* and how their convergence triggers feelings of abandonment and self-pity that I would argue is the seed that rightist populism taps into and uses as

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ammunition to not only create social and cultural divides between us-and-them but also undermine the democratic institutions of our societies and, eventually, cause self-destruction.

Admittedly, my suggestion to link migration to other controversial issues may sound verbose but I firmly believe that it is pertinent to not only critically interrogate the political populism that currently prevails in the Western world but also address the fear that drives it. Populism comes in many forms including anti-elitist populism that turns people against the system, excluding populism that turns people against out-groups and empty populism that only makes references and appeals to the people. Thus when we talk about rightist movements in Europe and America we should be mindful of their variety that in many countries combines elements of all three forms of populism. Even though Salvini (in Italy) brought several of Europe's populist parties together under one political umbrella during the recent EU-parliament elections (in May 2019), it is difficult to see what units him with Orban (in Hungary), Le Pen (in France) and the Nordic anti-immigrant parties except for their anti-EU views and, of course, xenophobia. But then, one migrant less in my country often means one more in yours. In other words, migration is more likely to pit Europe's nationalist parties against each other than to bring them together. However, I'm not a political scientist and therefore not an expert on populism or politics. I'm an anthropologist and what I see it as my job to explain the socio-cultural dynamic of Europe's and America's collective phobias and the economic and political contexts that nourish and shape them. Anti-elitist and excluding populisms are the craft of shrewd politicians but to succeed they must speak to an anxiety in the population that is real. Populists profit politically from this anxiety by amplifying and distorting it and to combat them, we need to understand its nature and the collective phobias it creates.

My thoughts about the deeper tiers of xenophobia go ten years back when I spent an academic year as a research fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington DC. It was at a time when America was witnessing the growing presence of the so-called Tea-Party movement that gathered momentum not only in the wake of the financial crisis in 2008, but also as a reaction against President Obama and the fact that Americans had elected their first black president. The movement was mainly supported by middle-aged and lower-middle-class white Americans and I was particularly stroke by their rhetoric and its lack of a clear political message except that "we're angry" and that "something is wrong". One of its leaders, Sarah Palin, captured the movement's mood by saying: "When we say no, we mean *hell* no!" Initially, I understood the repeated emphasis on anger and the strong almost infantile desire to say "no" as an answer to the frustration and bitterness the financial crisis in 2008 caused within the American middle class that feels ever more insecure as their income decreases and share of the nation's wealth shrinks while the cost of housing, education and health increases. The crisis also shocked Europe where particularly countries such as Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy experienced a drop in living standards and rising unemployment generating social discontent and political protest. In the years that followed, an anti-globalist wave has washed over both Europe and America stirring up anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiments particularly among the segments of the population that were hit by the financial crisis and that afterwards had to struggle the most to get back on their feet. While many perceived the globalization of the 1990s as a new brave world of technological revolution and political emancipation, a growing number of people now see the world's interconnection as a "zero-sum" game where my gain is synonymous with your lost and as the cause rather than the answer to our problems.

Sarah Palin's "hell no" had no exact address, which she, of course, was well aware of, but it speaks to the anger of millions of people who think the system is unfair and unjust and who with the words of anthropologist Elisabeth Povinelli feel abandoned. In her book *Economy of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Capitalism* Povinelli argues that we're



living in an economy of abandonment in which people are attributed value in purely economic terms and that those who are deemed valueless and therefore surplus to the system are left to die or swept out of the way. It is my suggestion that the anger fueling Europe's and America's populist movements is rooted in the fear of being abandoned by the state and its institutions and classified as useless and disposable by the labour market and society at large. I also argue that rather than turning against the economic and political forces that produce the conditions of this abandonment, the abandoned seek refuge in rightist populist movements that direct their anger toward another even more vulnerable and exposed segment of the population: immigrants and refugees. However, my claim is that it takes more than populist rhetoric to calm the anxiety of abandonment and cover the self-pity its anti-immigrant sentiments cloak. Targeting someone further down the ladder may offer relief for a short while but the threat of being abandoned is still there. In other words, there is more at stake.

The term phobia is Greek and means fear or flight. Anyone suffering from a phobia knows that it means overwhelming anxiety that disconnects your emotions from your brain and transforms you into an irrational and unpredictable person out of reach with the rest of the world. Some phobias are focused on a particular object, which makes them manageable, but others are diffuse and some people suffer from not one but several phobias at the same time, which makes their lives true nightmares. Xenophobia is the particular fear of foreigners or the "Barbarians", who were a cause of particular concern for the Greeks. In the anti-globalist mood that prevails in Europe and America today, rightist populist parties present migrants and refugees as a similar threat creating images of whole nations under siege by foreigners. The fear such images generates can be compared to what scholars who study risk call the dread factor, that is the fear the idea of a plane crash or a terrorist attack can trigger. Often the dread factor compromises of several threat imaginaries that converge and co-produce each other, which I suggest is the case of our days' xenophobia.

One of these co-producing imaginaries is climate change and the fear of a nature that has gone wild. Of course, migration and climate change are two entirely different matters but they may be connected and their distinction is blurred when they both are presented as existential threats to life as we know it. Unlike migration, however, climate change and the planetary collapse it is often imagined to cause are addressed as an issue of belief rather than of facts and charged with moral connotations of blame, shame and guilt that divide entire national populations. In America, denying climate change has become a strategy to mobilize the same angry non-urban, white voters Sarah Palin's "hell no" spoke to while in France President Macron's proposal to increase the tax on gasoline was a triggering factor in the Yellow Vests movement. Even though few dispute that climate change is real with consequences for us all, the idea that it is anthropogenic raises the question: who caused it and who should pay for its cost? Climate change also creates a new planetary awareness that triggers such questions as: what is our moral right to exploit the Earth at the cost of other species and forms of existence and how do we as humans act as its future steward? Finally, climate change and the rhetoric that articulates it as a political issue beg the question: how much life can the planet sustain? And ultimately: who are worthy to live and who are disposable?

While many including myself believe that there's light at the end of tunnel and a future for everybody, the design of a climate policy that attains both equality and sustainability is still warrant, which explains not only why climate change creates fear and conflicts in many places but also why certain segments of the populations in Europe and America respond the way they do: outright denial, which is widespread in the US and which Trump and his administration cynically use to gain political support, or protesting against the measures governments are taken to mitigate its effects and adapt to its consequences because they find them unfair, which is what we have seen in France



and which is imminent in other European countries. My point is that climate scepticism embodies both the fear we all share for the planet's future and the anger it creates when particular groups of people feel that the blame and guilt of causing climate change are attributed to them. Who has the moral right to doom my lifestyle or my livelihood a threat to the life of others? And why do I have to shoulder the burden of a problem that I think somebody else caused? Importantly, the principal political advocates of this view are the same populist movements that target migrants and refugees as the main cause of Europe's and America's problems, which suggests that in politics xenophobia and climatephobia speak to the same fear and contribute to the same dread factor. But, as I should suggest below, the way the two phobias converge is not static, which is evident from the revisions that some rightist parties in Europe are making of their rhetoric on climate change.

Another dread factor co-producing Europe's and America's xenophobia is artificial intelligence and the idea that robots are taking over our jobs and that algorithms are controlling our lives. Workers' fear of technology as a threat to their jobs goes back to the first industrial revolution when so-called machine breakers in the 19th century attacked the damp machines. Yet every industrial revolution creates its own anxiety and unlike the assembly line that was introduced in the early 20th century and caricatured by Charles Chaplin in *Modern Times* and the computerization that we now all are part of, artificial intelligence constitutes a brave new world that we only are beginning to understand. During the Cold War, the fear of nuclear weapons and a Soviet attack created ideas of aliens from Outer Space ready to invade the Planet. Some even believed it had already happened and that we unknowingly are living in a human zoo controlled by aliens. Artificial intelligence reproduces such ideas that are fueled by the fear of the robot rather than the alien producing what anthropologist Kathleen Richardson calls "symmetrical humanism", that puts humans and nonhumans on a par and erases the distinct quality that sets us apart as humans. Robotic anxiety is driven by questions such as: what will happen when AI takes over our jobs? Who will need manual labour and how will I make a living? Moreover: if robots do our jobs better than we do, what is the value of not only of human labour but also of humanity itself? Implicit in the growing robotphobia is the same fear as in climatephobia: am I the next to be classified as deplorable or, worse, disposable.

The many ethical, political as well as legal challenges the use of artificial intelligence poses is illustrated by Sophia, a female robot or should I say robota (by the way, the term "robota" is Slavic where it means "servitude, hard work"). Sophia has physical attributes as a human (including the ability to talk, smile and make facial expressions) and is designed to engage in dialogues with humans, which has made her a global public celebrity. Her designers use Sophia to promote artificial intelligence as a technological product that not only imitates human behaviour but also possesses its own agency and intentions. Among her many performances, Sophia was introduced to an audience of politicians and businessmen in Saudi Arabia, that has granted her citizenship as the first robot in the country and probably in the world.² The irony is hard to miss in this stunt that grants a machine legal rights and celebrates its human attributes in a country that denies its own non-robotic women the same rights as men and that makes millions of migrant guest workers toil at the margins of society under regrettable living and working conditions.

In other parts of the world, robots are also viewed as an important technology to solve the challenges of tomorrow's labour market but they are perceived differently. Japan is an ageing society with a low fertility rate that badly needs labour to do factory work and take care of the country's elderly. However, instead of inviting more immigrants, who make up less than two per

² See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMrX08PxUNY>



cent of Japan's population and who generally are viewed with mistrust by the native population, the country sees robots as the answer to its labour shortage. Like Saudi Arabia (and many other countries) Japan excludes its migrant guest workers, socially as well as legally, but rather than elevating robots as equal to humans and granting them more rights than not only foreigners but also native females, it uses them as make the country less dependent on foreign labour. Thus rather than reinforcing Japan's xenophobia, robots serve as remedy to alleviate it. Who do you want to change your diaper when you get old: a human immigrant or a native robot? Japan seems to have made its pick.

Migration is often triggered by a lack of opportunities and stability and many migrants are used to cope with uncertainty and insecurity. In Europe and America, on the other hand, the working and middle classes have experienced a long period of prosperity and stability, which only ended with the financial crisis in 2008. The chock it created revealed the underlying forces of capitalism and gave rise to an anti-globalization and anti-immigrant movement that reaches across national borders and that has shaken the political establishment in many Western countries. The anger against the system and the fear of foreigners are driven by not only rising economic inequality and dysfunctional political institutions but also by the anxiety of being abandoned. For the first time since the First World War and the Spanish Flue that hit the world in its aftermath, Americans' life expectancy is falling and many now fear that the next generation will experience lower rather than better living standards than their parents which is an important indicator of progress. One of the reasons for this trend is the fatal consequence of middle-aged white Americans' explosive consumption of drugs and alcohol that has become known as "death of despair" and that suggests that the country's working and lower-middle classes not only are angry and fear the future but that their own lifestyle is killing them.

Some parts of Southern Europe and surprisingly also England have experienced a similar development but in many European countries, the welfare state makes an important difference in mitigating inequality and the feeling of abandonment. Also important is the way European politicians address not only immigration but also climate change and artificial intelligence and how Europeans' climatephobia and robotphobia speak to their xenophobia. Hungary's prime minister, Orban, who is known for his idea of an illiberal democracy and his strong anti-immigrant politics and anti-EU rhetoric, questions Trump's denial of climate change, which he says is a threat to Europe. Guess why: climate change generates more migration. The new leader of Austria's rightist Freedom Party has recently made a similar statement and as Europe becomes more climate friendly, it is likely we'll see more U-turns within its populist movements. Exactly how their rhetorical convergence of their followers' xenophobia and climatephobia will transform Europe's political landscape and speak to their anger and anxiety is still an open question, just as one only can guess how the spread of artificial intelligence will affect the demand for foreign labour and Europeans' fear of immigration and abandonment.

I will conclude by repeating President Roosevelt's famous words after taking the oath of office in 1933 during the Great Depression: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Even though our days' phobias are different from those of the 1930's, the recipe for overcoming them is the same: to design a coherent and smart policy, a "Human Plus New Deal" that aims to save the Planet's multiple forms of life and existence from human destruction while offering all humans, including those who feel abandoned and therefore fear the unknown "other", a way out of their phobias and an alternative to self-destruction.



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