

# The Growth Of Malignant And Exclusionary Social Movements



09-11-2024 ~ The U.S. and many other societies are cycling into situations of toxic polarization today; discussion, let alone consensus, often appears impossible and the advantage goes to exclusionary social movements built on malignant rather than [goodwill impulses](#). As Heritage Foundation president Keith Roberts [stated](#) in July 2024, “[W]e are in the process of the second American Revolution, which will remain bloodless if the left allows it to be.”

As recently as a decade ago, violent social movements were gaining ground primarily in countries and regions that were struggling economically as they integrated themselves into the neoliberal global economy: examples include Russia, Hungary, and other states of the former Eastern Bloc, Turkey, India, and Greece. More recently, however, toxic polarization has also threatened to engulf countries at the core of the liberal democratic political grouping, including France, Germany, Italy, the UK, and the U.S.

In every case, the malignant social movement aims to overthrow a political order built—at least notionally—on principles of inclusion and goodwill, which the movement blames for its followers’ loss of economic and political status within their societies. What’s most striking, even counterintuitive, about this takeover is its seeming inexorability, due to the failure of parties of the center and left to offer coherent alternatives—and the resulting landscape in which extreme positions are steadily normalized.

The result is a crisis of democracy, stunting people’s faith in collective self-government owing to its inability to help address practical problems such as climate change, economic inequality, and mass migration. To reverse this trend, we must first understand the conditions that brought it about.

## *Nine Developments That Produce Toxic Polarization*

Toxic polarization becomes possible, if not inevitable, when a convergence of political, economic, and social conditions activate three [powerful forces](#):

*Malignant bonding:* An impulse to solidify communities built on resentment, bigotry, and a desire to exclude those who are “different”;

*The scarcity mind:* A psychological state that frames social life as a zero-sum game pitting oneself and one’s social affinity group against a racial, ethnic, or class-based *other*; and

*Trans-historical trauma:* The fears and compensating behaviors that accumulate over many centuries of physical and emotional violence and become encoded in our collective behavior.

When they converge, these conditions lay the groundwork for a conventional wisdom built on limited assumptions about what can be achieved by society. This in turn produces a deep sense of alienation from the existing order, especially among the dominant racial, ethnic, and class-based groups, which in turn generates new, exclusionary social movements. By alienation, we mean a feeling of isolation and disconnection from the larger society or from what that society is becoming. Alienation can quickly turn into a lack of sympathy and lead to open hostility toward the supposedly undeserving portion of the population.

The pivotal forces in this process are social movements, which are the incubators and carriers of the zeitgeist. Exclusionary social movements, which come to the fore in periods of toxic polarization, always either exist or are latent. So are inclusionary social movements, which aim to build on a very different set of impulses: empathy, goodwill, good-faith communication, mutual aid, and an openness to finding common ground in inclusive and widely beneficial change.

Traditionally, these two types of movements either clash or coexist, but neither seizes the upper hand for more than a limited period. Today, however, we are witnessing the convergence of nine key developments, some of them dating back decades, which favor the rise of powerful and possibly long-lasting exclusionary social movements:

*Decreased economic progress and social mobility:* The developed world has witnessed a decline in economic expansion and social mobility stemming from the outsourcing of jobs and vastly unequal growth patterns in the developing world. Rising global levels of migration, partly due to the imposition of neoliberal economic policies, complemented by insurgencies in the Middle East and parts of East Asia, have caused dominant ethnic groups in receiving countries to feel

threatened. Often, the concern is with “job theft” or crime, but the underlying impulse is racial or cultural prejudice.

*Self-inflicted austerity:* Four decades of fiscal austerity, rationalized by neoliberal economics and concentrated primarily on social spending, stalemated and stigmatized previously successful efforts to bring underprivileged and socially marginalized groups into the circle of prosperity.

Over the past two centuries, the state has emerged as the core agency for delivering on the promises of the inclusive or goodwill agenda. Austerity has the knock-on effect of “starving the state,” causing programs that large sections of the population depend on to deteriorate along with the goodwill agenda they were founded on. Benefits are curtailed, service worsens, and the citizenry become disgruntled or even alienated from the system that created and built loyalty through them.

*A deteriorating retail encounter with the state:* An additional effect of constraints imposed by austerity and rising debt is a decline in the state’s delivery of services. Bureaucratic agencies become less efficient and responsive and more impersonal. Also, the physical infrastructure deteriorates. These developments leave residents feeling further alienated from the state.

*Rising debt at all levels:* While the severity of debt burdens is often debatable, they reinforce austerity at the government level and hold back households’ and governments’ ability to invest for the future, further weakening inclusive movements. Over the past 50 years, these debt burdens have come increasingly under the control of global banks, investors, and multinational institutions: a “debt industry” that sees them as an opportunity to exploit rather than a means of equitable growth and development.

*A sense of national decline:* Political and economic collapse, stalemated wars that cost money and lives and lead to crises in national morale, and the erosion of a previously exalted geopolitical status give rise to a sense of decline within the society. Fifty years of failed wars, from Vietnam to Iraq, have been costly in blood and treasure, but are remembered in the American popular imagination as gallant missions that would have succeeded if the cause had not been betrayed by defeatist politicians.

*Fear of loss of potency:* This is fed by a fear of declining fertility, especially within

the dominant ethnic group; declining birth rates contribute to a sense that their overall position in society is crumbling. This creates a platform for theories like the "[Great Replacement](#)" to take hold, leading in turn to further marginalization of ethnic minorities and migrant communities and a new wave of racial bigotry and violence.

Among men within the dominant ethnic group, the decline in birth rates aggravates misogyny based on a zero-sum, scarcity-based belief that women, by claiming their rights, are infantilizing and castrating them. This sometimes results in a violent backlash against women's rights.

*Energy, environmental, and technological crises:* Global warming generates fears that the current living model is unsustainable, or that the crisis is a hoax intended to persuade people to accept a lower living standard. Fears of nuclear warfare endure but are now accompanied by concerns about new, high-tech forms of warfare and surveillance being used against people. The increasing role of sophisticated, computer-based systems in nearly every aspect of daily life creates a deepening fear that many long-time occupations will be eliminated or downgraded, damaging millions of workers' confidence in both their livelihood and sense of personal worth.

*Growth of corporate and financial power:* As union power declines and business evolves into a new model in which companies are managed as a collection of salable assets rather than productive enterprises, people grow more alienated from the capitalist system. On the right, people are encouraged to blame stigmatized groups (the Jews, the Chinese, the Arabs) for wielding economic power against them and covertly encouraging their "replacement" by migrants.

*Inclusionary movements lose their capacity for movement-building:* Social movements built on goodwill, while in the ascendancy, come to rely on the state to address challenges related to inclusion, through policies and programs that address socioeconomic inequality and marginalization. But with the state on a starvation diet, the leadership of these movements no longer have the means to address their inclusionary goals; their policies and programs become—or appear to become—untenable. The leadership can no longer deliver results for their popular base.

Focused, in an electoral democracy, on winning elections, the leadership seek a

new formula and new backing that will enable them to remain in power. They concede that capital is in the driver's seat and that challenging its interests and ambitions is futile, leading to a shifting of focus to crafting technocratic, "third-way" policies such as welfare reform and marginally milder alternatives to closing the border. These fail to win back the movement's base, instead creating an opening for exclusionary movements to expand their popular support.

Over time, the leadership of the exclusionary movement are emboldened to claim the accomplishments of the inclusionary movement as their own, seizing control of the historical-cultural narrative. In this telling, the abolition of slavery, the vast expansion of the middle class in the postwar decades, and the end of legal segregation become examples of America's greatness rather than the outcome of decades of struggle against violent opposition from exclusionary movements.

When it refuses to buy into this version of the story, the inclusionary movement is demonized for failing to celebrate America. ("The American people rejected European monarchy and colonialism just as we rejected slavery, second-class citizenship for women... and (today) wokeism," the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 "Mandate for Leadership" [declared](#). "To the left, these assertions of patriotic self-assurance are just so many signs of our moral depravity and intellectual inferiority.")

### *Exploiting Alienation*

The scarcity mind informs both the framing of the nine developments just described and the response to them. Some are quite real—declining economic growth, austerity, the resulting rise in migration and insurgencies, the climate crisis, and the rise of corporate power—and some reflect a psychological state—fear of the *other*, fear of debt in the abstract, and fear of national decline. Collectively, they nurture a profound feeling of alienation.

As alienation increases, people grow more desperate to be seen and heard, to belong, and to feel that the powers directing society are on their side—and not someone else's. These impulses generate new, exclusionary social movements, fueling a zeitgeist that spreads malignant bonding and toxic polarization, and which can then be used to forge a dynamic and passionate new political thinking of the right.

Alienation gives malignant bonding a powerful, long-lasting pull, at least while the

conditions that facilitate it persist. In our time, Roberts's "second American Revolution" takes its place within a pattern of self-renewal that began with the 1968 "silent majority" election of Richard Nixon in a campaign built on coded racism ("law and order") and extends to the 2016 and 2020 elections that brought Donald Trump to power and then solidified his right-wing populist MAGA movement.

Starving the state helps sustain this cycle as it accelerates the delegitimation of the inclusionary agenda. To gain power, however, a social movement needs resources and a conduit to the institutional and financial apparatus of capitalism and the state. For this, it needs the support of at least a portion of what we might call the Third Force: the elites, including propertied individuals who amass capital and control access to it and the institutions that defend and promote their interests.

The Third Force typically finds it easiest to form alliances with exclusionary rather than inclusionary movements, since the former find their organizing principle in imagined scarcity and dreams of a lost golden age and, therefore, seldom question existing wealth arrangements. Additionally, exclusionary movements fetishize power, making them useful partners in controlling marginal social elements.

At the same time, often-chaotic exclusionary social movements need the organized, disciplined institutional structures and expertise that the Third Force can build for them:

- Think tanks that can turn ideological preferences and resentments into policies (example, the Heritage Foundation);
- Media and messaging platforms (example, Fox News, Newsmax, and social media influencers);
- Advocacy groups (example, the Federalist Society); and
- An electoral machine and fundraising capabilities that can pull together a group of well-to-do donors behind a populist leader (example, the Republican Party, political action committees).

Over time, these resources enable exclusionary movements and their leaders to

generate new elites, operating on a somewhat different set of assumed principles than the previous elites, but still desiring to establish a new status quo. The nature of this new set of arrangements always depends greatly on the movement's relationship with the Third Force.

The success of this cycle of self-renewal blocks progressive political forces from implementing changes that might address the concrete issues giving rise to feelings of alienation: economic stagnation and austerity, the loss of workers' power and the rise of a corporate-financial hegemony, and technological fears.

### *A Way Forward for Inclusive Movements?*

An exclusionary movement built on alienation and malignant bonding, when combined with the resources of the Third Force, can radically change the direction of society, potentially reversing decades of social and economic progress. It can also, as we have just seen, change the direction of the rival inclusionary movement, neutralizing it while setting it up as the enemy for supporters of the exclusionary movement to rally against.

Even in the long periods when inclusionary movements have been ascendant, their rivals work to undermine them. In the 1960s and early 1970s in the U.S., when it seemed that many inclusionary goals, ranging from socioeconomic equality for people of color to universal health care, were within reach, the seeds of a powerful reaction opposing these goals were already sprouting. But inclusionary leaders often ignored or dismissed them. Real or perceived crises were then exploited, often very successfully, by exclusionary social movements as grounds for pinning the blame on their opponents.

One reason why this strategy is effective for the exclusionary movements is that attacks on vulnerable groups—women, migrants, racial and ethnic minorities, and gender nonconformists—are easily rationalized and emotionally gratifying to embattled working people who are used to occupying a more favored place in society. Another and equally important reason is that inclusive social movements often respond by emphasizing the gap between society's goals and its achievements, rather than highlighting its real accomplishments as reason to believe it can do better. This approach easily devolves into blaming and shaming the exclusionary movement's target audience, which that movement can then easily exploit.

Our next article will address the following questions related to the inclusionary movements: What makes them—despite generating mass support for long periods—susceptible to this cycle, and what does this tell us about the requirements for making them successful in the long run? Why have the inclusionary movements not been able to sustain and renew themselves to the same degree as their exclusionary rivals? What holds them back, and how can they find the capacity to do so?

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