EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF CULTURAL AND POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY
2025, VOL. 12, NO. 3, 219–225
https://doi.org/10.1162/ECPS.e.13

EDITORIAL

Bedtime for democracy? Europe's political and cultural fault lines

"Civilization, the orderly world in which we live, is frail. We are skating on thin ice," said Zygmunt Bauman in a 2005 interview (Jeffries, 2005). His words are worth recalling, not only because this is the centenary of his birth but also because 2025 may well mark a profound reshaping of the global order, with far-reaching cultural and political consequences.

The title of this editorial—"Bedtime for Democracy"—is taken from the fourth and final album by the punk rock band Dead Kennedys. Released nearly 40 years ago, the album's raw urgency voiced a disillusioned critique of imperialist ambitions and the hollowing out of democratic ideals under early neoliberal politics (in the form of Reaganomics), cloaked in the rhetoric of economic progress and patriotic revival. Four decades later, similar threats have resurfaced in the context of a polycrisis: As environmental problems intensify and competition for energy resources escalates, authoritarian populism exploits economic insecurity, and far-right parties gain traction by scapegoating minorities and migrants. The current lived realities of democratic backsliding in both the United States and Europe do not just run in parallel—they are intertwined with each other.

In recent months, Europe was appalled as US Vice President J. D. Vance took the stage at the Munich Security Conference and delivered an unprecedentedly controversial speech (Lu, 2025), sidestepping a serious discussion of Ukraine's future to argue instead that Europe's real threats came "from within"—from limitations on free speech, uncontrolled immigration, and attempts to restrain right-wing nationalist movements. This rhetoric is part of a broader pattern of provocative interventions through which the Trump administration has sought to destabilize the geopolitical centers of gravity in world politics, putting "the transatlantic alliance," in which Europe has long placed a great deal of faith, to work for right-wing populist agendas.

These crises threaten to fragment Europe, but paradoxically, they may also serve as a defining test of its cultural and political coherence. As Jeffrey Alexander has pointed out, "There's a common thing called 'Europe,' but there are also nations. There's a playoff between difference and commonality" (Brown & Gilson,

2013). Reflecting on the southern European austerity crisis, he described it as "a real traumatic episode" that exposed the precariousness of the European project even decades after it emerged. These wounds have never fully healed; instead, they have morphed and ramified into new symbolic and material disputes that continue to challenge European solidarity and the capacity of its institutions to uphold the values they claim to represent. Similarly, Europe's divergent reactions and responses to refugees seeking shelter have caused new divides among European countries. Differing approaches to border control, asylum policies, and calls for fairer "burden-sharing" have put the idea of "a community of values" to a real test. These crises have caused new rifts within Europe and provided fuel for parties that benefit from the European countries turning against one another.

A September 2024 report on European sentiment by the European Council on Foreign Relations sheds light on some of these disputes, equating the European Union with Barbieland: "a place prone to regard itself as more perfect than it really is—and harboring some notable blind spots" (Zerka, 2024). The report advocates for addressing these blind spots by going beyond "white," "Western," and "boomer" Europe. Culturally, this means recognizing diasporic and racialized communities not as peripheral but as integral to Europe's collective memory and identity. Politically, it calls for amplifying voices from Eastern Europe and other peripheral regions whose histories of authoritarianism, marginalization, and postsocialist transition challenge dominant Western liberal narratives. Institutionally, it requires rethinking racial representation in EU governance, embracing multilingualism and pluralism, and confronting the racialized assumptions embedded in migration policies and public discourse. An expanded sense of "Europeanness" would take seriously the political agency of second-generation immigrants, Roma communities, and refugees—not as subjects of integration but as coauthors of the European project.

Responding to crises is not merely about whether Europe can maintain unity amid external pressures, but whether it can confront the moral calamity that undermines its claims to ethical leadership on the global stage—namely, when universal basic values are subordinated to cynical geopolitical calculations and distortions of historical responsibility. So far, the European response has shown no signs of coming together behind unassailable values of democracy. Indeed, in the face of the genocide and ethnic cleansing underway in Gaza, perpetrated by the far-right Israeli government, Europe has adopted a silence that is not neutral but deafening—and complicit. According to UNICEF's Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, over 50,000 children have been killed or injured in the Gaza Strip (Beigbeder, 2025). Yet European official statements remain mired in diplomatic euphemism—mourning civilian casualties, criticizing ceasefire breakdowns, and condemning Hamas for holding hostages, while

avoiding naming the Israeli government as the principal agent of those atrocities (European Council, 2025).

While official voices remain muted, moral clarity emerges from the margins. Mosab Abu Toha, a Palestinian poet born in a refugee camp and internationally acclaimed for his literary work, wrote on social media, "Silence is not the absence of sound. Silence is the constant scream of the anguished." Courageous words come not from heads of state but from students, activists, and volunteers, often at great personal risk. In fact, the deliberate attacks on cultural, political, and humanitarian actors—journalists, activists, medics, and aid workers—expose the necropolitics of the Israeli state in Gaza. The same logic that targets voices in Gaza finds its echo in the response to solidarity movements elsewhere. Pro-Palestinian demonstrations that began on US campuses have spread across European universities, where students have faced similar responses: repression, violence, arrests, and expulsions—revealing translational logics of suppressing dissent.

In times of moral reckoning, sociological inquiry and imagination must be mobilized with acute awareness of the world they seek to understand—the positionalities they occupy, the voices they amplify, the silences they risk perpetuating, and the institutional and political terrains they navigate. We seem to be witnessing a post-global sociocultural conjuncture shaping power relations, particularly where issues of race, migration, and geopolitical positioning intersect to determine who is deemed worthy of voice, recognition, and belonging. As we know, even when institutional and procedural democratic frameworks appear to be working properly, democracy is largely practiced in everyday life, shaping the texture of political culture. It is our task as sociologists to place our focus there and strive toward inclusive narratives and expanded forms of recognition. Making daily struggles visible, unfolding oppressive mechanisms, and cultivating dignity and respect through sharpening analytical tools and exploring more collaborative research practices—researching *with* not just research *on*—are not merely academic exercises but vital sociological praxis to enact more just and plural futures.

The articles in this issue all discuss exclusion, boundaries, and struggles over belonging. The first three deal with the problem of Europeanness—not just as a discursive conundrum or an "imagined community" but as a moral dilemma exacerbated by the violent history of the continent. The fourth article provides us with a proposition for how a cultural sociological approach can help make sense of political cleavages.

First, Thomas Douniès's article "**The Time of Origins: The Rise and Fall of a Diversity Policy toward Migrant Pupils in France (1960s–1990s)**" addresses Europe's colonial legacy through a case from the French education

system. Douniès retraces the institutional rise—and eventual fall—of a policy that, from the 1970s to the 1990s, explicitly sought to recognize the cultural origins of migrant pupils. In stark contrast to France's self-image as a universalist republic that purports to "see no difference," Douniès shows how state actors once encouraged dual linguistic and cultural development, both to facilitate the return of migrants to their "home" countries and to improve social relations in an increasingly diverse society. Drawing on archival sources, Douniès reconstructs how this policy was shaped not only by colonial legacies and foreign diplomacy but also by a pedagogical critique of ethnocentric schooling. Yet by the 1990s, an "integrationist turn" reframed cultural difference as a problem rather than a resource, dismantling the very structures that had once nurtured plurality within the school system. Douniès's analysis strikes a chord in the present, where Europe stands again at a crossroads between exclusionary retrenchment and pluralist renewal. His work reminds us of the long history of the moral dilemmas with which Europe continues to struggle and our particular debts and duties arising from them.

In their article, "**Contextualizing Past Heroes: The Dilemma of Negotiating the Postcolonial Legacy in Norway**," Mette Andersson and Kjell Erling Kjellman approach Europe's colonial legacy from the perspective of a country that is accustomed to "understand[ing] themselves as outside of the colonial project and thus claim[ing] innocence from racist images and terms within their national borders." With the concept of *colonial complicity*, the authors highlight how this narrative has enabled the Nordic countries to imagine themselves as "the good agents" compared to other European countries and to subsequently shrug off any accusations of racism embedded in the contemporary Nordics. Through 47 interviews with antiracist activists, Andersson and Kjellman explore reactions to public memorials—benches, statues, and place names—that gained renewed attention in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. The authors trace how Norwegian debates about figures such as Carl von Linnaeus, Winston Churchill, and Ludvig Holberg have become entangled in the national narrative of innocence. Among the racialized Norwegian activists—particularly those with diasporic or minority backgrounds—these public debates were regarded not just as opportunities to question Norway's historical narrative of innocence but also as reproducing exclusion and marginalizing colonial narratives. While symbolic critique remains essential, many activists express ambivalence about whether highly mediatized memorial debates detract from confronting structural racism in the everyday. Andersson and Kjellman's piece offers a compelling inquiry into the long roots and contemporary experiences of Europe's fault lines and inner tensions: between commemoration and forgetting, between dominant narratives of cultural superiority and lived experiences of exclusion. It

reminds us that Europe's moral self-image cannot be disentangled from the material histories it too often suppresses.

Aino Nevalainen's article "**Contention and Concerted Consensus over (Anti)Racism: Tempering Black Lives Matter in Finnish Mainstream Media**" continues the analysis of contemporary reckonings over racist histories. It underscores a central tension in today's moral landscape: the simultaneous expansion and disciplining of public discourse on race. In an era when anti-wokeness spreads under the guise of protecting democratic norms, this article lays bare how the arguments of "temperance" can normalize racial hierarchies by rendering radical critique illegible. The author analyses media coverage of Black Lives Matter protests in another self-proclaimed "innocent and color-blind" context: Finland. Through a frame analysis of 243 articles published in three Finnish mainstream media news outlets, she maps the competing discourses through which the meanings of racism and antiracism were constructed, amplified, and constrained. Nevalainen identifies five dominant frames: the antiracist frames of experiential racism, structural racism, and colonial complicity—and two frames challenging antiracism: the frame from moderation to anti-wokeness and the frame of denial of colonial/racial history. The antiracist frames were dominant, producing "an understanding of racism as a systemic and structural issue penetrating every layer of society." However, antiracism was far from uncontested. Within the antiracism-critical frames, questions were raised over whether antiracism has "gone too far," and proposals to "avoid both extremes" were made. This feigned neutrality is also painted over Finnish history when arguments over Finland's colonial complicity are disregarded as "a fanciful politicization of history born out of moral hypervigilance."

Finally, Linus Westheuser's landmark theoretical contribution, "**Boundaries and Cleavages: Elements of a Cultural Sociology of Political Divides,**" proposes a novel cross-fertilization of cleavage theory and the sociology of boundary-making. Through this innovative combination, Westheuser produces a cultural sociological theory of political cleavage that helps trace the subterranean logics of a Europe marked by the rise of radical right populism, retreating solidarities, and a dwindling sense of a moral community and offers us tools to tackle it empirically. Cleavage studies, he argues, offer a robust theoretical toolkit for making sense of the long trajectories of group divides and polarizing societies. At the same time, Westheuser argues that the social construction of these rifts could be fruitfully studied with tools from cultural sociology. Against dominant "tribalist," "dispositional," and "attitudinal" approaches—which often essentialize group differences or obscure the social labor behind them—he proposes a relational model centered on symbolic boundaries and cultural repertoires. Through his contribution, Westheuser develops tools to analyze the

sociocultural dimension of cleavages by focusing on "practices of classification both as ongoing processes (boundary work and distinction) and through their results (closure and relational group classifications)." The classificatory struggles over who belongs, who deserves, and who is deemed "decent," "hardworking," or "out of place" are the raw materials of polarization.

The two book reviews in this issue address the unfinished past of historical transitions and the unsettling reality of contemporary authoritarianisms. Daria Khlevniuk discusses *Remembering transitions* (Robbe, ed., 2023) with a wide range of empirical studies of political transitions of the 1970s to 1990s in their postsocialist, postapartheid, or postdictatorship contexts. For an edited volume, the book is remarkably coherent: "Each chapter offers a strong theoretical contribution that falls neatly into two major themes," namely the nonlinearity and multiplicity of transitions and their memories, "ensuring that the collection reads as interconnected rather than fragmented." Finally, Khlevniuk praises the editor, Ksenia Robbe, for her strong concluding chapter offering a promising theoretical "contribution to the study of transitions and even memory studies in general." Discussing Anna Schwenck's *Flexible Authoritarianism* (2024), Anna Zhelnina praises the book for its convincing analysis of how young people in contemporary Russia navigate the "contradictory combinations of neotraditionalism and innovation-boosterism [. . .], of patriotism and negative self-stereotyping, of loyalty and regime criticism." Yet, being primarily based on research on leadership youth camps in provincial Russia, the study falls short in terms of placing the "individualism" found there in a broader cultural context—although a separate chapter on YouTube "vigilante-entrepreneurs" provides some remedy here. All in all, Zhelnina finds the book entertaining as well as insightful, shedding light on "the everyday foundations of authoritarianism and its legitimation."

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