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Challenging cultures of rejection

**SANJA BOJANIĆ , STEFAN JONSSON ,
ANDERS NEERGAARD  AND BIRGIT SAUER **

ABSTRACT In this article, Bojanic, Jonsson, Neergaard and Sauer present a synthetic overview of the five country cases included in the special issue that analyse the emergence of cultures of rejection since 2015. In general, they discuss the conceptual framework of ‘Cultures of Rejection’, elaborated throughout the issue as a more encompassing approach that is sensitive to the values, norms and affects that underlie different or similar patterns of exclusion and rejection in different contexts. These cultures are located in the everyday lives of people. The article, therefore, first identifies contexts, objects of rejection—often migrants and racialized Others, but also ‘the political’ or state institutions—narratives and components of cultures of rejection that we label reflexivity, affect, nostalgia and moralistic judgement. The contrasting reading of the five cases shows that people struggle for agency under precarious and insecure conditions, and fight against imagined enemies. As Bojanić, Jonsson, Neergaard and Sauer conclude, cultures of rejection mirror ongoing processes of neoliberal dispossession, authoritarianization and depolitization that culminate in a wish for agency and resovereignization. Second, and based on this overview, trends in cultures of rejection are detected against different national contexts as well as against common trends of social and economic transformations and crises, such as, for instance, the COVID-19 pandemic. This results, finally, in a discussion of ways of challenging the cultures of rejection towards more democratic and solidaristic societies. One starting point might be the ‘re-embedding’ of the economy in society, that is, a more equal distribution of resources and future perspectives.

KEYWORDS affect, democratization, moralistic judgement, nostalgia, reflexivity, rejection, socio-economic dispossession, solidarity, transformation

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Since the ‘long summer of migration’ of 2015,¹ European countries have witnessed a new articulation of paradoxical responses to the economic

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1 Sabine Hess, Bernd Kasperek, Stefanie Kron, Mathias Rodatz, Maria Schwertl and Simon Sontowski (eds), ‘Der lange Sommer der Migration: Krise, Rekonstitution

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and social transformations and crises that followed in the wake of authoritarian and neoliberal austerity politics,² and which have hit countries in the Balkan and Mediterranean regions particularly hard. The more recent mobilizations against governmental policies implemented to contain the COVID-19 pandemic have added new contradictions and paradoxes to these social and political crises. Whereas the so-called 'anti-vaccine protests' discursively insisted on freedom from vaccinations or restrictions mandated by the state and recommended by medical science, they also appeared willing to give up freedom by bowing to alternative authorities on the fringes of politics and science. The pandemic thus added another layer to a socio-cultural conjuncture in which authoritarian, right-wing and radical nationalist perceptions, political preferences and actions have found increased resonance among broad sectors of the European public.

Some researchers have labelled these developments as parts of a 'populist Zeitgeist', as the emergence of antagonistic political strategies connected to right-wing radical actors who reject immigration and constructed Others, be they migrants, minorities, LGBTIQ+ people or feminists.³ Other research refers to ongoing processes of de-democratization and a constellation of notions of 'post-democracy' that focus on a loss of sovereignty not only in European countries but across the globe.⁴ Those inspired by critical theory, for their part, have emphasized the psycho-political aspects of these phenomena and see them as new articulations of the 'authoritarian character', modelled on 'the authoritarian personality' that Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and their collaborators developed from their 'studies in prejudice' in the immediate post-Second World War period.⁵

While recognizing the relevance of such perspectives, Manuela Bojadžijev and Benjamin Opratko, in their introduction, explain the difference in approach that informs the five studies in this special issue. Instead of running the risk of reducing mentioned paradoxes to economic transformations,⁶ or, by contrast, neglecting the economy and connecting political-economic mutations to attitudes, the researchers pay attention equally to voting and protest behaviour,⁷ and do not focus solely on cultural or

und ungewisse zukunft des europäischen Grenzregimes', in Sabine Hess, Bernd Kasparek, Stefanie Kron, Mathias Rodatz, Maria Schwertl and Simon Sontowski (eds), *Grenzregime III* (Berlin and Hamburg: Assoziation A 2016), 6–24.

2 Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press 2019).

3 Cas Mudde, 'The populist zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2004, 541–63.

4 Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity 2004).

5 Maurits Heumann and Oliver Nachtwey, *Autoritarismus und Zivilgesellschaft: Eine empirische Studie zum neuen Autoritarismus*, IFS Working Paper, no. 16 (Frankfurt: Institut für Sozialforschung 2021).

6 Philip Manow, *Die politische Ökonomie des Populismus* (Berlin: Suhrkamp 2018).

7 Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 2018).

psychoanalytical explanations.⁸ The studies in this special issue instead mobilize the interpretive tools and nuances of qualitative social research in an effort to expose the specific social, economic, political and cultural experiences, contexts and dynamics that provoke and nurture narratives of rejection and make them acceptable to people. Taken as a whole, the articles suggest an analytical framework that heuristically posits the existence of ‘cultures of rejection’ as an important mediating link empirically tracing such cultures in social and digital environments in Austria, Croatia, Germany, Serbia and Sweden. Cultures of rejection include practices, discourses, attitudes, value formations and affects that rebuff certain socio-cultural objects, be it groups of persons, practices or symbols, and with due variation between countries and places. The concept is informed by the assumption that political and cultural attitudes are rooted in the everyday, and are thus susceptible to transformations of all aspects of social life: people’s workplaces and professional lives, the private sphere of partnership and family, neighbourhood relations and social-media activity. Changes in these realms, reflecting economic power relations, as in the case of neoliberal austerity, are reflected in people’s perceptions, feelings and embodied practices, and people also construct and reconstruct these transformations from and into attitudes, feelings, conversations and other aspects of their *habitus*.

In this concluding article, we trace the contours of contemporary European cultures of rejection to demonstrate why the concept helps to understand the turn to right-wing and authoritarian politics, the loss of trust in authorities, and the search for new forms of agency and sovereignty. In this sense, the studies indicate that the concept of cultures of rejection offers an adequate term for what Chantal Mouffe has called the ‘populist moment’.⁹ However, instead of speaking of a populist *moment*, as Mouffe primarily does, and taking the cue from Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall, we suggest that cultures of rejection are quintessential features of our contemporary conjuncture.¹⁰ As Hall argued, developing Gramsci’s thoughts on conjuncture, and incorporating ethnicity and race beyond class (but not gender): ‘When a conjuncture unrolls, there is no “going back”. History shifts gears. The terrain changes. You are in a new moment.’ Gramsci’s thought is so pertinent to us today because he had to ‘face the capacity of the Right—specifically, of European fascism’.¹¹

Barring for the moment the possibility that the war in Ukraine inaugurates a new historical conjuncture, the scope and intensity of which we cannot predict at the time of writing, we reiterate our claim, confirmed by the five country studies, that the conjuncture exposed by today’s cultures of rejection is of a

8 Heumann and Nachtwey, *Autoritarismus und Zivilgesellschaft*.

9 Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London and New York: Verso 2018), 11.

10 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. from the Italian by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers 1997), 395.

11 Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso 1988), 162.

particularly challenging kind. It challenges the life of those identified as Others, just as it challenges solidarity and democracy, understood as people's sovereignty and self-determination. Nevertheless, the country analyses also indicate moments of what Karl Polanyi, in his 1944 study of the capitalist system and its continuous dis-embedding of the economy from society, would identify as seeds of 'counter-movements'.¹² Polanyi's notion of counter-movements refers to the re-embedding of the economy within society; it recognizes that such movements can take many forms beyond the idea of 'good' challenging 'evil'. Implicit in this notion is therefore the question as to whether today's conjuncture is dominated by cultures of rejection and, if so, whether it emerges as a response and challenge to austere neoliberalism.

Our aim in this concluding article is to *first* summarize the variations and similarities of cultures, practices, objects and 'modes' of rejection identified in the five country cases. We do this in order to refine the analytical perspective offered by the concept of cultures of rejection with a view to identifying national patterns and highlighting common (European) trends concerning the ways in which rejections of Others are activated, how objects of rejection are constructed, and how the conditions and outcomes of such rejections are socially accepted.¹³ Put briefly, we aim to clarify crucial elements in what Foucault called the 'conditions of acceptability' for right-wing populism.¹⁴ *Second*, based on sound knowledge of the mechanisms and dynamics in which these cultures of rejection have developed over the past years, we suggest how we may begin to challenge and thus transform them.

The empirical results of the articles come from combinations of ethnographic approaches, digital ethnography, participant observations, semi-structured interviews and focus-group interviews with workers in the logistics and retail industries. Data are structured by a division between traditional and digital ethnography, which serves to demonstrate that rejections take varied and complex forms depending on the setting. The material is also organized by method, by country and by employment sector. The country chapters asked similar research questions with regard to transformations of everyday life: at the workplace, at home and in leisure time activities. In addition to the five studies presented in this issue, we also refer to a recent study by two members of our research programme, which examines cultures of rejection in the logistics and retail sectors of Austria and Germany.¹⁵

12 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press 1985).

13 Benjamin Opratko, Manuela Bojadžijev, Sanja Bojanić, Irena Fiket, Alexander Harder, Stefan Jonsson, Mirjana Nećak, Andres Neegard, Celina Ortega Soto, Gazela Pudar Draško, Birgit Sauer and Kristina Stojanović Čehajić, 'Cultures of rejection in the Covid-19 crisis', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 44, no. 5, 2021, 893–905.

14 Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2007), 61.

15 Alexander Harder and Benjamin Opratko, 'Cultures of rejection at work: investigating the acceptability of authoritarian populism', *Ethnicities*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2022, 425–45.

In terms of methodology, we contextualize the analysis of cultures of rejection in concrete historical, social, political and cultural settings in the five countries. The five selected countries represent 'old' European democracies, such as Sweden, countries of the post-Second World War wave of democratization, such as Germany and Austria, and transition countries that were formerly state-socialist, such as Yugoslavia, Croatia and Serbia. All five countries have been marked in recent years by a questioning of liberal democratic institutions, specifically by the resurgence of right-wing authoritarian parties and authoritarian governments. The economic transformations in the five examples show similar characteristics of economic liberalization, the retreat of state influence on market activities and austerity politics. However, these transformations have taken on different forms in the five countries, not least because of their different welfare-state settings and measures imposed by the European Union (EU). An important rationale for the selection of the states is their location on the migration route of 2015. While Serbia and Croatia were transit countries on the so-called Balkan route, Austria, Germany and Sweden were destination countries for refugee migration. This led to different legal responses with regard to asylum and migration.

It follows from this methodology that we do not intend to make stringent country comparisons with the aim of detecting commonalities and differences, and explaining them through contextual parameters. Our methodology also does not intend to extract clear cohesions and shared properties of the kind that would allow us to stipulate, for instance, a specific 'character type', 'form of subjectivity' or 'collective consciousness'—perhaps corresponding to the 'authoritarian personality'—which could be claimed as a cause or result of the emergence of cultures of rejection from Serbia to Sweden. Instead, we suggest a 'non-comparative' contrasting reading of the country cases, to comprehend the concrete manifestations of cultures of rejection in different settings. Our reading has been guided by questions concerning the contexts of socioeconomic transformations, the 'objects' of rejection, the narratives that justify rejection and the 'modes' in which people react to or process these transformations in their perceptions, practices and feelings, but it has also been guided by questions concerning the objects and constellations people believe they have lost and keep longing for.

Our article proceeds as follows. We first highlight the different country contexts and describe objects and narratives of rejection that are pertinent in each case, but that also indicate general European patterns. The next section focuses on the variations in the expressions of cultures of rejection and identifies similarities that may be conceptualized as three specific modes of rejection: resignation, conflict and antagonism. Following that, we discuss how these modes are politically functional, as they articulate people's reactions and efforts to make sense of socioeconomic and political transformations. We here argue that cultures of rejection are configured by combinations of reflexivity, affect, nostalgia and moralistic judgement.

Finally, the last section makes some overall observations, derived from our studies, concerning the conditions of acceptability of right-wing populism in today's Europe, and we suggest some country-specific possibilities and ways of challenging cultures of rejection.

Contexts, objects and narratives of cultures of rejection: common trends and national contrasts

This section illuminates the country-specific contexts in which narratives, mechanisms and modes of rejection develop. All the case studies focus on social groups dependent on the retail and logistics economy. These sectors have suffered from the neoliberal retrenchment of welfare systems, crumbling labour market regulations, declining wages, worsening workplace conditions and steeper competition, as have far larger swathes of the European working class, especially those with low-income jobs and precarious employment.¹⁶ Interviewees and informants in all five case studies demonstrate an awareness of this state of affairs, but they show no expectation of support from politicians or established organizations. Often, they display acceptance of the seemingly inevitable, and submission to forces beyond their control.

The Serbian case appears to show a particularly concerning 'lack of trust in political actors, institutions, democratic procedures and, after all, in democracy per se'.¹⁷ The authors find a prevailing 'political illiteracy' among the public. They adopt the concept of 'anti-politics' to characterize the general sentiment emerging from interviews and social media posts. This sentiment includes various manifestations of rejection: distrust and disengagement; delegitimation of politics and existing political authority; anti-parliamentarism; anti-particracy; and anti-establishment as well as outright anti-democratic sentiments. The Serbian example shows that one of the main mechanisms of rejection targets a specific Other, which illustrates asymmetrical relations of power between 'ordinary people', on the one hand, and political actors, experts and corrupted or co-opted segments of the citizenry, on the other.

As shown by several of the articles, which we discuss in the following, anti-politics is connected to arbitrary affective mobilizations detected in both offline and online environments. Moreover, anti-politics often expand into a more general regime that structures the attitudes, practices and affects that citizens display in their withdrawal from politics. Emerging from interviews and digital ethnography are numerous affective statements testifying

16 See Manuela Bojadžijev and Benjamin Opratko, 'Introducing "cultures of rejection": an investigation of the conditions of acceptability of right-wing politics in Europe', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 57, no. 4/5, 2022, 205–218.

17 Irena Fiket, Gazela Pudar Draško and Milan Urošević, 'Anti-politics as culture of rejection: the case of Serbia', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 57, no. 4/5, 2022, 279–296 (281–2).

to a strong sense of having been abandoned by the political elites, of being underestimated and discarded, but also of having found new sources of political literacy in public media and unreliable news sources that are open to conspiracy narratives.

Historical and contextual circumstances, such as authoritarian nationalism, corruption scandals and, beginning in the 1990s, a wave of privatizations, explain why the Serbian and Croatian studies display particularly firm versions of these views. Thus, the maritime transportation workers in the Croatian study have experienced drastic changes for the worse in their working lives and everyday conditions. Among the ship workers, such transformations have fostered open animosity towards the international trade and labour systems and their organizations, as well as an embrace of nationalist imaginary and extremist tendencies. Anti-institutional attitudes and socio-cultural deprivation are articulated on at least three levels in the everyday lives of Croatian maritime workers. First, instead of embracing pluralism and global institutional structures of liberal social democracy, which in the previous century provided high esteem for seafarers and their cosmopolitan aura, the research unearthed a sense of abandonment and dispossession. Most of the interviewed seafarers do not vote and are not interested in politics.¹⁸ Second, the Croatian case is marked by frequent observations as to how internet platforms, contaminated by ultraliberal corporative services, allow distortion and deformation of content, especially of political information.¹⁹ Finally, on a third level, the Croatian study shows the devastating impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the ship workers, as their affective and discursive relations to other people were cut off. The ensuing isolation made exchanges on *Facebook* groups particularly exploitable by 'the entrepreneurs of exclusion'.²⁰ Arguing that any format of social networking entails a 'situational affective regime', the Croatian study reveals that anti-political motivation, and hence also mechanisms and narratives of rejection, germinate in the entwined institutional ambiguity and deteriorating working conditions, in which 'the workers have no access to reliable and efficient mechanisms for organizing and collective action across national boundaries'.²¹

The Austrian case study lays bare the transformative impact of social media on everyday spaces, such as the neighbourhood, family, friends and leisure time, just as much as on public debate. According to Benjamin Opratko, the so-called 'Danube' *Facebook* group and the *Telegram* group 'Austria Rises' exemplify a new digital and para-political ecosystem that creates spaces for mobilization against the Austrian government's

18 Kristina Stojanović-Čehajić and Marko-Luka Zubčić, 'Unmoored: resources for the rise of right-wing populism in everyday experiences of international maritime industry workers from Croatia', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 57, no. 4/5, 2022, 259–277.

19 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs 2019).

20 Stojanović-Čehajić and Zubčić, 'Unmoored', 270.

21 *Ibid.*, 271–3, 276.

COVID-19 restrictions, as well as for other narratives of rejection.²² During the pandemic, several mechanisms and narratives of rejection in these two online environments addressed the fear of worsening one's living conditions by complying with prescribed modes of conduct, such as mandatory mask-wearing. Securing their own comfort by searching for scapegoats, ordinary Austrian citizens reached for familiar forms of Othering in relation to migrants, global elites or those targeted in various conspiracies. However, despite the predominant far-right content, and thanks to specific processes of deliberation (with the introduction of a code of conduct for one of the *Facebook* groups), the rejective discourse of the right did not achieve complete hegemony in the digital arena.

The German case study connects the experiences of structural change at the workplace with the workers' social and political outlooks, and it describes a scenario that, national specificities excepted, corresponds to observations in the other countries. Alexander Harder notes an 'intensification and isolation of labour, a general scarcity of resources for social reproduction and powerlessness'.²³ The logistification of work and life impacts the everyday experiences of the service workers in ways that may ultimately contribute to the rise of right-wing politics in Germany. Three aspects of the workers' social views indicate slow movement towards the acceptability of right-wing politics: a sense of decline and nostalgia; a disillusionment with politics and a desire for executive actions; and a retreat from publicity and deliberation towards spaces of conflict-free expression. Still, the interviewed service workers resist immediate right-wing solutions and instead appear to be waiting for alternative political forces to bring change.

The fifth study concerns Sweden, characterized in an OECD comparative context both by a rapidly growing income and wealth inequality, and by having taken in more refugees per capita in 2015 than any other country in Europe. Together with Germany, it at first proclaimed a culture of solidarity that came to an abrupt end as the government closed the country's borders and passed legislation aiming to make Sweden less attractive to asylum-seekers. This sudden change in migration politics reflects other, more general socio-cultural tendencies: 'a weakening social democracy; a dominant but non-hegemonic neoliberalism; and the growing strength of a neo-racist right'.²⁴ As the study shows, Sweden's path through the COVID-19 pandemic mirrors a similar shift from liberal to potentially repressive measures. Both migration policy and public health policy in Sweden are

22 Benjamin Opratko, 'Beyond pandemic populism: COVID-related cultures of rejection in digital environments a case study of two Austrian online spaces', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 57, no. 4/5, 2022, 297–314.

23 Alexander Harder, '"Everything has changed": right-wing politics and experiences of transformation among German retail workers', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 57, no. 4/5, 2022, 219–235 (219).

24 Celina Ortega Soto, 'Swedish cultures of rejection and decreasing trust in authority during the COVID pandemic', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 57, no. 4/5, 2022, 237–257 (237).

therefore areas in which boundaries of democratic openness and inclusion have been tested by increasingly vocal manifestations of rejection. The development has been fraught with conflicts and contradictions. For example, while government restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 were implemented, 'public opinion supporting tighter measures decreased in parallel with the growth of a vocal anti-restriction rhetoric'. As a result of such developments, antagonistic and agonistic resentment increased and 'uneven tensions and peculiar confluences between neoliberalism and ethnonationalism' became visible. This was accompanied by 'general patterns of separation based on class and racialization', which, as the study shows, are activated by multiple mechanisms of rejection that are visible above all in digital environments.²⁵

By way of conclusion to this section, we emphasize a few features of the conjuncture underlying the manifestations of rejection discussed in the five studies. The first thing to note is that interviewees as well as social media contributors typically address concerns, issues and objects that are often extremely local, whereas the causes of the concerns and problems are seen as distant and diffuse, having to do with far-away elites, newcomers from remote countries or global power structures who have left people in these local settings feeling abandoned, repressed or even violated. The feeling of being abandoned by the political elites as well as the turn towards new 'experts' are observable in all the countries in our sample. However, while topics and issues of concern and rejection are local or national, the patterns, forms and media of rejection are similar across the five studies. At its simplest, this gives rise to the observation that affective rejection is strongly enabled by digital communication, whose detrimental effects are also visible in all five countries. At its most complex, it involves the observation that rejection activates a processing of conspiracy theories and invented facts, whose appeal is often supranational and difficult to understand and explain. The five cases display strong commonalities of pattern and form in their bewildering mixture of the local and the global in the contents or objects of rejection they articulate.

Another common but hardly surprising observation shared by the five articles is that the outbreak and unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic provided a novel context for exploring cultures of rejection. One aspect is the restrictions that followed in the wake of the pandemic and partially limited the forms of political mobilization in real life; but that, at the same time, strengthened different digital forms of communication and sociability. Thus, protests in Austria, but also in Germany and Sweden, were partially protests in support of the right to protest and of other forms of sociability. In addition, however, the unfolding of the pandemic also provided a new (or, more correctly, enhanced and intensified) object of rejection in the form of a medical expertise previously seen as apolitical and objective. Perceived

25 Ibid., 238, 239–40, 241.

as a biopolitical instrument of governance, science in general, and the biomedical disciplines in particular, because of their links to profit-driven enterprises (or 'big pharma'), became increasingly targeted by cultures of rejection. In all the articles, except the one on Germany, albeit in different ways, the medical profession and/or doctors are seen to be in a highly complex relationship, even among their peers, and represent objects of rejection.

Variations in the expression of cultures of rejection towards liberal democracies in transformation

In this section, continuing to take inspiration from Gramsci, Polanyi and Hall, we explore the forms of expressing cultures of rejection in the shadow of the so-called 'migration crisis' of 2015 and the COVID-19 pandemic. Using features such as the direction, degree of intensity and stages of rejection, we argue that these cultures find expression through a variety of forms that ideal-typically may be summarized as *resignation*, *conflict* and *antagonism*.

Practices of rejection may be understood as cultures, that is, as the ways in which we implicitly or explicitly make sense of and understand our way of life. As such, rejection is often linked to the everyday, mundane normality of interactions at workplaces, within households, during leisure-time activities and through friendships, although often embedded in (social) media landscapes. Cultures of rejection are thus also cultures of identity formation in a dialectical process between a firmly centred 'us' and a decentred or peripheral 'them'. The case studies discern somewhat similar objects of rejection that can be summed up generally as radical right-wing populism, including: immigration; domestic political elites; 'mainstream' media; institutions of civil society; scientific or educational institutions; certain bodies of knowledge; shifting gender relations; racialized or culturalized Others; LGBTIQ+ people; environmentalism; and also a horizontal mistrust of co-citizens and colleagues.²⁶

It emerges from the five studies that cultures of rejection find expression through a number of different modes, including *direction* (defensive or offensive), *degree of intensity* and *stages*. Defensive forms of expression can be understood as the withdrawal from all public interaction that goes beyond what is necessary. This is especially highlighted in the Croatian, Serbian and German cases. By contrast, offensive rejection is linked to counter-claims and projects that aim to rally the like-minded, which is especially visible in Austria and Sweden.

The degree of intensity of cultures of rejection is, on the one hand, discerned by the ways in which strong and affective words and other symbols

26 Harder and Opratko, 'Cultures of rejection at work', 430.

are used in the characterization of the objects of rejection and continued dealings with them. On the other hand, the variation in intensity is also the result of communication. Thus, the material in the case studies tends more towards the nuanced and, therefore, less intense rejection seen in the semi-structured interviews. In contrast, focus-group interviews and observations of social media groups and real-life manifestations facilitate fierce rejections. Katrina Stojanović-Čehajić and Marko-Luka Zubčić introduce the term 'entrepreneurs of exclusion' for those social media interventions that heighten the intensity of rejections.²⁷

Furthermore, taking inspiration from Ervin Goffman's classic distinction between 'frontstage', 'backstage' and 'off stage', we see strong variations between different expressions of cultures of rejection.²⁸ Rejections taking place 'off stage' would here amount to those formulated and maintained individually or within the close circle of family and friends. 'Back-stage' rejections are those that occur among work colleagues and closed forms of social media, whereas 'front-stage' rejections are open expressions especially in demonstrations and on public social media. For several decades, issues of migration, migrants and racialized Others, as well as the political system, the political and cultural elite, the traditional media and so-called 'globalization' have been objects of rejection proliferated by the entrepreneurs of right-wing populism and the radical right, as well as neo-racist mobilizations. No wonder, then, that the so-called 'long summer of migration' of 2015 functioned as a phenomenon that intensified the existing cultures of rejection. In this context, it is important to recall, however, that there was at the same time, and to some extent still is, a culture of solidarity, a movement welcoming refugees, which partially expresses conflict and antagonism towards the same political and cultural elite, traditional media and the political system for not doing enough and for closing borders too quickly.

Another feature of cultures of rejection is the experience of an era of change or a time of social transformation. This era is juxtaposed against the perception of how it was (nostalgia), how it might have been (an alternative change or past futures) or how it perhaps might become (visions of systemic transformation). The voices heard in the five studies break down the experienced era of change by focusing now on economic change, which brings precariousness, stress, isolation and insecurity, and now on the futility of politics or the failure of politicians and the political system to make a difference.

The role played by racism, migrants and the racialized Other in cultures of rejections varies more by empirical setting than by country. In the interviews with workers, the object of rejection is rarely the migrant or racialized Other. Precariousness, insecurity and loss of status are instead linked to processes of globalization, neoliberal restructuring, the changing role of management or the inability or lack of interest on the part of politicians and trade unions to

27 Stojanović-Čehajić and Zubčić, 'Unmoored', *passim*.

28 Ervin Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* [1956] (London: Penguin 1990).

intervene. The German and Croatian cases contain some comments that come across as veiled references to problems with racialized Others. This is not the case with social media, as exemplified in the articles on Austria, Croatia and Sweden, in which racism is more present and expressed in many different forms. With regard to an Austrian *Facebook* group, Opratko notes that racism had been so strongly present that the group was closed down and when it re-opened, now with a 'code of conduct' that advised against racist content, such content was still posted although at times accompanied by objections and critique.²⁹ Stojanović-Čehajić and Zubčić state that all but one Croatian interviewee explicitly insisted that they held no racist views, while the *Facebook* group analysed was composed of explicit and extreme racist diatribes and comments that were never challenged by other group members.³⁰ Similarly, the Swedish study shows that, in one of the *Facebook* groups examined, objects of rejection encompassed the whole list of radical-right and neo-racist notions, including immigration and/or immigrants, Black Lives Matter (both the US social movement and its Swedish counterpart) and Islam.³¹

In summary, we see how cultures of rejection may be articulated in three different ideal-typical modes: as *resignation* before a society that prevents me from living as I once did; as *conflict* with a world that prevents the realization of a good life; and as *antagonism* towards the existing world and support for systemic change.

However, by exploring cultures of rejection in these case studies, there is a risk of obscuring other forms of political challenges that are present in most of the interviews—often expressed in classical left-right terms concerning the organization and distribution of production—and in perceiving the dominant governments and politics as 'normal'. The latter raises the possibility of reifying liberal democracy, both in its ideal form and, more importantly, in characterizing current governments as true and credible realizations of a presumed norm of liberal democracy. The analysis of interviews, social media and protest makes visible how cultures of rejection are interactions with both the image of liberal democracy (as systemic challenge) and with the lived experience of pro-austerity and (increasingly) authoritarian liberal governments. This distinction, which complicates the analysis, is still central in maintaining a critical perspective that emphasizes the conjuncture of crisis.

Four components of cultures of rejection: reflexivity, affect, nostalgia and moralistic judgement

In this section, we move to a political interpretation of the modes of rejection identified in the previous section. We assume that such modes of rejection—

29 Opratko, 'Beyond pandemic populism', 304.

30 Stojanović-Čehajić and Zubčić, 'Unmoored'.

31 Ortega Soto, 'Swedish cultures of rejection and decreasing trust in authority during the COVID pandemic'.

resignation, conflict and antagonism — offer a way to adapt to, and make sense of, the lived reality of late capitalist European society in its present conjuncture. In brief, if people react to and adapt to work and everyday life through modes of resignation, conflict and antagonism, this seems to indicate a popular repertoire of different ways of making sense of one's situation. We can start here from one of the initial hypotheses of our research project, the assumption that cultures of rejection are differently articulated in socio-spatial environments, including the workplace and digital environments. By considering the differences and tensions between results obtained from the two environments, this section will discuss how cultures of rejection are articulated in four different ways: as *reflexivity*, in which informants identify the objective pressures at their workplace and in their everyday lives, in relation to which rejection appears as a rational response; as *affect*, in which rejection is vocally expressed mainly in online environments; as *nostalgia*, in which informants give meaning to their insecure or intolerable present by contrasting it with homespun ideas of a past when life was better; and, finally, as a *moralistic* judgement, in which informants' rejections activate a moral binary that enables them to make sense of society through processes of Othering, or an incessant boundary-drawing between good and evil. These four — reflexivity, affect, nostalgia and moralistic judgment — can be seen as the elementary components through which cultures of rejection are configured, regardless of whether they are manifested as resignation, conflict or antagonism. As we shall see, each of the four modes has direct consequences for our views on how to understand and counteract right-wing populism and racism.

As we have already noted, informants in interviews, focus groups and fieldwork voice rejection in the mode of resignation, a more or less frustrated withdrawal into the private enclosure of the family and the home. Informants testify to a lack of time and money as well as work-related fatigue, which prevent them from engaging with wider society and the public sphere or news media. Informants often link such resigned rejection of society and public life to their everyday job experiences that offers little in terms of recognition and self-realization.

Workers are far from blind as to the reasons for their worries. Informants in all five countries echo one another in their rejection of deteriorating working conditions that make them isolated, stressed and exploited. They even lucidly and reflexively detail how corporate hiring policy, business strategies, workplace automation and labour market arrangements are rigged against them. Yet they see few alternatives, have no influence on their working conditions, fear losing out if they complain and argue that unions and politicians are either useless or corrupt. In brief, they feel stuck; they see no way out and must carry on. They do not even practise the minimal tactics of resistance that Michel de Certeau once called the 'art of doing'.³² One German worker

32 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Stephen Randall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press 2011).

summed up the essence of this *resigned mode* of rejection: 'nothing will change . . . you can't really control it . . . We live in a totally normalized capitalism.'³³

Through narratives, life stories and illuminating anecdotes, informants produce the beginnings of an analysis that maps the connections between their own position and socioeconomic transformations. As the material shows, rejection does not necessarily exclude reflexivity. However, when asked to relate such an analysis to the public and political sphere, interviewees describe an abyss of indifference and distrust that separates their lives from political power structures.

Rejection in the digital environment differs from this resignation. Digital spaces of various kinds appear to fulfil the need for a conflict-free environment in which emotional recognition is offered by like-minded members of one's chosen community. Shielded and encouraged by their community, members find it possible, as the articles analyse in detail, both to find comfort among peers and express absolute *affective rejection* of anything and anybody that questions the socio-cultural norms and existential security of the in-group. In all case studies, social media spaces enable their members to engage in blaming, ridiculing or attacking perceived elites, racialized Others and other objects of dislike. As demonstrated in the Croatian case, digital spaces with homogeneous membership (so-called echo chambers or filter bubbles) destroy the epistemic potential of their members; any 'dissent from popular opinion is tagged as malicious'. The authors describe this dynamic as a 'situational affective regime' that 'not only accommodates, but prescribes piling of ever more extreme articulations of grievances'.³⁴ The mode of rejection that dominates digital spaces is the antagonistic one, and it is articulated by aggressive affect, disregard for civility and facts, and spontaneous polarization between 'us' and 'them'. Boosted by affect, antagonism also entails a self-exaltation of 'we' as the pure breed. The Swedish study shows how members of social media groups refer to themselves as the 'humane ones' and as the only ones who are awake in a world of sleeping people.³⁵

By contrast, Opratko suggests in the Austrian case that digital environments that retain connections to socio-spatial environments accommodate greater diversity, such as the *Facebook* group 'I Live on the Right Side of the Danube'. As new political challenges arrive, as in the case of COVID-19, this diversity is essential and can serve to transform, confuse and perhaps even defuse political polarization.

The affective component of rejection is often connected to a certain temporal mode, or what we called an experienced era of change, which is

33 Harder, "Everything has changed", 231.

34 Stojanović-Čehajić and Zubčić, 'Unmoored', 269, 272.

35 Ortega Soto, 'Swedish cultures of rejection and decreasing trust in authority during the COVID pandemic', 249.

expressed by implicit or explicit narratives of decline and fall, and the projection of what Zygmunt Bauman in his last book called *retrotopias*.³⁶ We suggest that this way of making sense of the present serves as a substitute or proxy for an account of the conditions of scarcity and disempowerment that informants accurately, and reflexively, describe in interviews but which they are unable to redress.

It is precisely the convergence of awareness of socio-economic dispossession and political impotency that triggers the switch from a reflexivity—which could potentially enable critical observation of and protest against socio-economic transformations—to expressions of affect and nostalgia: the more or less comprehensive rejection of present conditions in the light of alluring images of ‘the good old days’. This process is brought out in the material of the five case studies. Judging from some informants and several social media posts, nostalgia enables agents to dodge the inscrutable complexity of the transformations and crises from which they are suffering. Instead, they can make sense of their condition by relying on easy pseudo-explanations, for instance, by projecting guilt on to selected villains whose actions have presumably undermined the social cohesion and community of yesteryear.

This finally brings us to rejection in the form of *moralistic judgement*, in which the mode of antagonism comes to the fore. Cultures of rejection apparently articulate renewed and intensified varieties of what—throughout modernity (and probably before)—has been a common way of accounting for social processes, namely, to inscribe them in moral antagonism: us and them, good and evil, heroes and villains.³⁷ However, the antagonistic expression that dominates our material is not of the political kind that potentially could be accommodated, as argued by Chantal Mouffe and others, by an agonistic democracy.³⁸ On the contrary, the antagonisms in our material are antagonisms between good and evil that reject the very field of politics as useless (or evil); it must therefore find resolution in some other way, that is, through surrender and submission or violence.

As we have argued above, rejection generates Otherness: Others who may be loathed and blamed, to whom guilt and responsibility may be ascribed and on whom punishment may be exacted. Under beleaguered circumstances in which the greater part of one’s mental energy is invested in efforts to uphold a sense of self-esteem and identity, it will appear necessary to distinguish oneself as being on the right side. Rejection fills this need through a ceaseless fabrication of figures of evil, in relation to which one’s own position appears as a force of good. As Harder points out in his

36 Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity 2017), 1–12.

37 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1981), 114–16.

38 Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London and New York: Verso 2013), 8–22.

study, rejection through affect and moralistic judgement thus amounts to catharsis: a social cleansing ritual. Hence, the high visibility of the moralistic mode and its concomitant antagonisms in the five case studies: binaries between deserving and undeserving citizens (in the German case); 'humane ones' and 'idiots' (in the Swedish example); honest people and corrupt politicians (in Serbia); protectors of the heartland and invading masses, patriots and migrants, and so forth (in the Croatian case).

When moralistic judgement is intertwined with nostalgia, what results is a narrative whose heroes will be those who struggle for the resurrection of the good community that presumably once existed. From this perspective, even the most apparently quirky and outlandish statements cited from our sources resonate as crucial signs of world-views that are articulated in cultures of rejection. Most importantly, this includes the desire for a supra-political executive authority, sometimes voiced as a preference for authoritarianism over liberal democracy, as well as the idea of a 'vanguard' that speaks and acts in the name of truth while the rest are condemned as sleeping fools.³⁹ Such instances of *intensive* rejection, as we call it above, make sense in a context in which people are so hard pressed by everyday scarcity and precarity and so discouraged by their political representatives that they discard their political outlook altogether—or even opt for a society *without politics*, as in the Serbian case—and instead adopt a moralistic view in which the social world is made intelligible in binary moral terms. In such a universe, characterized by the ubiquitous rejection of alleged Otherness linked to imaginary figures of evil, and an equally ubiquitous embrace of one's community as a force for good, acceptance of right-wing populism is potentially universal.

Of course, not every voice or statement analysed in the five articles would, in and of itself, support intensive and antagonistic rejection of this kind. We claim, however, that an analysis of the modes of resignation, conflict and antagonism present in the overall corpus discloses a specific cultural logic that translates political and economic matters into moralistic issues, a contest of good and evil. It is this logic that can explain why cultures of rejection are cultures that accept, or are captured by, authoritarianism, right-wing populism and radical nationalism.

In this context it is crucial to note that accounts given of reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic—especially in the Austrian, Serbian and Swedish cases—indicate that the pandemic and all the efforts to contain it established an ideal environment for cultures of rejection. When politics is partly replaced by moralistic boundary-making against perceived evils, substantial minorities apparently find it rational to entrench themselves

39 See (in this issue) Stojanović-Čehajić and Zubčić, 'Unmoored'; and Ortega Soto, 'Swedish cultures of rejection and decreasing trust in authority during the COVID pandemic'.

in acts of self-protection, be it against the virus itself or against state restrictions aimed at containing the virus. If it is true, as we argue, that cultures of rejection entail a societal situation in which many are accustomed to reading social challenges in moralistic terms, the detailed studies of manifestations of rejection in five European countries are of considerable interest. They explain not only why public reactions to the pandemic have been so dramatic, but also why they have been profoundly disruptive to the social order.

To sum up, what tentative characterization of cultures of rejection comes across in the five case studies of people's reaction to socioeconomic transformations and crises? Under contemporary conditions of economic precarity and social change, people are deprived of resources and avenues for improvement in their working lives and everyday life practices; they experience this as a loss of agency. Many are able to maintain agency to some degree in the private realm of the family; or they affectively reclaim agency in online digital environments; or they commemorate agency as a desired thing of the past; or they supplant agency with a moralistic imaginary in which their lack is 'explained' as a result of antagonistic agents. Finally, they aim at regaining agency, as they identify themselves as a force for good struggling against these same agents, who are often no more than imagined enemies continually produced by collective rejection.

The challenges of cultures of rejection and how to challenge them

The case studies demonstrate that cultures of rejection constitute conditions for a greater acceptability of authoritarian right-wing and radical nationalist ideology. More specifically, these conditions contribute to a widespread sense of supremacy, a deep mental structure of European whiteness vis-à-vis migrants, minorities and stigmatized Others; a sense of being abandoned or repressed by society, the political system, the elites and public media; a belief in conspiracy theories; a yearning for alternative leadership and authority; and a strong identification with an idea of the people, the ordinary citizen and common sense, that is often projected backwards in time and perceived as being endangered in the present, or already lost. What the articles establish, in short, is that cultures of rejection are of considerable significance for understanding the turn to right-wing populist parties and movements in Europe.

The identified modes and forms of rejection not only point to a rupture of the moral economy and a destabilization of welfare state institutions and procedures of liberal democracy, but also often entail a rejection of those very institutions. On the one hand, anti-political and anti-state resentments reveal the loss of a feeling of belonging as well as a crisis of authority. On the other, the rejective practices also include a longing for

(a new) authority. Cultures of rejection thus mirror ongoing processes of neoliberal dispossession, authoritarianization and de-politicization that culminate in the wish for agency and re-sovereignization, often by pitting an 'us' against a 'them'.

At this point we can reconnect to Karl Polanyi. According to our analysis, some features of cultures of rejection can be interpreted as 'counter-movements' against the dis-embedding of the economy; they may be seen as struggles for re-embedding the social and creating a sense of belonging and security. But, if this is true, Polanyi's concept also indicates that cultures of rejection can be counteracted by a politics that supports *alternative* counter-movements that are able to establish solidarity, community and belonging without breeding antagonism and authoritarianism. Because cultures of rejection grow in a context of economic marginalization, social alienation and political distrust, and are at least partially captured by political entrepreneurs of authoritarianism, right-wing populism and radical nationalism—all demonstrated in the five country studies—their undoing requires counter-movements that go beyond educational initiatives, cultural programmes and targeted policy reforms, despite the fact that such measures may ameliorate some of the most deplorable manifestations of cultures of rejection. Efforts to challenge and transform cultures of rejection must entail credible ways of re-embedding the economy in society through dispositions, agreements and regulations that lead to a fairer and more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. Such measures should establish the preconditions for avenues of empowerment and improved welfare, whereby people can regain agency as citizens and establish relations to society and politics that are not primarily coloured by negative affect, nostalgia and moralistic antagonism. However, such measures must also recognize that the primary abject figures in cultures of rejection—the migrants and racialized Others who endure the bulk of the effects of neoliberal transformation—need to be included in a new project of solidarity and community, and to reap the benefits gained from measures of empowerment and improved welfare.

This is not the place to propose political blueprints. We conclude by highlighting three general considerations that emerge from our analysis and that should inform reforms that counteract cultures of rejection. First, we have seen that cultures of rejection are not irrational reactions but symptoms of societal disintegration, increasing inequalities and fragmentation that call for careful scrutiny. Any step towards a society in which democracy is neither plagued by racism nor suppressed by authoritarianism requires an effort to understand the meaning-making of rejections, that is, the formation of subjectivities shaped by the fears and desires that emerge in contexts of socio-cultural transformations. Taking these meanings seriously can show ways to delegitimize the neoliberal affective phantasma of competition, inequality, authoritarianism and a Manichaeian division between good and bad, which Engin Isin labelled

‘neurotic subjectivation’.⁴⁰ Such a project, beyond reducing inequalities, needs to develop a new notion of democracy and solidarity that goes beyond the idea of the electoral majority, and that connects people in their everyday practices at work, during their leisure time, in their neighbourhoods, households and partnerships, that is, democracy as a way of living. Such notions of and programmes for democratic revitalization exist in abundance, although they have so far had very limited impact on national and international political institutions. Bruno Latour’s conception of ‘Dingpolitik’ (in contradistinction to ‘Realpolitik’) may serve as an example: it renounces the idea that the will of the people is a priori represented by parliamentary institutions and suggests that contemporary democracy requires various kinds of popular assemblies.⁴¹ Similar arguments have been made by Judith Butler, Wendy Brown and Jason Frank, who perceive the public sphere as bodies that jointly act together.⁴²

Second, as several authors in this issue have remarked, the COVID-19 pandemic disclosed the malleability of people’s forms and objects of rejection. However, in parallel with our analysis of cultures of rejection, we can identify that period as a political interregnum in which the capitalist economy was de facto socially and politically re-embedded. Suddenly and necessarily, the state made investments (albeit limited) in welfare, healthcare and social insurance systems, while at the same time adjusting fiscal frameworks and regulating commercial activities to a degree previously unthinkable. The biopolitical constraints imposed by the pandemic exposed a situation in which the political agency of both the state and the people—spanning the spectrum from rejection to solidarity—made seemingly solid economic dogmas of neoliberalism and austerity melt into air. This shows that democratic state institutions *can* address some of the root causes of right-wing extremism and racism. We must recall here, however, that the concrete social and historical manifestations of cultures of rejection in the five countries diverge. This warns against premature generalizations; there is no universal solution to the challenges posed by cultures of rejection. Each problem must be addressed in its national and historical context.

This brings us to our third consideration, which concerns the ways in which the challenges posed by and to cultures of rejection may be transformed by that more recent and even greater historical rupture we mentioned at the beginning. As we conclude this article in March 2022, it is evident that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is creating a partly new landscape.


40 Engin F. Isin, ‘The neurotic citizen’, *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2004, 217–35.


41 Bruno Latour, ‘From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or how to make things public’, in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2005), 14–41.

42 Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press 2015); Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*; Jason Frank, *The Democratic Sublime: On Aesthetics and Popular Assembly* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2021).

As war is the ultimate mode of rejection, the armed conflict in Ukraine is bringing with it geopolitical changes, homogenizing, along one dominant axis, all the various forms and objects of rejection that we have discussed in this issue. Patriotic mobilizations on both national and European levels will boost public identification with the homeland and its military, with 'the West' and perhaps the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) itself thus erecting new ideologies of unity and exclusion. At the same time, with refugees in numbers that dwarf those of the summer of 2015, public affect and debate related to migration will probably manifest new kinds of solidarity and refugee Keynesianism,⁴³ strong enough to overshadow the nostalgic fictions of racial and national homogeneity on which many right-wing narratives are based, although possibly bringing with it new modes of racialized rejection and exclusion.


Neither of these developments will in themselves be sufficient to transform European cultures of rejection in essential ways, but they will drastically modify its articulations and objects of rejection. However, the conflict can also potentially affect the food and fuel security of hundreds of millions of people. Transformations at this level could rapidly escalate the present crisis into systemic changes—an emergent cold-war economy framed by a nuclear arms race, uncontained climate crises and a global scramble for critical raw materials—that take us into an altogether new conjuncture. In this scenario, our concept and analysis of cultures of rejection retain their value but, then, as explanations of some of the forces that brought us to that new level of danger and discord.


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43 Peo Hansen, *A Modern Migration Theory: An Alternative Economic Approach to Failed EU Policy* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing 2021).

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