Democracy and Autocracy

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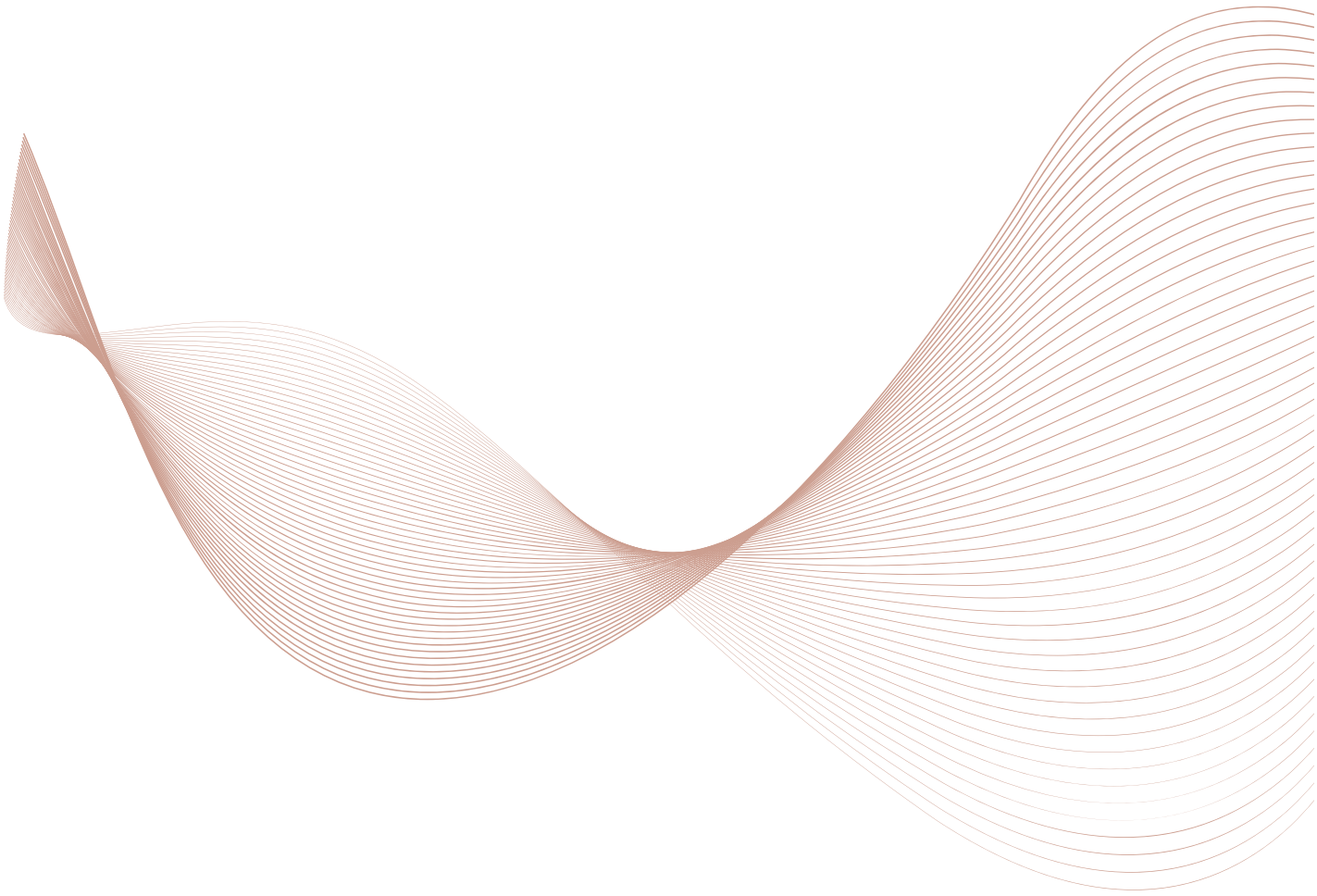
“Polarization and the Past”



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Editor's Introduction

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The past enters into present debates and sociopolitical divides characterizing today's polarized democracies. This contested past is often used strategically by polarizing leaders to further divide electorates and enhance their own power. But it also reflects conflicting experiences of citizen inclusion or exclusion, competing identities, and even the construction of collective narratives of trauma. The articles in this newsletter exemplify new research illuminating many of these issues in a variety of countries.

My own work on drivers of pernicious political polarization and ways to overcome it starts with one particular fault line of polarization – debates over the question of "who belongs", who is a full member of the political community? Today, divisions in this country often stem from formative rifts -- long unresolved historical debates dating to the country's founding, about who is a rightful citizen, the national identity, or the national origin story.[1] These formative rifts over who belongs are exacerbated by new pressures from changing values and newcomers bringing different languages, religions, and cultures.

The challenge is a continuous one. As democracies evolve, economies develop, values change, and demographics morph, demands to redefine the criteria and to expand or contract the political community membership and rights enjoyed by those members will continually surface. Some demands originate in the country's founding and come from below. For example, historically marginalized groups who did not enjoy equal status at the country's founding will later seek full inclusion in the political community, such as the descendants of African slaves brought to the Americas. Demands also come from below from cultural groups who existed prior to the formation of the modern nation-state, and who seek recognition and different forms of cultural and juridical autonomy within the larger state, such as French-speaking Quebecois in Canada, Catalans in Spain, or indigenous groups in Bolivia and Ecuador.

Demands for inclusion in the political community also come from more recent change. As societal values change, some groups may demand equal rights such as women's right to work, own property and control their own reproductive decisions, or LGBTQ rights to marry, adopt children, or adopt their own gender

1 Somer, Murat, and Jennifer McCoy. 2019 "Transformations through Polarizations and Global Threats to Democracy." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 68 (1), 8–22.

identity. Other demands for inclusion come from outside the political community – from the large-scale contemporary forces in our age of globalization and mass migrations driven by economic aspirations, war and climate change.

These waves of demands to expand the political community, in turn, often create backlashes from those who prefer the status quo and strive to maintain the traditional culture as they see it, which includes the existing social hierarchy where they maintain a dominant status, or at least are not at the bottom of the ladder. Thus, these may produce demands to contract the boundaries of the political community.

Historically, states have tried to forge a shared national identity that can bring a country together and create a sense of connection, belonging, and common purpose. Commonly this was an authoritarian top-down effort and generated winners as well as losers. In the rare case of ethnically homogenous populations, such as Korea or Japan, an ethno-racial narrative of nationalism could be at once substantively exclusive and politically inclusive, laying the basis for a strong sense of attachment and civic duty to the democratic state, as Aram Hur documents in her book reviewed in this newsletter, *Narratives of Civic Duty*.

But more commonly, modern nation-states have attempted to create national identities based on one dominant culture within multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, or multi-religious states. These national identities never equally represented all inhabitants of a national territory, and the defenders of these national identities were often outright assimilationist, oppressive, and violent against contesters – from Native Americans in the US to Kurds in Turkey, Sami in Sweden and Norway, and Rohingya in Myanmar. Even seemingly innocuous policies of assimilation, such as creating an official language, resulted in some instances in prohibitions on the use of local or tribal languages and removal of children from families.[2]

The cases of Taiwan in the Hur book, and of Indonesia in Charlotte Setijadi's *Memories of Unbelonging*, exemplify such multi-ethnic challenges. In these cases, nationalist narratives excluding some groups created more splintered visions of the nation-state, and even underground identities resisting assimilation.

As these cases starkly highlight, the path toward an inclusive national identity varies based on the specific case context. But when a national identity can be created democratically that represents a definition of who belongs, shared values and common purpose, it can provide the social cohesion necessary for democracies to flourish and overcome other divides that could turn into pernicious polarization. Those shared values and identity, in other words, can provide the ties and bridges to cut across other deep divides or cleavages.

Yet, the task faces formidable challenges, as the other research projects in this newsletter highlight. Polarizing leaders use the past strategically to further their own ambitions. President Lopez Obrador in Mexico, documented by Tania Islas Weinstein and Agnes Mondragón Celis, is a case in point. They tell an important untold story about the intertwining of cultural heritage, militarization of public administration, and populist polarization. Within his larger expansion of the role of the military in public affairs, AMLO has shifted responsibility for the recovery and protection of cultural heritage and artifacts from scientists and cultural experts to the military. This shift then becomes part of AMLO's intentional populist narrative of nefarious elites (which now includes scientists and cultural experts) versus the authentic people (which now includes the military) to justify his own power grabs.

Similarly, Tahmina Rahman's analysis of how Modi's BJP made inroads into one of the most diverse states in India, with secessionist historical claims – Assam - shows the power of polarizing narratives. It is a fascinating story of how a polarizing discourse focused on Hinduism/non-Hinduism was strategically transported and adapted to a syncretic state, replacing its historic indigenous/outsider divide with the BJP's Hindutva-divisive narrative.

This challenge of creating an inclusive national identity across diverse groups must also take into account the human need for belonging and community at subnational levels or in subgroups with their own particular cultural practices. The hyphenated national identities in the United States historically took into account these complementary identities, representing both cultural origins and a common American identity. The project reported here by Adam Hjorthén and Adam Kaul on one of those groups – Swedish-Americans in Minnesota - reflects the intrusion of the hyper-partisan polarization in today's United States on the shared bond and perception of ancestral heritage of this group. That is, even common Swedish heritage may fail to overcome the partisan identity divide, and its associated urban-rural divide. The question is whether such a common heritage can still represent a point of superordinate identity sufficient to overcome this polarization.

My current book project with Murat Somer argues that to overcome these divides, dominant national identity frames need to be remade to recognize plural and complementary identities in a non-hierarchical manner. Rather than the binary choices that are

2 The treatment by Canada and the United States of Native-American children is an example. They were removed from their families and communities and placed in boarding schools where they were punished for speaking their native language, and required to learn English, dress in Western clothing, and be educated in Western ways, in an attempt to assimilate them to the dominant culture.

often presented to citizens, asking them to choose and prioritize - are you Catalan or are you Spanish, are you Kurdish or a Turk, are you a Christian patriot or not – we argue that it is possible to maintain a shared sense of national belonging and loyalty while *also* respecting complementary identities. Likewise, we reject a binary frame of policy options between a multicultural approach focused only on group identities and a universal liberalist approach focused only on individuals. We see instead a continuum of policy choices. In some cases, group-focused policies to redress past injustices may be necessary, while in other cases, more universal programs to provide equal opportunity for life advancement may be desirable.

Moving away from binary frames and hierarchical rights and identities can help restore cross-cutting ties and reduce incentives for anti-democratic behaviors. It can shift perspectives from win-lose to win-win. And it can provide the unifying force of a shared national story and commitment to a common purpose based on political equality, while also recognizing the human need for belonging and community at subnational levels or in subgroups with their own particular social identities, traditions, and cultural practices. Our solutions seek to enhance four principles we identify as key to overcoming polarization: restoring cross-cutting ties, moving from win-lose to win-win perspectives, creating institutional and informational incentives to discourage perniciously polarizing rhetoric and behavior, and using politics effectively to build the new majority coalitions needed to arrive at such democratic remaking.

Polarization and the Past: A Research Agenda

Elisabeth Niklasson, *University of Aberdeeen*

In times of political polarization, when the lines between 'us' and 'them' sharpen, historic monuments, traditions, and cultural symbols from the past often emerge as central aspects in attempts to reinforce group identity, to persuade, and to protest. We have seen it in the riots over statues linked to slavery and colonisation (Samuels 2019). We have seen it in the politico-religious razing of architecture in India and Bangladesh (Ahmed 2014; Rahman this issue), and in the transformations of heritage sites such as Hagia Sophia in Turkey and the Córdoba Mosque-Cathedral in Spain from multi to mono-religious sites (Astor et. al 2019; Cho 2023). We have also seen it in campaigns by populist political parties that sow division by appointing themselves guardians of the 'real' heritage of the 'real people' – as opposed to elites, immigrants, and political opponents (Niklasson 2023; Islas Weinstein & Mondragón Celis this issue). Such uses challenge the perception of heritage as a common good, a reservoir of resources that help societies come together and learn from the past. It shows that heritage can also contribute to social erosion.

The existence of a relationship between culture and polarization has been noted across disciplinary boundaries. Researchers in the social sciences have identified a growing tendency towards cultural values and affective claims of identity in processes of political polarization (Mudde 2007; Mason 2018; McCoy et al. 2019). Heritage plays a role in such emotional positioning (Hjorthén and Kaul this issue), but how and with what effects is poorly understood. In the interdisciplinary field of heritage studies, the political potential of heritage to promote conflict as well as communal wellbeing is long since recognized (Smith et al. 2018). Numerous studies have explored the political uses of monuments, traditions, and historic time periods (MacDonald 2009; Harrison 2010; Logan & Reeves 2009; Meskell 2020; Samuels & Rico 2015; Silverman 2011; Stig Sørensen & Viejo Rose 2015). Yet few have looked at the role of heritage in current processes of polarization. There is, consequently, both a conceptual and empirical gap when it comes to identifying the precise nature of this relationship.

The interdisciplinary research agenda *Polarization and the Past* (PoP) aims to address this gap. It engages voices from different academic spheres, such as

comparative literature, law, history, archaeology, and the social and political sciences, to better understand when such dynamics may make or break societies, and what futures they help envision. Initiated in 2021, the agenda seeks to understand how, when, and to what effects heritage is activated in polarized debates, and to identify the circumstances under which this results in productive versus pernicious polarization. It addresses different types of polarization, from intense conflict to simmering controversy, and diverse political, cultural, and religious contexts, including Turkey, Mexico, Spain, Sweden, Bangladesh, and the US. It also traverses the political spectrum by addressing legacies of fascism, religious fundamentalism, authoritarianism, leftist populism, and constitutional nationalism.

This brief essay outlines some of the components of this research agenda, and introduces two analytical lenses through which heritage can be examined in relation to political polarization.

The Concepts: Heritage and Polarization

The words heritage and polarization are both buzzwords that figure in news media and public debate on an everyday basis. There, heritage is often used as a shorthand for anything ancient or traditional, while polarization is used as a dramaturgic device in reports about political divides and binary social conflicts. *Polarization and the Past* departs from the definitions of 'heritage' and 'polarization' as analytical concepts developed in separate research spheres.

Traditionally, 'polarization' has been used by political scientists to study changes in liberal democracies, with the aim to understand the causes, development, mechanics, and impacts of partisan divides, particularly between voters in the US (e.g. Talmon 1991). However, studies have shown that polarization occurs in diverse cultural and political contexts around the world (LeBas 2006; Arugay & Slater 2019; Rahman 2019). Primarily, polarization research has focused on 'pernicious polarization' in liberal democracies, caused for instance by situations of gridlock between opposing sides, followed by democratic erosion (McCoy et al. 2018). But polarization is not always harmful. Addressing past wrongs or social injustice may require polarizing strategies that are divisive, and polarization can boost democratic participation as it rallies non-voters, creating the potential for democratic reform (LeBas 2018, McCoy et al. 2018).

Social and political scientists therefore understand 'polarization' as something qualitatively different from occasional riots and internal political tensions. It is a deeper and more complex development whereby society is thoroughly divided into separate camps (McCoy & Somer 2019). Of particular interest to PoP's research agenda are studies on 'affective polarization' (Iyengar et al. 2019): how people merge their political leanings and stance on contested issues with their social, ethnic and religious identities (Mason 2018; Kalmoe & Mason 2022). Another key point is the tendency of political actors to exploit existing historical rifts – between left and right, poor and rich, and native and foreign – as part of polarizing strategies to divide the electorate (McCoy et al. 2018).

As a research focus and analytical concept, heritage has traditionally been the domain of Heritage Studies, with roots in anthropology, archaeology, and art history. Starting in the UK and US in the 1980s (Hewison 1987; Lowenthal 1985), the field has consolidated and extended to other parts of the world (Meskell 2015), especially after the launch of 'critical heritage studies' by Laurajane Smith (2012). Heritage Studies formulates an explicit critique against essentialist and objectivist tendencies in the historical disciplines by showing that the past is not only used, but creatively cherry-picked to serve political and social strategies, and for purposes of commercial exploitation (Harrison 2013).

Following this, the PoP research agenda defines heritage as the articulation, appropriation, and use of the past in the present, with ambitions towards the future (Smith 2006). 'The past' can take various forms –material objects, aesthetic forms, or traditions – but it needs to be singled out as characteristic of a particularly important aspect of the past that is worth preserving for the next generations. In doing so it tends to avoid complicated legacies and instead clarifies the selected bits to 'infuse them with present purposes' (Lowenthal 1998: xv). Heritage, thus, is never neutral. It tends to replicate dominant narratives that 'privilege the experiences and achievements of some groups over others' (Astor et. al 2019: 339). Because of this, much of the official heritage we see today was borne in, or chosen because it represents those historic rifts identified by polarization scholars (McCoy & Somer 2019). Importantly, and in more palpable ways than processes of memory, heritage can also be claimed as cultural property. This ties it to a sense of ownership, belonging and the articulation of identity. Finally, key to heritage is the idea that it is threatened by decay and oblivion, if authorities and experts do not intervene to preserve it. If lost, the perception is that we also lose ourselves, as individuals, communities and nations.

Heritage in Processes of Polarization

Two analytical lenses applied in the PoP research agenda, which allow for interdisciplinary exploration of political polarization and heritage, are *identity* and *nostalgia*.

Identity

Self-definition, as noted by Jonathan Friedman (1994: 117), 'does not occur in a vacuum, but in a world already defined'. To situate the self and the 'other' in this known world, a link to the past is usually forged to create an 'appropriated representation of a life leading up to the present' (Friedman 1994: 17). Heritage – as an argument, a set of symbols, or tangible resources – is often at the heart of such appropriated representations, making it crucial to identity formation at the individual, group, and state level.

In the US, the proclamation 'it's my heritage' can have an emotional and almost self-explanatory power. Here, the use of ethno-cultural and religious heritage to denote a person's 'true' origins – alongside a civic and futuristic ideal – have long influenced people's sense of belonging to specific groups and created expectations about their political affiliation (Hjorthén & Kaul this issue).

Symbols, arranged into systems of meaning, have similar affective potential and can wordlessly signal political imaginaries (Browne & Diehl 2019). The Confederate flag, for instance, is firmly appropriated as a representation of a southern, white, and politically conservative identity (Sinclair-Chapman 2018). It gains a lot of power through 'heritagization', visible in attempts to disassociate its meaning from contemporary politics through false dichotomies such as 'Heritage not hate!' (Sinclair-Chapman 2018; González-Ruibal 2023). The state of being under threat, so crucial to heritage, is present in the recurrent debates about banning the Confederate flag from public places due to its links to white supremacy and treason (Samuels 2019). The US Constitution has also been mobilized as a heritage under threat (Goldstein 2022). Adam Hjorthén, a historian in the PoP programme, is interested in how this significant heritage object and symbol of American national identity has been mobilized in polarizing debates on civil rights and liberties. This is especially in the case of public heritage exhibitions about the 'Freedom Train' (1948–49), which have been infused with issues of racial segregation (see also Christiansen 2013). Understanding when, how, why, and with what consequences such symbols are mobilized as heritage in processes of affective polarization requires the kind of interdisciplinary collaboration promoted through PoP.

Tangible heritage sites can be equally potent for political self-positioning. Singled out as historically important by authorities and often protected by law or privately owned, they can crystallize enduring legacies of inequality and injustice (Niklasson 2023). This makes them excellent stages for political rallies and protests, whether the aim is to honor or topple these legacies. This was clearly demonstrated by the events in Charlottesville (2017), surrounding the fate of a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee which had ripple effects in national politics (Perry 2018). Between activists trying to remove the statue in the name of justice, and the violence incited by the alt-right in the name of heritage protection, politicians and publics were prompted to pick sides, feeding processes of pernicious polarization (Sinclair-Chapman 2018: 319). However, it also brought issues of racism to the forefront of the public consciousness, and provoked productive deliberation on the removal and reinterpretation of monuments celebrating racist figures and ideas for new monuments dedicated to civil rights champions (Samuels 2019).

The use of tangible heritage in polarizing debates can be found well beyond the US. In Spain, for instance, controversies around social and political identities have amassed around the symbols and material traces of the Franco regime. This has reactivated the historic rift of the Spanish Civil War. The 'Valley of the Fallen', finished in 1959, is among the most contentious sites (Hepworth 2014; Ferrándiz 2023). Built by Franco to commemorate those who died in the war, the colossal mausoleum holds the remains of around 34,000 people (mainly Nationalists). As many monuments built by the victor, it was a testament to the outcome of the war and to the dictator himself, who was later buried in the central basilica. This made it a sacred place for those honouring the fallen on the Nationalist side versus a symbol of multigenerational trauma for those seeking justice for the killed, persecuted, and imprisoned Republicans. After the 'pact of forgetting' was broken and the first mass graves were excavated at the turn of the century (González-Ruibal 2022), and particularly since 2007 when the Law of Historical Memory was introduced, a process began to change street names and remove statues associated with regime 'heroes' (Ferrándiz 2019). While the heritagization of the Valley of the Fallen has been ongoing since the 1960s (Fuentes Vega 2017) – depoliticised as an architectural wonder to promote tourism – recent decades have seen attempts to recast it as a place of reconciliation. Political demonstrations are now forbidden at the site,

and recently Franco's remains were moved to a family grave (Ferrándiz 2023). Yet, neo-Fascists still salute Franco when visiting, and the Valley will likely remain a stage for protest (González-Ruibal 2023). Rather than depolarizing public discourse, the heritagization of the valley seems to have contributed to a pernicious climate that serves populist radical right parties like Vox (Wildeboer Schut & Dujisin 2023; Rodríguez-Temiño and Almansa-Sánchez 2021). Starting from this context, Avi Astor, a sociologist in the PoP cohort, seeks to look beyond the national level to understand how local communities and families in Spain identify with and negotiate such polarizing heritage, and how they may build shared visions of the future. The PoP research agenda considers such affective and intimate social settings key to understanding how political polarization influences self-definition.

Nostalgia

Svetlana Boym (2001: xiii) captured the fundamental nature of nostalgia when she argued that nostalgia is 'a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy'. To yearn for what no longer exists or never existed, she suggests, requires the object of nostalgia to remain elusive and out of reach: 'Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship' (Boym 2001: xiii). Imporantly, she distinguishes between 'restorative' and 'reflective nostalgia' (Boym 2001: 49). Restorative nostalgia is often dour. It focuses on origins and seeks to reconstruct 'emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time'. Reflective nostalgia allows for irony. It embraces 'shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space' (Boym 2001: 49). While both types are present in processes of heritage and polarization, restorative nostalgia resonates clearly with traditional heritage in its selective nature and focus on spatializing time. It also resonates with the strategies of populist leaders, who often rely on ancient symbols and myths of national heroes and golden ages to anchor their notions of 'us' versus 'them'.

Restorative nostalgia is perhaps most visible among the populist radical right, where it figures into rhetoric as well as policy (de Cesari and Kaya 2019; Kaya 2019; Niklasson 2023). The idea of a mythical homeland is central to the radical nationalism of Jobbik, for instance, seeking to reunite all 'true' ethnic Hungarians in a pre-WWI 'Greater Hungary' (Thorleifsson 2023). Similarly, the League in Italy long sought to invent for itself a 'pure' Celtic origin in the mythical homeland of Padania (Albertazzi 2006). Front National has opted for the Middle Ages as a point of origin, by reinventing figures like Jeanne D'Arc' (Kaya 2021) and by funding medieval sites and festivals (Almeida 2019). The Freedom Party of Austria sees themselves as taking up the torch after Prince Eugen of Savoy (1663-1736), and commemorating the Christian victory over the Ottomans in the Battle of Vienna (Wodak & Forchtner 2014; Farrell-Banks 2022). In each case, the parties' politics of nostalgia has resulted in actions that shape public discourse through narratives, symbols, funding, or manifestations at heritage sites.

A lot of the time, however, as Boym underlines, vagueness is of the very essence. Many radical-right parties do not stick to a single time period or pivotal event, but strategically mix rituals and emblems from different eras. The time when things were so 'great' and what ancestors were the most 'real' or 'pure' often remains implicit. This has also been called the 'mystification of time' (Taş 2022), referring to how plots of past, present, and future are tailored to manipulate collective memory and make divisive political imaginaries appear natural. When the populist radical right in Sweden tries to evoke nostalgia for a lost homeland, it is through a mix of 19th century cottages, blonde children with flowers in their hair, seasonal crayfish parties, as well as Viking Age sites. This superficial construction of continuity makes their nostalgia seem banal (Billig 1995), but in reality it can act as a smoke screen for racism and ethno-nationalism. When disconnected from actual anti-immigration policies, culture and heritage can become a proxy for race targeting Muslims and non-white immigrants (Niklasson & Hølleland 2023).

Gabriella Elgenius, a sociologist in the PoP cohort, explores this dynamic at the governmental level by studying the ethno-nationalist underpinnings of the politics of nostalgia among radical right parties in Scandinavia (Elgenius and Rydgren 2019). Their focus is set on how polarizing discourses of immigration are framed in relation to nostalgic ideas of belonging and the conditions under which this becomes appealing to the electorate. Ethnologist Ida Hughes Tidlund, another PoP researcher, approaches the issue from below. Starting from regions characterized by political polarization and demographic changes due to migration and deindustrialization, she is interested in how local history museums in Sweden encounter and negotiate attempts by politicians to influence their work. Both offer important avenues for discovering how polarizing populist strategies shape ideas of the national past and present, and with what effects.

In Turkey, where social and political polarization is widespread (Somer 2019), we also find the politics of

nostalgia at work. President Erdoğan and his ruling party have long tried to regionalize and nationalize the Ottoman past to fit the narrative of an eternal Turkish nation (Erdem 2017). At the root of this Ottomanism is a restorative nostalgia that combines different components from history (Yavuz 2020). Again, there is nothing banal about its polarizing effects, especially on the secular and Islamic divides in Turkish identity. Burçak Bingöl, a visual artist from Istanbul who has been part of the PoP initiative, is interested in exploring the successive attempts by political regimes to redefine the nation by systematically erasing the traces of the other. By systematically erasing traces of the other, from the Ottoman empire, to the Kemalist nation-building project, to the current neo-Ottoman turn. Through visual arts and material shapes, she wants to learn how new truths about the nation's past are created. By observing the current neo-Ottomanization of the urban landscape, and stacking layers of history in her work, she believes that art can be a tool for unlocking the positions of pernicious polarization and finding different ways to think about heritage.

Ultimately, by studying the processes of heritage and polarization from different vantage points and disciplines, the PoP research agenda can promote a better understanding of the politics of nostalgia, and, it is hoped, work to demystify the timelines forged by radical populist parties in order to promote depolarization.

Final Reflections

The complex dynamics of heritage and polarization calls for a major research undertaking; one that opens the door between hitherto separate fields of scholarship. Identity and nostalgia have been suggested as fruitful starting points for such research. They capture the political power of representations of time, and how heritage becomes particularly potent where identities are tied to historic rifts in nation states, such as civil war, ethnic and religious conflict, or colonial oppression. This is not surprising considering that heritage is often singled out as important due to its role in such rifts, or is created in remembrance of them. Yet few in-depth studies have examined this dynamic. Identity and nostalgia are just two out of a multitude of starting points proposed by *Polarization and the Past*. The agenda encourages new, detailed, and context-specific exploration of the relations between heritage and polarization that move beyond the dominant anglophone research spheres and acquires knowledge from case studies across the world. Only then can we hope to identify general trends and build new theories of benefit to future research and society at large.

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Refracting Roots: White Ethnic Heritage and Political Identification in the Contemporary United States

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Political identification has been shown to influence Americans' perception of social reality and notions of American identity (Marietta & Barker 2019; Dawkins & Hanson 2022), but less is known about how partisan identity affects perceptions of personal pasts. This includes one of the most profound dimensions of American identity: individual ancestry and ethno-racial heritage. In this project, we explore how white ethnic identity is being reshaped through political polarization in the contemporary United States. More specifically, we look at the ways in which political identity influences Americans' ideas about their ethnic heritage, and vice-versa, through a case study of Swedish Americans in Minnesota.

By focusing on Swedish heritage in Minnesota today, the project centers on the maintenance and negotiation of hyphenated American identity, which is a defining feature of the narrative about the U.S. as a "nation of immigrants." Minnesota has a long and substantial history of Swedish immigration, dating back to the European mass migration of the nineteenth century (Runblom & Norman 1976; Anderson & Blanck 2001), and today it is still the state with the largest number and proportion of individuals self-reporting a Swedish-American ancestry. As of 2020, there were 425,000 who reported Swedish ethnicity, or 9% of the total state population (Minnesota State Demographic Center 2020). This population maps onto a political landscape defined by a strong urban-rural divide.

The Minnesota counties that most strongly identify with a Swedish heritage are divided between urban counties that vote heavily Democratic, such as Hennepin County in Minneapolis, and rural counties that vote heavily Republican, such as Chicago County northeast of the Twin Cities (Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State 2022). In the 2020 presidential election, Joe Biden won with 43.21% margin in Hennepin County, while Donald Trump won with 29.25% margin in Chicago County (Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State 2020), which may indicate a "geographic partisan sorting" that during the past decade has increased in Minnesota (Kaplan et al. 2022).

The politics of race have in recent years been amplified in this particular area after the 2020 murder of George Floyd. The murder happened just 1.5 miles from the museum and cultural center, the American Swedish Institute, which arguably forms the epicenter of Swedish-Americanness in the state. In this context, it is all the more interesting to focus on Swedish ethnic heritage since it is often considered a "hyper-white" version of heritage in the American racial hierarchy (Jackson 2019; Sverdljuk et al. 2021). It is an example of negotiation of the hegemonic myth of what the historian Matthew Frye Jacobson has called "Ellis Island whiteness" (2006) during a time of heightened awareness around the politics of race.

We approach this topic in relation to scholarship on the impact of "affective polarization" in the United States (Iyengar et al. 2019), and through the analytical concept of *refraction*. Our hypothesis is that Americans' understandings of their personal pasts are thoroughly negotiated and processed through the intense destabilization of the social and political landscape. Similar to how a ray of light is refracted through a pane of glass, we wonder how and with what consequences an individual's cultural, socio-economic, and political ideas focus, redirect, or deflect perceptions of ethnic heritage.

Americans today have become increasingly entrenched in political camps, where political opponents are viewed with resentment and distrust (Kalmoe & Mason 2022). This is in part driven by increased social sorting and partisan polarization, affected more strongly by emotive factors rather than policy attitudes, which Liliana Mason (2018) has described as "the increasing alignment between our partisan, ideological, racial, and religious social identities." This development is a socially and democratically pernicious form of polarization (Somer & McCoy 2018), fomented by reduced social mobility, fraught race relations, the Covid-19 pandemic, urban-rural divides, and increasing levels of "political endogamy" as Americans choose partners to date and marry (Opzoomer 2020). It is further entrenched through insular U.S. media systems, the algorithmic functions of social media, weak trust in institutions, as well as through perceptions among mainly white, non-college educated, Americans that racial minorities have been "cutting in line" while scaling the socio-economic ladder (Bennett & Livingston 2021; Russell Hochschild 2018). In this project, we seek to engage this overwhelmingly quantitative scholarship in a qualitative study of the intersections of partisan identity and ethnic identity, adding to the emerging scholarship on heritage and

polarization (Niklasson 2023) by exploring a specific midwestern white ethnic community.

In June of 2023, we spent two weeks conducting in-person, semi-structured interviews in Minnesota. We looked for Swedish Americans with an interest in politics who were over 18 years of age, using two general strategies for recruitment. First, we recruited participants through our contacts at Swedish-American organizations in the Twin Cities area. In a pilot study a few years ago, however, this resulted exclusively in left-leaning and/or Democrat participants. To complement this approach, our second strategy was to also contact local Republican committees in counties with a high proportion of Swedish-Americans, asking for members of Swedish ancestry.

In total, we interviewed 29 people: 15 women and 14 men. The participants came from a mix of urban, suburban, exurban, and rural counties, the youngest being in their late-20s and the oldest in their early-90s. Nine of the interviewees identified as Republican or Republican-leaning, seventeen as Democrat or Democratic-leaning, and three did not explicitly state party affiliation or political leaning. The numbers thus skews heavily to the left, which is a result of its own: even after directly approaching GOP party offices, we still had a much harder time getting Republicans to talk to us. Even though our goal was not to produce a representative sample, but to gather voices from across the political spectrum through in-depth interviews, this lopsidedness may indicate either less interest or less willingness on the political right to engage in an academic study of heritage and/or political polarization.

Our interviews focused on three general areas: questions about Swedish heritage and ancestry; questions about political opinions and thoughts on contemporary U.S. politics; and questions about individual perceptions of how heritage and politics intertwine. We divided this last cluster of questions into four areas: 1) opinions about immigration, historically and today, including the recent refugee immigration to Sweden and the U.S.; 2) Swedish identity in today's American ethno-racial landscape; 3) perceptions of the welfare state and "socialism" in Sweden and Minnesota; and 4) perceptions of the Covid-19 pandemic, and in particular Sweden's response to the pandemic—a response which, due to Sweden's lack of government mandate and reliance on state recommendations, were held as a "deterrent example" of a laissez-faire strategy by Democrats and lauded as a "model nation" protecting individual freedom by Republicans (Hagström et al. 2022). We are still processing and analyzing the interviews, but would like to highlight two tentative clusters of results.

The first concerns the socio-political function of ethnic heritage. We found in our interviews that heritage can function as a safe harbor to which individuals with diverging partisan identities can take refuge in their social relations. An example is Greg, a college-educated man in his 30s living in the Twin Cities. Describing the role of ethnic heritage in his family, he said:

> [T]hat's like a safer space… […] especially, like, my kid brother is nine years younger, you know. So it's, like, well, he doesn't read anything that doesn't come from Alex Jones or isn't, you know, supported by Joe Rogan… But what can we talk about? Well, we can talk about, "I'm going to Sweden again. I'm going to see the Swedish relatives" […] it's a safe hobby for me to both explore and have some escapism and still connect to my family. So for me it's a way of maintaining a neutral connection.

Safe harbors of ethnicity have their limits, however, and can be affected by polarized politics. An interviewee in his early-80s, Robert, reported rising tensions among board members who work for a local heritage site. He had assumed that because the operation of the heritage site in his mind was apolitical, that it was a safe space free from politics. But when one board member attended a meeting wearing a MAGA hat, he felt a palpable unease and tension in the room. For another interlocutor, Charles, a man in his early 90s living in a rural Minnesota town, a sense of unease stemmed from a deep fear of African Americans, that in his own account made him avoid taking the freeway through the Twin Cities when visiting his children. His reasoning was "because the major highways go right through downtown Minneapolis, you know. And how do you know somebody isn't going to pull a gun and shoot?" Several of our Republican interviewees expressed similar fear of Minneapolis, grounded in racialized stories about the aftermath of the riots of the summer of 2020, increased crime levels, and the city's subsequent political emphasis on racial justice. As a consequence, some interviewees nowadays refrain from going to the American Swedish Institute because of a perception that the Phillips neighborhood is "dangerous." It is noteworthy that the neighborhood is about 48% Black (of which a substantial proportion are Somali immigrants, thus layering multiple forms of discrimination from anti-Black racism, Islamophobia, and sentiments of anti-immigration), 20% Hispanic or Latino, and merely 19% White (Minnesota Compass 2023).

Our second tentative result concerns how polarized racial politics in Minnesota appears to align with a renegotiation of white ethnic heritage. Here, we could identify two distinct positions connected to partisan identity. For self-identified Republicans, several reported that it had become more difficult to identify as Swedish after the murder of George Floyd. An example was a man in his 50s, Andrew, who is involved in the state Republican party, who said:

> It's frustrating to me and many of my -- what you might consider Black friends, [who] take pride in their Black heritage, just as we do in our Scandinavian heritage. But I feel like even now, if I'm talking about my Scandinavian heritage, it's almost a crime that I bring it up because they call me a White Supremacist at this point… for -- for what reason? I'm probably the least racist person that you know.

Andrew goes so far as to feel like a he is being labeled a criminal for talking about his Swedish-American heritage in front of his African-American "friends." He pushed back against a perceived dominant discourse of racial justice, saying:

> I'm not going to put a check anymore on White or Caucasian or any of that … this White hate, this, this cultural – and I'm sorry… we used to be called "Little Sweden." That's what Minnesota was: "Little Sweden," way back!… And I just feel like that's being stripped from us… that we don't have an opportunity [to] really foster the love for our Scandinavian history.

Andrew feels accused of White Supremacy for expressing his Swedish-American identity, and taps into a now-common rightwing talking point about "reverse racism" that is evident in these exchanges about white ethnic heritage (Pinder 2015). For self-identified Democrats, on the other hand, there was a strong indication about the importance of racial justice. In a paradoxically similar fashion, this recognition made some feel uneasy or even resist public assertions of pride about their Swedish ethnicity, making some reluctant to publicly call themselves "Swedish" or "Swedish American" at all. A woman in her 30s, Sarah, who lives in the Twin Cities and identifies as "progressive," described how:

> [t]here's almost like a hesitance to like talk about being Swedish-American or to like be proud of that, because it's, kind of in today's day and age, it's like there's almost a guilt or like a shame around it – which is kind of interesting because I think from my perspective, the more nuanced and like, the more you know your own history and traditions and cultures, allows you to better relate to other people who are different from you.

For both the conservative and progressive positions, in other words, polarized racial politics appear to have adverse effects on people's willingness to publicly claim a Swedish heritage in the United States today.

While our results are preliminary, we found that these two patterns stood out rather discretely across many of the interviews we conducted. Another dimension to highlight concerns the politicized understanding of contemporary political and social developments in Sweden, relating in particular to perceptions about the welfare state, refugee immigration, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Interestingly, it appears that a domestic U.S. critique of these issues does not entail a similar critique of Sweden. For example, some Republican interviewees were staunchly critical of Minnesota's purported "socialism" but still praised Sweden for its "socialist" welfare policies. This seeming cognitive dissonance can potentially, at least in part, be attributed to the affective dimension of ethnic heritage. Some Democrats, on the other hand, had conflicting feelings about recent developments in Sweden, especially relating to integration and racism. Whilst this too is a critique that comes from a place of affection, it appears grounded in a generally stronger awareness of current events in Sweden. A liberal woman in her 50s living in the Twin Cities, Christina, said that, in her view of many Swedish Americans:

> Sweden to a certain extent is put on a pedestal… There are times when they [Swedes] stay on the pedestal and then there are times they get knocked off the pedestal, and then they can be put back on for something else, right. So, it is almost more of this "Sweden is a wonderful place and therefore they're doing it right," or "no, they did that wrong, oh but they do this right." So trying to find ways to, like, make it positive. I think it is quite often what people try to do.

We are still analyzing the dynamics of how this plays out in perceptions of current events in Sweden, in relation to contemporary U.S. developments. Other patterns are sure to emerge as well. For example, further exploration of possible correlations along rural-urban divides, gender dynamics, or generational differences, are warranted.

Even though our participants' politics and ideologies varied widely across the political spectrum, one thing is abundantly clear from this initial set of interviews: our hypothesis seems to have been confirmed. For Americans whose ethnic ancestry remains a core aspect of their "semiotic selves"—as anthropologist Deborah Jackson has called it (2001)— ethnic heritage and ancestry is being refracted through the lens

of contemporary U.S. political polarization. This is significant since scholars have pointed to the promise of "superordinate identities" that can foster sentiments of national coherence and accord and serve to alleviate societal rifts (Mason 2018; Klandermans 2014). Indeed, our study produces concrete examples of what happens when "conceptions of national identity itself become the subject of the very sorting process that is driving affective polarization" (Dawkins & Hanson 2022). Ultimately, our study adds to a growing body of work that illustrates that politics in the United States has become more and more of a deeply embedded cultural identity rather than just party affiliation or set of policy disagreements.

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"The People in Uniform": Populist Polarization, Cultural Heritage, and Militarization in Mexico's "Fourth Transformation"

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In November 2021, a few days before dozens of pre-Hispanic pieces were slated to be auctioned off at the Christie's auction house in Paris, the Mexican government launched a campaign titled #MiPatrimonioNoSeVende (or #MyHeritageIsNotForSale) that sought to highlight "the extraordinary efforts made by the current Mexican government to protect and repatriate what belongs to all Mexicans: the cultural treasures that give [them] an identity and that generate admiration around the world"(Secretaría de Cultura de México 2022). According to the campaign, the efforts to repatriate cultural heritage objects largely rest on the collectors themselves, who must be made to feel shame for owning archeological pieces from Mexico and dissuaded from buying them. But in addition to appealing to the goodwill of the collectors, the campaign also highlighted a different kind of work that was necessary to protect the nation's cultural heritage, and that would be carried out by members of the country's Armed Forces. This work includes policing and surveillance to prevent pillage, looting, and illegal trafficking of objects, including by patrolling areas where heritage is located, as well as conducting legal tasks and intelligence services.

Since the campaign was first launched, the Mexican government has recovered more than 12,000 artifacts (Martinez 2023). While some of these objects have been returned voluntarily by collectors and museums around the world, in other cases the restitution efforts are the outcome of a series of investigations, legal battles, and seizures by Mexican authorities. Regardless of the process, the repossessions are often celebrated in press events held before rows of cameras. Members of the Armed Forces are often present at these photo ops and they are central to the campaign's other promotional materials. For instance, in a short video that circulated as part of the #MiPatrimonioNoSeVende campaign, soldiers are shown sitting in a classroom listening to a professor and taking notes, and then posing in front of David Alfaro Siqueiros' iconic mural *Del Porfiriato a la Revolución* (1964) while a museographer explains the piece to them. Just as images depicting members

of the Armed Forces as responsible for safeguarding the country's heritage have become more frequent, so too have those that show them building the country's current patrimony, which includes constructing and managing what have become President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's (AMLO) signature infrastructural projects. These include, among others, an airport, an oil refinery, a 950-mile railway, a space agency, the makeover of Mexico City's iconic Chapultepec Park, as well as hotels and tourist facilities around areas that are classified as national heritage.

The presence of the Armed Forces in Mexico's everyday life has grown dramatically during AMLO's tenure (2018-2024), surprising even the most astute political analysts. Less surprising, however, have been AMLO's populist polarizing tactics. During his time in power, Mexican citizens have increasingly come to align themselves along a single dimension (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018): those who are in favor of the President and those who oppose him. Widely theorized as a form of political conflict, political polarization can become a threat to both established and emerging democracies because it can create the conditions that enable the implementation of authoritarian practices, such as repressing dissent and weakening the legislative and judicial powers (Schedler 2023). What remains less studied are the ways in which the government justifies and enacts such practices, and the role that the military can play in this process.

In this brief essay, we begin to show the elective affinities between the country's rising militarization[1] and its political polarization. We argue that Mexico's national heritage and its links to "the people" are being mobilized as part of the country's partisan militarization. Culture – and particularly cultural heritage – is one of a number of areas where militarization is being smuggled into formerly civilian functions of government. In turn, the Armed Forces are increasingly open about their loyalty to AMLO rather than to the Constitution, making their growing militarization anything but neutral and, therefore, an anomaly in constitutional democracies (Slater et al. 2023, 17).[2]

Populist Polarization

In July 2018, Andrés Manuel López Obrador won Mexico's presidential election with the greatest vote share of any Mexican president since the country became a formal democracy in 2000. His party – the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) – also won a majority in Congress, allowing his administration to fast-track legislation. In classical populist fashion (Laclau 2005), his political project, the so-called Fourth Transformation (*Cuarta Transformación*, or 4T), claims to be a turning point in Mexico's history on the scale of three prior landmarks: the War of Independence (1810-1821), the Reform War (1858-1861), and the Revolution (1910-1917). AMLO describes the 4T as a political project that aligns the presidency with the popular will and one that will eradicate social inequality.

In a country where over 40% of the population lives below the poverty line, AMLO's promise to deliver economic justice by "putting the poor first" profoundly resonated with many people who interpreted his victory as a step towards deepening the country's democratic life. A central aspect of AMLO's political project is the program that he calls "Republican Austerity" which includes a set of budgetary policies ostensibly rooted in the moral imperative of curbing the misuse of public funds by either eliminating or drastically reducing the operating budget of a wide range of government institutions. The President deploys a polarizing discourse to justify these cuts, arguing that these will help to weaken the power of corrupt economic and cultural elites who use these institutions for their own benefit (Olvera 2021). Some of the institutions that have been hit the hardest by these cuts are those responsible for protecting, classifying, and managing heritage. A large part of the money that is ostensibly being saved from these cuts is being directed to the mega-infrastructural projects which are meant to generate jobs and revenues for the population who is least well-off. Like the pre-Hispanic artifacts that are being repatriated, these infrastructures are framed as part of the nation's valuable heritage, in need of protection from greedy elites.

While there is little agreement on whether poverty and inequality have in fact declined during AMLO's time in power, there is no doubt that he continues to be a popular president, consistently receiving over 50% of public approval in public opinion surveys. AMLO's widely diverse group of supporters do not necessarily share similar grievances nor ideological views. Instead, what aligns them is a generalized discontent with traditional political parties and economic and cultural elites (Castro Cornejo 2022). Capitalizing on

1 Militarization is the material and discursive process by which the state's practices acquire military logics. We use Armed Forces, Army, and Military interchangeably.
2 This essay draws on the authors' ongoing, long-term ethnographic and discursive analysis surrounding Mexico's cultural heritage, drug war, and current militarization process.

this discontent, AMLO repeatedly argues that Mexican society is divided —and, as a result, has effectively divided society— into two distinct camps: a majority allegedly devoid of internal conflict or political and ideological differences, which he refers to as "the people" and whom he claims to represent (Leal 2021, 123), and a corrupt minority which he refers to as "traitors to the motherland" or "enemies of the people." The latter group has come to include not only members of the political establishment and economic elites, but also feminist and environmental activists, journalists, artists, and scientists, whose political struggles the President repeatedly discredits. It is precisely the antagonism to this eclectic group that produces a cohesion among "the people," who despite only representing part of the national community, claim to have exclusive political legitimacy (Laclau 2005) under the president's banner.

In Mexico, "the people" as a key collective political actor and one mainly constituted by members of the lower class has a history that dates back to the post-revolutionary period (Lomnitz 1995). Tied to this history is the public imaginary of the Army as a loyal institution in the service of the civilian population, engaging in first-responder tasks during natural disasters, literacy campaigns, and the like. Because the Mexican Armed Forces were born with the Mexican Revolution, their foundation marked their composition: most of their members were peasants and citizens from the lower classes. The Mexican Army's origin story sets it apart from the elitist character of other militaries in Latin America and has helped to maintain the perception of a popular army (Moloeznik 2008).

It is this image of the Armed Forces as not only being on "the people's" side but as quintessential members of this camp that AMLO has mobilized when explaining why he is expanding their role in public administration. He has argued that soldiers "uphold a great reservoir of Mexico's cultural, moral and spiritual values" (Gobierno de México, 2023) and refers to them as the *pueblo uniformado* (or "the people in uniform"). He repeatedly contends that members of the military are poor and working-class subjects and that their loyalty therefore inherently rests with "the people" and, by extension, with him and the 4T. For instance, in a video that documents the Army building one of AMLO's mega-infrastructural projects, the Felipe Ángeles airport, he explains that "[T]he soldier is [a member of] the people in uniform. They are children of peasants, of laborers – the generals included! – children of mechanics, of teachers, and they are now showing their loyalty to Mexico, to the people" (in Ibarra 2022). The Army's actual composition, however, is much more complex and reproduces the vast social differences and contrasts that characterize society as a whole. Historian Pablo Marcos Moloeznik goes as far as to argue that in Mexico, one must speak of two armies rather than one. The first is composed of a privileged minority embodied in the high-ranking officers and who earn very high salaries. The second is the large majority constituted by lower-class troops (Moloeznik 2008: 158). While the Armed Forces clearly mirror the sharp class hierarchy that underpins the dichotomy of "the people" and "the elites" constantly invoked by AMLO, he remains silent about this parallel.

Militarization

During his presidential campaign, AMLO labeled members of the Army as part of the corrupt elite which he opposed. He blamed them for many of the country's woes and promised to demilitarize public space. Shortly after taking office, however, he claimed to have "changed my mind when I saw the problem I inherited" (Villa y Caña and Morales 2022). The problem was, indeed, tremendous. In 2006 President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) launched the "war on drug trafficking," which included a widespread deployment of the Army. The logics of the drug war have contributed to exacerbate the viciousness of criminal organizations (Smith 2021) and have unleashed an unprecedented degree of violence that has since claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Even as the available evidence demonstrates that the rising presence of the Armed Forces is not only not helping to curb the violence but has helped increase it (Philipson García 2023), AMLO has opted to further enhance their power. In turn, members of the Armed Forces openly demonstrate their allegiance to the President and his political project. Luis Cresencio Sandoval, Mexico's Secretary of Defense, consistently makes declarations such as "the [Fourth] Transformation consists of understanding that as Mexicans, as the Mexican Army, as citizens, as a country, we can do great things. (…) We [the Armed Forces] participate in Mr. President's projects simply because (…) it's an order" (in Ibarra 2022).

In light of the corruption scandals and human rights violations involving the Army amid the drug war, the Army has sought to rehabilitate its reputation, partly through propaganda campaigns that show them performing nonviolent tasks. The institution is now framed as undergoing "a new stage in their role of service to Mexico" (Benitez Manaut 2021: 33). They have received an ever-larger budget, which is particularly noticeable given the context of the administration's "Republican Austerity." As highly disciplined members

of "the people," the argument goes, the Army is more suited to guard and manage the nation's heritage than the corrupt elites who were enriching themselves with public monies. Such a justification has been put forth to expand the number of public administration duties with which the Armed Forces are tasked, and which previously were not in their purview, including in areas such as public health, patrolling and managing ports and customs, policing Central Americans' northbound migration through Mexico, environmental protection, social policy, education, aviation, and public infrastructure, including in projects that are either directly or tangentially related to the creation and preservation of cultural heritage.

The role that members of the Armed Forces are playing in protecting Mexico's vast cultural heritage is often promoted most directly by AMLO himself, who constantly mentions them during press conferences and invites them to public events. In September 2021, for instance, he invited the Secretary of National Defense and the Secretary of the Navy to inaugurate the exhibition "The Greatness of Mexico" in the world-renowned Anthropology Museum in Mexico City. The show included thousands of pre-Hispanic objects, many of which were owned by museums around the world and had never been publicly displayed in Mexico. As part of the opening, the President honored the Commander of Italy's Carabinieri Unit for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, Roberto Riccardi, with the Mexican Order of the Aztec Eagle—the greatest honor given by the Mexican state to a foreigner—and praised Italy for having created a special military unit dedicated to recovering stolen artifacts. "We are going to follow Italy's example," the President told the assembled press, "I have already given the instruction for a special team to be formed in the National Guard to achieve this purpose" (Jiménez and Martínez 2021). While a similar team had been created by the previous administration, by presenting it and widely advertising it as completely new, AMLO reinforces the image of the Army as one who is taking on new roles related to protecting the nation by caring for its cherished heritage.

Accompanying this discursive construction of the Army as uniquely capable of guarding the nation's patrimony is their administrative and financial expansion in the Mexican state. Indeed, an important part of the budget that was previously managed by cultural and scientific experts who work for institutions such as the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) is now being managed by the Army. This is occurring even as the money continues to be earmarked for the INAH. For example, a large part of the budget allocated for the INAH in 2022 was destined to purchase land which houses archeological monuments situated around the Tren Maya railway, AMLO's signature infrastructural project.

The 4T is, in short, marketing the increase in the acquisition of cultural heritage – either via the return of objects or acquisition of land and excavation – as well as the Army's role in repatriating, protecting, and managing it, all while weakening the specialized civilian institutions which were historically tasked with carrying out these duties.

Authoritarian Drift

Many observers have criticized AMLO's populist polarizing strategies as undermining "the constitutional safeguards built into Mexican democracy to prevent the arbitrary use of power" (Sánchez-Talanquer and Greene 2021). Less discussed have been the ways in which the president's empowerment of the Armed Forces contributes to such an undermining. Here we have sketched how AMLO's polarizing rhetoric and his adjudication of the Army as the guardian of the nation's heritage has enabled the unprecedented and virtually uncontested expansion of the Army's presence and attributions in Mexico's public administration. That such militarization is operationalized through cultural heritage, art, and infrastructure illuminates the political centrality of this material culture, and the need for its further analysis in political science. As we showed, the seemingly innocuous and praiseworthy tasks of repatriating stolen artifacts or building Mexico's patrimony entail the military's increasingly partisan alignment with the current regime. Such an alignment, in turn, signals an emergent divergence from the political neutrality that sustains and guarantees Mexico's constitutional democracy.

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The Politics of Heritage and Indigeneity in Assam: Hindutva's Regional Expression

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> "I always do religious polarization. What is new? There is nothing wrong with that. Because what is my religious polarization - there will be no insult to Hindus. If it is called polarization, then I will polarize. Is it religious polarization to raise a voice for the rights of Hindus?" -Himanta Biswa Sarma, Chief Minister of Assam, April 14, 2024

Just five days before the 2024 general election in Assam, a Northeastern state in India, the Chief Minister (CM) – a charismatic politician who switched allegiance from Indian National Congress (INC) to Bharatiya Janata party (BJP)[1] in 2015 – legitimized religious polarization in a public speech (ETV Bharat 2024). In previous election campaigns, Sarma also pitted Hindus against Muslims by claiming that the latter is trying to snatch political power away from the former (Singh 2020). But what is so surprising about this polarizing rhetoric in Assam when the rest of the country has been experiencing the onslaught of Hindutva[2] for a while now? Assam's polarization is worth investigating because it is a puzzle with multiple layers. It has implications for the wider Northeast where similar issues regarding majority/minority relationship are bubbling up and even for neighboring Bangladesh where some conservative Islamists use parallel polarizing rhetoric.

To start with, Assam's diverse demographic make-up[3] with cross-cutting identity markers among major groups makes it a less ideal candidate for religious polarization. Lately, however, Assam's historical ethno-linguistic divides have been replaced by Hindu/non-Hindu divides. Secondly, some sub-national groups in Assam had long defied the idea of a united India through violent separatist movements, but BJP's

1 BJP, the party that has been ruling India since 2014, promotes Hindu values and culture and its majoritarian view privileges the (upper caste) Hindus.
2 Hindutva is a Hindu supremacist ideology supported by BJP and other Hindu nationalist organizations that calls for establishing a Hindu state in India.
3 Hindus constitute 61.47% of the Assamese population while Muslims constitute 34.22% in Assam. Assamese (48.3%) and Bengali (28.9%) are the two major languages here. It has 14 recognized plain tribes, 15 recognized hill tribes, and 16 recognized scheduled caste communities.

communally-infused idea of *Akhand Bharat*[4]/undivided India is gaining currency here. Lastly, Assam is not part of the Hindu heartland of India where tropes such as cow protection[5] and Ram Temple[6] work as a mobilizing narrative (Bhattacharjee 2016). Nevertheless, BJP has managed to secure their electoral hold here for almost a decade.

I argue that solving this puzzle requires a bottom-up approach that goes beyond strategic coalition politics and the defection of local INC leadership (Tripathi, Das, and Goswami 2018). I highlight the anxieties related to Assam's peripheral location in India's geography and the pressure on its land and resources caused by population movement since the colonial era. These unresolved anxieties create loopholes in the syncretic culture of Assam that BJP and its ideological parent *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS)[7] can take advantage of. Instead of directly imposing the Hindutva master frame that advocates for Hindu (insiders) rights in *Akhand Bharat* against the non-Hindus (outsiders), they have adjusted and projected it onto the local *khilonjiya*/ Indigenous frame of identity discourse that advocates for the rights of the original inhabitants of Assam against the late arrivals. This regional variety of Hindutva does not follow the internationally accepted parameters of indigenousness, but rather infuses it with communal elements (Dutta 2017).

A significant part of RSS/BJP success in this regard can be attributed to the twofold heritage politics they are engaged in. By claiming the egalitarian Hindu cult developed in Assam as part of their version of Hinduism and valorizing the Assamese national heroes (Bhattacharjee 2016), RSS/BJP creates a sense of belonging for the historically secluded state or for a section of its people (interviews on May 1, 9, and 23, 2024) and brings its overlooked history and heritage to the mainstream India. This inclusionary effort denies non-Hindu contributions to Assam's history, essentializing Assamese culture as a Hindu one. It also claims the animistic tribal religions of Assam as part of Hinduism, which leaves Muslims and Christians as the cultural outsiders.

When paired with the decades-long discursive game of RSS/BJP about 'illegal immigrants', this cultural othering creates a fertile ground for polarization. Hindu nationalists portray the 'migrant Muslims' in Assam as the geographical outsider/non-indigenous people, who are challenging the rightful position of the indigenous (broadly defined as Hindu) people in politics and economy and threatening the authentic Assamese culture. They transformed the local debate over the *Bohiragotos*/outsiders (initially referred to ethno-linguistic groups from other parts of India) into a debate over the *Videshi*/'foreigners' (people from Erstwhile Muslim majority East Bengal/East Pakistan/ current day Bangladesh). In conjunction with the term *Anupraveshkari*/'infiltrator', this geographical othering stokes the fear of being subdued by the non-indigenous people and justifies their exclusion from the citizenship regime. Since Assam is the entryway to the Northeast, its experience with the 'soft Hindutva' approach (interview on April 21, 2024) is telling of the rise of Hindu nationalism in this demographically diverse region. Alongside reconfirming Hindutva's adaptability as an ideology and problematizing the concept of indigeneity (Longkumar 2021) it shows that religious polarization can bloom even in the most unlikely environment if the majoritarian message can adopt to the regional identity discourse, using heritage for the reification of that message.

Assam's Uniqueness and Anxieties

Assam's current political situation is tied to the geographical realities of the Northeast, which create two types of anxieties for the region. Its distance from the center and proximity to Southeast Asia makes it culturally and economically isolated from mainstream India. The Northeast is the face of Indian diversity in tourist brochures (Baruah 2020,12-13), but the 'mongoloid phenotypes' prevalent here have not found a strong footing in the concept of an 'Indian face' (Wouters and Subba 2013, 126). Like other states in the region, Assam has historically been more economically underdeveloped than many parts of India (Hazarika and Dutta 2020). The second source of anxiety is the international borders of the Northeast. Sharing boundaries with Bhutan and Bangladesh, Assam feels vulnerable to cross-border population movement and its perceived pressure on natural resources and the economy.

To understand RSS/BJP manipulation of these anxieties, one must look back at Assam's history with outsiders.

4 The idea of India being one indivisible geographical, political, and cultural entity that goes beyond the current political map of India and incorporates other states in South Asia and some parts of Southeast Asia.
5 Cows are considered a sacred animal in Hindu religion. One of the planks of Hindu nationalist politics is to protect the animal by banning its slaughter.
6 The promise to establish a temple for Hindu deity Ram in Ayodhya, which is believed to be his birthplace and where the Mughal era mosque Babri Masjd stood until 1992, was a key mobilizational tactic for BJP for a long time.
7 RSS is a volunteer organization that promotes Hindutva ideology through its cultural activities and paramilitary training.

Assam defended itself from external invaders until the 19th century under the Ahom dynasty.[8] This dynasty was instrumental in creating a common identity for Assam that included both the caste Hindus and the plain tribal people through its patronage of Hindu religion (Bhattacharjee 2016, 81). The earliest Muslim settlement in the region is associated with the 1205 AD invasion of Muhammad Bakhtiar Khalji. The converted locals to Islam during this early period are considered as the indigenous Assamese Muslims.

The British colonial practice of bringing people from outside Assam to do agricultural works and man the bureaucracy sowed the seeds of discontent against the geographical and ethnic outsiders. Initially there was no opposition to bringing in Bengali Muslim peasants from East Bengal, but anti-Bengali sentiment started forming when the Bengali Hindus started dominating the bureaucracy. During the 1947 partition, local politicians wanted to restrict the number of refugees from Pakistan for settlement in Assam, citing shortage of land for the indigenous population. The demand was not entertained by the national leadership. The tension exacerbated with the 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh, produced another wave of India-bound refugees. The allegation that illegal Bangladeshi immigrants were enrolled as voters for *Lok Sabha*[9] constituencies started the agitation called the Assam movement in 1979. In 1983, the Nellie massacre led to the killing of 3000 Bengali speaking Muslims.

The first-hand account of the people who experienced it, either as a direct participant of the movement or as someone who tried to escape it, suggests that the overall tone of the movement was non-communal, driven by the fear of being dominated by the Bengalis (interviews on May 5, 9, and May 20, 2024). However, there are assertions that BJP leaders' inflammatory speech at that time amplified anti-immigrant feelings. RSS/BJP is believed to have "spread the fantasy that the religious minorities were a grave threat to the Assamese interests in land, jobs, and political power among both the Assamese Hindus and tribals of Nagaon district where Nellie massacre happened" (interview on May 22, 2024).

The 1985 Assam Accord ended the movement, but the categorization of the *Bohiraogotos*/outsiders threatening Assamese identity and culture found a permanent home in the political vocabulary. Kalita (2011, 1358) explains that this fear of the other came from a concern over "losing cultural identity and political power and not receiving its share of the region's resources." This is worsened by the absence of accurate data on the actual number of Bangladeshi immigrants. Different institutions and experts use different methods to estimate the current volume of Bangladeshi immigration. This leaves room for speculation and enables political parties to mobilize voters, citing the high growth rate among the Muslim population in Assam (Dutta 2017) and the decreasing share of Hindu population in neighboring Bangladesh who are allegedly taking refuge in India. Over time, RSS/BJP changed the language of this debate by popularizing the concept of *Anupraveshkaris*/'infiltrators' from Bangladesh. In the Hindu nationalist lexicon, these outsiders are not necessarily the ones with the suspected and recent unauthorized migration history. Rather, they are members of religious minority groups who have been living in the country from the colonial era who are also dubbed as *Anupraveshkaris*/'infiltrators'/'Bangladeshis'.

Selective Historical Amnesia

One of the most easily identifiable attempts at (mis-) appropriating the secular heritage of Assam by RSS/BJP in amplifying the fear of the 'migrant Muslims'/'infiltrators' / 'foreigners' is the valorization of Lachit Borphukan, the legendary General of Ahom Kingdom who defeated the Mughal army in the battle of Saraighat in 1671. BJP labelled the 2016 legislative assembly election as the 'last battle of Saraighat' as it intended to oust the 'illegal immigrants' from the grounds of Assam the same way Borphukan ousted the Mughals. Conflating Muslims with the Mughals is a polarizing tactic that simplifies history and overlooks anomalies such as the fact that it was a Hindu military commander named Man Singh I who led the Mughal army at the battle of Saraighat. Such selective retention of history reduces the clash between two empires into a clash between two religions (interview on May 9, 2024). BJP launched a yearlong celebration of the 400th birth anniversary of Borphukan in 2022 to bridge the gap between the center and the periphery and bring Assamese nationalism into Hindutva fold. Drawing on the anti-Mughal sentiment of the people in Assam, Modi said:

> After independence…the stories of fierce resistance to tyranny in every part of the country were deliberately suppressed. Does the bravery of Lachit Borphukan not matter? Does the sacrifice of thousands of people of Assam who fought in the war against the Mughals for the identity of the country not matter? …The country is rectifying the mistake that was made earlier by not according them a place in the mainstream of history. (Press information bureau of the government of India 2022)

8 Assam became part of British India in 1826.
9 The lower chamber of Indian national parliament.

While promoting the gallantry of Borphukan, BJP is criticized for neglecting the contribution of a Muslim commander named Ismail Siddique, popularly known as 'Bagh Hazarika', in the battle of Saraighat. BJP leadership termed him a fictional character (Hasant 2023), drawing criticism for invalidating Muslim contribution to Assamese history (Zaman 2023). Another BJP Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) Shiladitya Dev saw several complaints lodged against him after labelling the celebrated Assamese author Mr. Syed Abdul Malik as an "intellectual Jihadi" (The Sentinel 2020). There have been attempts to demarcate Assamese heritage and culture in a way that excludes the 'Miya Muslims' (Bengali migrant Muslims). In 2022, Mohar Ali was arrested after opening a museum in his house exhibiting the 'Miya culture', although it was never cited as the official reason for his arrest. CM Sarma took umbrage with the exhibits displayed in the museum, insinuating that Mr. Ali had (mis-) appropriated authentic Assamese culture as the culture of his community:

> How come nangol [a tool used to plough land] be exclusive to Miya museum when agriculturists in Sibsagar also use the same to plough their land? These people will have to explain to the expert committee. The tool to keep fish is not exclusive to them. Except lungi [a type of sarong], which is exclusive to them, there is nothing in the museum which they can claim to be theirs…Even the gamosa [scarf] which they displayed there belongs to desi Muslims (quoted in Choudhry 2022).

The Muslim community faces a further challenge in expressing their religious heritage as madrasas or Islamic seminaries are shut down (Parashar 2023) or converted into English medium schools (Deb 2023) based on a 2020 law aimed at promoting secular education in the state (Nath 2020). The fear of losing linguistic heritage to these Muslims becomes further consolidated when CM Sarma claims that "If people in Assam are not united in the next 20 years the mother tongue of Assam will be Arabic and in schools Arabic will be taught" (quoted in Singh 2020).

Another successful example of politicization of heritage is the RSS/BJP relationship with the neo-Vaishnavite establishment in Assam. The 15th-16th century saint-scholar *Srimanta Sankardev* started the neo-Vaishnavite movement, repudiating the Brahminical caste system and welcoming people from all walks of life and faith to monasteries named Satra (Saikia 2018). In 1969 RSS first attempted to appropriate this syncretic heritage by establishing *Sankardeva Shishu Kunjo*, a school for children built under the model of its nationwide *Shishu Shiksha Samiti*. There are hundreds of these schools operating in the state now where alongside the traditional RSS curriculum, "Sankardev's ethos" is being taught (Bhattacharjee 2016, 82). BJP has also developed a warm relationship with *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*, the biggest organization of the Vaishnav devotees. The depth of their association became evident when Prime Minister Modi was invited to attend the 85th annual conference of this organization in 2016. He made an implicit assertion that *Sankardev* and the BJP brand of Hindu nationalism share the same dream about India when he said: "strength of the government and society must combine so that we can create the India that Srimanta Sankardeva envisioned" (Narendra Modi in 2016).

The neo-Vaishnavite monasteries themselves have become an arena of heritage politics. Once credited as the "centres of equality and syncretism" (Bhattacharjee 2016, 82), some *Satras* are now involved with RSS/BJP (Saikia 2018). In its 2016 Assam Vision Document and the 2021 legislative assembly election manifesto BJP promised to protect the *Satralands* from 'illegal encroachments'. The party's popularity lies in part in its ability to follow through these promises (interview on April 21, 2024), as evident by the eviction efforts that affect the migrant Muslim population (maktoobmedia 2022) but win over some of the *Satradhikars*/head priests of these monasteries (interview on April 19, 2024). Besides, frequent visitation of *Satras* by BJP leadership, the promise to promote *Sattriya* culture[10] (Assam Vision Document 2016-2025), and to establish *Namghars*[11] in other parts of India (Assam Assembly Election-2021: Manifesto for Atma Nirvar Assam 2021) bolster BJP's claim that neo-Vaishnavism is part of Hindu religion and boost its credentials as the protector and promoter of Assamese (Hindu) heritage.

Stretching Hindutva

Following a trend observed in other parts of the Northeast (Deb 2023), there is a recent demand in Assam for putting a stop on religious conversion and taking back the scheduled tribe[12] (ST) status of the converted tribal people. *Janajati Dharma Sanskriti Suraksha Mancha*, believed to be an RSS affiliate, held a rally in March 2024 in Assam that drew thousands of people from various tribal communities in support of that demand (The Hindu 2023). It goes on to show the strength of the RSS narrative that by converting to foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam, one

10 A classical dance form developed by Sankardev.
11 Community prayer halls in Assam.
12 Scheduled Tribe is a legal term in the Indian Constitution that lists several different tribal groups as beneficiaries of certain affirmative actions.

abandons their ancestral cultures and norms and hence cannot lay a claim on the welfare benefits associated with their original tribal identity. The converted tribal people are also accused of double dipping, getting benefits both as religious minorities and STs (Sharma 2023). Statements such as "Adivasis…are actually Hindus" (quoted in Pegu 2024) issued by an organizer of this movement is the extension of the Hindu nationalist argument that all indigenous religions are part of *Sanatana Dharma*[13]/eternal truth, a claim that is debated within the tribal communities where some are proud of their distinct ancestral animistic heritage. However, when prominent tribal figures associated with RSS advocate against the converted members it bolsters the Hindu/non-Hindu narrative (interview on May 1, 2024).

BJP's reactions to the updated National Register for Citizens (NRC), where 1.9 million out of 33 million people of Assam were left out (Khalid 2019), test the limits of Hindutva's adaptability. Initially viewed as a strategy to exclude the 'migrant Muslims' from the benefits of Indian citizenship, the list surprised BJP with the omission of many Bengali Hindus (Kumar 2019). For BJP, Hindus irrespective of their origin are not *Anupraveshkari*/ 'infiltrators', rather they are *Sharanarthis*/ 'asylum seekers' (Saikia 2020, 74). Things became more complicated when the government passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019, making it easier for 'persecuted' minorities from neighboring Muslim majority Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to gain Indian citizenship (BBC 2024). The 2019 anti-CAA protest in Assam was driven by concern over the government's intention to grant Bengali-speaking Hindus citizenship status. So, upholding the secular principles of Indian constitution might not have been a strong motivating factor (interviews on April 14, May 1 and 9, 2024). The docile protests after the 2024 notification of the implementation of the Act gives the impression that the policy of coercion/co-optation of anti-CAA movement leaders might be at play (Pegu and Gogoi 2024).

Lately, BJP is trying to earn the allegiance of Muslim groups who are believed to be early converts to Islam by giving them indigenous status (Chakravarti 2022), which further downgrades the status of the 'migrant Muslims', many of whom have lived in Assam for generations and embraced Assamese culture as their own. In 2024 CM Sarma was seen warming up to this community that he once disparaged as geographical and cultural outsiders. The reason might be the recent delimitation exercise which has made it difficult for the Muslim candidates to win in the *Vidhan Sabha* (state legislative assembly) elections but increased the number of *Lok Sabha* (lower house of the national parliament) seats where Muslim candidates have a chance to win. Since 2024 is a parliamentary election year, BJP wooing the Muslim constituencies is seen as an opportunist move (Zaman 2024). BJP still needs a Muslim opposition such as Badruddin Ajmal, representing the 'Miya'/'migrant Muslims', to keep religious polarization alive. Reconfirming the stereotypical 'Miya' appearance with a beard and a skullcap, this politician is often accused of using divisive rhetoric like his Hindu nationalist counterparts, feeding the cycle of religious polarization (interviews on April 17 and April 21, 2024).

Conclusion

RSS/BJP accomplishments in Assam can be largely attributed to a refined Hindu majoritarian and civilizational message that feeds off of the unmet local grievances brought on by large-scale population movement. Recently BJP is also experimenting with its signature tropes by banning cattle slaughter and the sales beef within a five-mile radius of a temple or a *Satra* (The Wire 2021) as well as holding various programs in Assam on the Ram temple consecration ceremony in Ayodhya (The Economic Times 2024). The depth of the social changes caused by these activities is debated as some believe that people in Assam are slowly beginning to despise RSS activities (interviews on April 19, and May 22, 2024) while others think that the resistance (online and in real life) to these activities is mostly confined to within urban educated circles. In the countryside, their message is believed to have a stronger effect because of repetition and consistency (interviews on April 21 and May 9, 2024). In the meantime, there is a heightened threat perception among the minority communities in Assam (interview on May 5, 2024) and also a ripple effect in neighboring Bangladesh where some influential conservative Islamist figures are mirroring the logic of excluding religious minorities' contributions to Bangladeshi history and culture.

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13 Often conflated with Hinduism, Sanatana Dharma is an umbrella term that incorporates Buddhism, Sikhism, various ancient animistic traditions, etc. The proponent of the concept believes that these religious traditions are part of original Indic civilization before the introduction of foreign religions such as Islam and Christianity.

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Author Exchange

Memories of Unbelonging: Ethnic Chinese Identity Politics in Post-Suharto Indonesia. *By Charlotte Setijadi. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2023. 294p. Hardback.*

Review by Aram Hur, Assistant Professor of Political Science and Kim Koo Chair in Korean Studies, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University

Memories of Unbelonging is a study of the precarious and contested status of Chinese Indonesians. Setijadi dives below the surface of post-Suharto *reformasi* policies to uncover the oral histories, habits, and cultural expressions of the Chinese that remember the collective trauma of forced erasure during the New Order period. In her captivating anthropological account, the past is not only haunting; it is living and breathing in the daily lives of many Chinese Indonesians.

The book highlights the *informal* politics of Chinese identity in Indonesia. By "informal," I refer to non- or para-state activities of identity-making to differentiate them from "formal" politics that center on state policies or actions. This is a conceptual distinction, as identity contestation occurs by how informal and formal politics interact. But it is a useful distinction because it highlights disciplinary mores. For example, most studies of "identity politics" in the discipline of political science are studies of the formal politics of identity, where the focus is on state policies of enfranchisement, naturalization, commemoration, enumeration, or representation.

But many groups are forged in the shadows cast by the state. Their identities are responses to state exclusion, oppression, or even neglect. In such cases, informal politics looms larger. The critical lift of identity transmission relies less on official holidays and textbooks, and more on the oral histories, family rituals, and group norms passed down through generations. The parallels in how collective trauma narratives manifest in private realms among the Chinese in Indonesia and my own study of the islanders in Taiwan—both groups that solidified in opposition to

the state—were striking.[1] If one were to visit Taiwan today with no knowledge of the internal trauma between the islanders and mainlanders, one would see the Chinese relics in the National Palace Museum and the towering Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial in the middle of Taipei and wonder why cross-strait tensions even exist. Setijadi reminds identity scholars that state narratives of "who we are" are themselves products of power. Especially for nations with internal trauma histories, the officialized "imagined community" can embed intrinsic barriers for some groups whose role in sustaining that community is to forever profess their worthiness—even by changing their family names—but never truly belong.

For political scientists who study identity, books like *Memories of Unbelonging* are therefore necessary reading for holistic theorizing about the formation and change of identity. Setijadi's account illuminates, for instance, why state policies to eliminate identity hierarchies - such as *reformasi* in Indonesia or abolition in the U.S. or naturalization of marriage migrants in South Korea- are not only ineffective, but often backfire, hardening the very lines they meant to erase. It can also explain why certain underground identities can seemingly coalesce out of nowhere and why certain minority identities are resistant to change despite legal and material incentives to assimilate.

The book left me wrestling with the role of trauma in identity-making. The book unflinchingly traces the trauma legacies from the New Order and May 1998 riots, but it offers little in the way of trauma theory. That is, why do certain incidents of mass violence become elevated as collective trauma, while others do not? Trauma is typically seen as something that involuntarily and undesirably "happens" to a person or people. But is the *collectivization* of trauma something that is more "made"—selectively constructed and even strategically useful? China's "century of humiliation" narrative easily comes to mind. Perhaps the collective memorialization of trauma, whether inflicted by the betrayal of co-nationals or suffered from national "others," is a necessary condition for durable identity formation. These are normatively uncomfortable questions. But such is the reality of politics and identity.

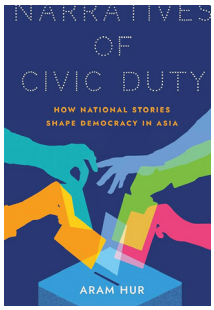
Response from Charlotte Setijadi

Nothing binds a group of people together like the memories of a traumatic event experienced collectively. Yet the ways in which traumatic events are remembered by individuals and groups within the same affected community can vary greatly. For instance, in the interviews I conducted with members of the same household who experienced the May '98 riots together, individual memories of what happened can be quite diverse, hearsay from family and friends gets incorporated into the story, and different people choose to emphasize different aspects of the events. In the absence of officially acknowledged facts about past traumatic episodes, Chinese Indonesians have come to rely on these kinds of fragmented personal accounts to construct their collective memory.

This is always difficult to admit, but the lack of known truths is often an advantage in the construction of trauma narratives. When the facts are blurry, individuals and groups can shape and use narratives of collective trauma in ways that suit their goals best. All too frequently, the original victims themselves become lost amidst the collectivization of the trauma. Indeed, as Professor Hur reminds us in her pertinent question, in the processes of memory-making, the decision of what (as well as when, who, and how) to remember is both selective and strategic. This is certainly the case among Chinese Indonesians, where in the post-Suharto era, influential groups within the community have been accused of shaping and leveraging trauma narratives to advance their own political/economic/social causes. Predictably, this has led to contestations about narratives of the collective past as well as disagreements over who should represent Chinese Indonesians in national identity politics.

There is a common assumption in the study of trauma that resolution in the form of justice or recognition is needed for the affected group(s) and the society in which they live to be able to heal. While trauma resolution is certainly ideal, case studies such as the Chinese Indonesians presented in *Memories of Unbelonging* show us that narratives of unresolved trauma can sometimes be an even more powerful tool for identity politics.

1 For those interested in the complex identities of Chinese diaspora, a worthy pairing to Setijadi's book would be Dominic Meng-Hsuan Yang's *The Great Exodus from China: Trauma, Memory, and Identity in Modern Taiwan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).



Narratives of Civic Duty: How National Stories Shape Democracy in Asia. *By Aram Hur. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022. 181p. Paperback.*

Review by Charlotte Setijadi, Assistant Professor of Humanities, School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University.

Narratives of Civic Duty opens with a story of Mrs. Han, an ordinary Korean wife and mother, who amidst the 1997 Asian financial crisis sold her and her husband's wedding rings, along with the gold bar they had received as a wedding gift, to help the South Korean state pay off its massive foreign debts. Mrs. Han was one of approximately 3.5 million South Koreans who participated in the gold donation drive of 1997-98. Like Mrs. Han, many of these citizens were personally affected by the crisis. So why did they sacrifice treasured personal possessions to help bail out the state that had failed them?

The answer, according to Aram Hur, lies in nationalism. Citizens who feel that their histories and interests are represented by their state are more likely to feel national attachment and a strong sense of duty towards it. This is of course not a novel proposition. However, Hur takes it further by highlighting the importance of national stories – understood as narratives about a nation's origins, failures, and successes – to democratic states. Hur theorizes that national stories that establish a strong nation-state linkage can inspire citizens to behave in a civic manner that strengthens democracy. To prove this theory, Hur utilizes surveys and personal stories to compare South Korea and Taiwan as the book's main case studies. In the latter chapters, Hur looks beyond East Asia to post-reunification Germany and other democratic states to test the hypothesis further.

Hur argues that South Korea's racialized national identity based on bloodline (*danil minjok*) has served as a national unifier that only got stronger as the nation weathered crises such as the Japanese occupation and the struggle against military dictatorship. Hur attributes contemporary South Koreans' strong sense of civic duty to the democratic state's successful harnessing of *minjok* nationalism. On the other hand, the history of the Kuomintang's aggressive efforts to re-Sinicize the islanders after World War II has created a divided vision of Taiwanese nationalism, resulting in less national attachment and a more fragile sense of civic duty among many of its citizens. The lesson here is that the kinds of national stories states produce can serve as an important indicator of the strength of democracies.

Hur's national theory of civic duty offers a compelling challenge to existing assumptions about the compatibility between nationalism and liberal democracy. As an area studies scholar, I appreciate Hur's efforts to root her theory to local contexts in East Asia and dispel essentialist arguments about whether weak democracies in Asia may be attributed to cultural reasons. Hur's creative and well-conceived survey experiments also provide valuable empirical data to the study of how collective memories and trauma shape political behavior – a topic that has traditionally relied on ethnographic methods.

However, the countries chosen as the main case studies in the book are those with relatively low levels of corruption and high public trust towards democratic institutions. I found myself wondering how Hur's theory would apply to countries with strong nation-state linkage but weak democratic institutions, a situation increasingly common among democratic states today. In Indonesia, for example, more than twenty-five years after the fall of the New Order regime that ushered in a democratic revival, rampant corruption and political polarization have led to low levels of public trust towards democratic institutions and processes. As a result, as some recent data suggest, while most Indonesians still believe in representative democracy, a growing number are becoming disillusioned and think that more autocratic styles of government may be what the country needs. This would at least partially explain strongman figure Prabowo Subianto's landslide victory (with a high voter turnout of 81.78%) in the presidential election earlier this year. How can the national theory of civic duty help us analyze situations where nationalism and the sense of civic duty remain strong, but the public's faith in democracy has wavered?

Response from Aram Hur

The striking similarities between Professor Setijadi's book and my own, despite our different academic backgrounds and cases, converge on a singular point: that narratives matter powerfully in identity politics. Such stories have lifecycles of their own, often outlasting the political moments that first gave rise to them.

Setijadi's question of how to reconcile places like Indonesia with strong nationalism but weak trust in democracy hits right on the role of critical junctures in assessing narrative legacies. National stories,

like all narratives, are driven by punctuated plots. Democratization is one such punctuation. But how it affects national stories depends on its narrative antecedents. In South Korea, the discursive strategy of pro-democracy activists as the restoration of national representation preserved strong nation-state linkage through democratization, fusing nationalism with support for the democratic state. In Taiwan, however, democratization initiated by Kuomintang incumbents failed to serve as a narrative catharsis for many islanders. Their weak and even oppositional beliefs of nation-state linkage under KMT rule continued into democracy, fueling national stories of doubt and distrust of the now democratic, but still heavy KMT-legacy state.

Narratives of Civic Duty offers a national theory of civic duty *in* democracies, but it is not necessarily a theory about democracies only. Civic duty is a form of political loyalty to the state, regardless of regime type. Whether strong nationalism manifests in pro- or anti-democratic forms of civic duty depends on the narrative context of democratization—whether it served as an impetus for nation-state building or splintering.

From this lens, Indonesia appears more as the rule rather than exception. Indonesia's path to democracy is riddled with nationalist fissures. The pro-independence struggle was as much against internal "others"—colonial colluders, local aristocrats, the Chinese, the Communists—as it was against the Dutch colonizers. As Setijadi's book demonstrates, some of those groups have had traumatic experiences with the state in the name of democratization. The resulting national stories of these subgroups likely paint an oppositional linkage to the democratic state, manifesting in civic withdrawal and low democratic trust. Thus, while national identification in Indonesia may appear high in public opinion surveys, how the Indonesian nation is imagined—particularly in relation to the democratic state—likely differs widely across national members.

Joint Commentary from Setijadi and Hur

At first glance, the commonalities between our books may not be obvious. We focused on three different Asian countries of varying levels of democratic maturity and employed very different methodological approaches. A political scientist, Hur combined interviews, experiments, and survey data to compare how national stories shape citizens' sense of civic duty in South Korea and Taiwan. Setijadi utilized anthropological ethnographic methods to analyze how collective trauma of anti-Chinese violence has shaped ethnic Chinese identities in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

While the countries of focus and methodologies are different, our books provide complementary insights into how states' narratives about belonging shape national identity and political behavior. Hur's case studies show that when national stories portray a strong nation-state attachment, nationalist narratives can inspire democratic participation in places like South Korea. On the other hand, Setijadi's analysis of Chinese Indonesian identity politics reveals the flipside of strong nation-state attachment, where the use of nationalist narratives based on nativism all too often results in the marginalization of minority groups, which ultimately weakens national unity and democracy.

Read together, our books suggest that the resilience of contemporary Asian democracies depends on the existence of inclusive state-led nationalist narratives. Yet the pathway to inclusivity is not uniform. In ethnically homogeneous societies like South Korea, an ethno-racial narrative, which is exclusive in substance, can effectively achieve political inclusivity across the widest swath of the citizen population. In ethnically diverse societies like Indonesia with histories of conflict, inclusivity must embrace rather than reject that diversity. Substantive inclusivity in how the nation is defined does not always guarantee political inclusivity across the citizen population. Often, states must make difficult choices between these two goals.

Together, our books compel social science to reconsider the role of nationalism in democracies. Contrary to the common assumption that nationalism is inherently disruptive to democratic processes, it can also be a tool for democratic empowerment and reconciliation. Our works also highlight the power of narratives. Stories, especially the ones we tell about ourselves, are enormously consequential to how we choose to behave and should be an integral part of any study of identity politics.

Meet the Authors

Adam Hjorthén is Associate Professor of history and Senior Lecturer in American Studies at the Swedish Institute for North American Studies, Uppsala University. He specializes in 20th and 21st century US cultural memory and heritage, and US transatlantic relations with Sweden. He is author of *Cross-Border Commemorations: Celebrating Swedish Settlement in America* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), and co-editor of *Swedish-American Borderlands: New Histories of Transatlantic Relations* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021). He has a PhD in history from Stockholm University, and has been a visiting scholar at the Free University of Berlin, George Washington University, and the University of Minnesota.

Adam Kaul is a Professor of Anthropology at Augustana College in Rock Island Illinois. His research is eclectic, but primarily focuses on the dynamic impacts of tourism on local communities, traditional Irish music, street performers, the anthropology of death & dying, and Swedish-American heritage and ethnic identity. He has conducted ethnographic fieldwork across Ireland for twenty years, and in the American Midwest for over a decade. He is the author of *Turning the Tune: Traditional Music, Tourism, and Social Change in an Irish Village* (Berghahn 2009), co-editor of *Tourists & Tourism: A Reader* (3rd edition, Waveland Press 2018), co-editor of *Leisure & Death: An Anthropological Tour of Risk, Death & Dying* (University of Colorado Press 2018, winner of the Edward Bruner Prize), and co-author of *Becoming Utopia: History, Heritage, and Sustainability in the American Midwest* (under contract with University of Nebraska Press). His PhD. is from the University of Durham.

Agnes Mondragón Celis is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Rochester. Her research explores the forms of knowledge production and circulation that emerge in contexts of generalized violence and opacity, analyzing how they are constitutive of political authority. She is currently developing a book manuscript titled *Mediations of War: Statehood, Criminality, and the Politics of Knowledge in Mexico*, which explores the partial and oblique ways in which Mexicans apprehend the "war on drug trafficking."

Aram Hur is Assistant Professor of Political Science and the Kim Koo Chair in Korean Studies at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. Her research focuses on nationalism and democracy in East Asia. She is the author of *Narratives of Civic Duty: How National Stories Shape Democracy in Asia* (Cornell University Press, 2022), which won the 2023 Robert A. Dahl Award for best book on democracy by an untenured scholar from the American Political Science Association. Previously, she taught at the University of Missouri and served as Co-Director for the MU Institute for Korean Studies. She holds a Ph.D. in Politics from Princeton University, M.P.P from the Harvard Kennedy School, and B.A. with honors from Stanford University.

Elisabeth Niklasson is Lecturer in Archaeology and Director of the Cultural Heritage Programme at University of Aberdeen. She holds a PhD from Stockholm University (2016) and was postdoc at Stanford University 2017–2019. She is editor of the peer-reviewed journal Current Swedish Archaeology. Her research explores the role of cultural heritage in national and international politics, with publications on topics such as EU identity politics and the radical right in Scandinavia. She is editor of the volume *Polarized Pasts* (Berghahn, 2023).

Tahmina Rahman is an Assistant Professor of Political Science in Rollins College, Florida. Her teaching and research focus on polarization, political parties, and civil society in South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa. Her publications include *From Revolutionaries to Visionless Parties: Leftist Politics in Bangladesh* (Carnegie Endowment for International peace 2022); "Party System Institutionalization and Pernicious Polarization in Bangladesh" (The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 2019); and "Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities" (American Behavioral Scientist, 2018). She is currently working on the development of civilizational populism of India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

Charlotte Setijadi is an Assistant Professor of Humanities at the School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University. She researches ethnic Chinese identity politics in Indonesia and the Indonesian diaspora worldwide. Charlotte's research has been published in academic journals such as the Journal of Contemporary China, Asian Survey, and Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies. Her first book *'Memories of Unbelonging: Ethnic Chinese Identity Politics in Post-Suharto Indonesia'* was published by University of Hawaii Press in 2023.

Tania Islas Weinstein is Assistant Professor of Political Science at McGill University. Her research focuses on how art and aesthetics shape the way people experience the world as politically significant. Her recent work has been published or is forthcoming in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, the Journal of Latin American Studies,* and *International Politics*. She co-edited *Beyond Mestizaje: Contemporary Debates on Race in Mexico* (2024, Amherst College Press).

Editorial Team

Executive Editors

Dan Slater specializes in the politics and history of enduring dictatorships and emerging democracies, with a regional focus on Southeast Asia. At the University of Michigan, he serves as the Director of the Center for Emerging Democracies and the James Orin Murfin Professor of Political Science. Previously, he served for 12 years on the faculty at the University of Chicago, where he was the Director of the Center for International Social Science Research, Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, and associate member in the Department of Sociology.

Rob Mickey is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan. His research focuses on U.S. politics in comparative and historical perspective. He is interested in the country's belated (as well as incomplete) democratization by the 1970s, its current democratic backsliding, and the place of racial conflict in each. He is now at work with David Waldner on a book-length study of America's Reconstruction in comparative perspective with other postwar efforts to construct democratic polities and diverse economies in societies dominated by labor-repressive agriculture. He is also exploring the historical legacies of mid-20th century urban racial conflict for America's contemporary policing with Jake Grumbach and Daniel Ziblatt.

Managing Editor

Adam Fefer is research coordinator with the Center for Emerging Democracies. He manages the Democracy and Autocracy Newsletter and Freedom House fellowship program. Adam has a Ph.D. in Political Science from UC San Diego. His research focuses on democratic change, ethnic conflict, and power-sharing, with a geographical focus on the Horn of Africa and South Asia.

Guest Editor

Jennifer McCoy is Regent's Professor of Political Science at Georgia State University and Nonresident Scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, as well as Research Affiliate at CEU's Democracy Institute in Budapest. She was named a 2024 Andrew Carnegie Fellow for her project, "Mitigating Pernicious Polarization through Innovative Civic Educational Interventions." Her current book project is Depolarizing Politics with Murat Somer, under contract with Princeton University Press. Her latest volume is *Polarizing Polities: A Global Threat to Democracy*, co-edited with Murat Somer (2019).

About *Democracy and Autocracy*

Democracy and Autocracy is the official newsletter of the American Political Science Association's Democracy and Autocracy section (formerly known as the Comparative Democratization section). First known as *CompDem*, it has been published three times a year since 2003. In October 2010, the newsletter was renamed *APSA-CD* and expanded to include substantive articles on democracy, as well as news and notes on the latest developments in the field. In September 2018, it was renamed the *Annals of Comparative Democratization* to reflect the increasingly high academic content and recognition of the symposia.

Section News

From the Journal of Democracy

The Journal of Democracy has been a leading forum for expert discussion of the biggest questions in democracy—all in a clear, accessible prose that makes our essays favorites for university settings. As you refresh your syllabi, consider this collection of recent Journal essays on everything from why democracy survives populism, the real dangers of generative AI, and why Russia was never a democracy. Also, check out our special symposiums on the future of liberalism and India's democratic backsliding.

"Power, Performance, and Legitimacy" (April 2024)

Larry Diamond

Around the world, democracy has lost steam. If we are to regain the momentum, we must harness these essential elements and wage the struggle with the conviction that the times demand.

"Why Democracy Survives Populism" (January 2024)

Kurt Weyland

Populism is a mortal threat to liberal democracy, but it rarely hits the mark. The evidence shows that these would-be strongmen require an extraordinary set of circumstances to succeed, which is why they so rarely do.

"Democracy's Surprising Resilience" (October 2023)

Steven Levitsky, Lucan A. Way

Despite worry of an authoritarian resurgence, the vast majority of "third wave" democracies are enduring. Democracy, buoyed by economic growth and urbanization, is outperforming most people's expectations or fears.

Symposium: Redefining Liberalism (April 2024)

"The Liberalism of Refuge"

Bryan Garsten

Liberal societies are those which offer refuge from the very people they empower—through individual choice,

mobility, and the possibility of exit. This is the form of liberty that most clearly elevates the liberal project.

"Liberalism as Fortress and Prison"

Nadia Urbinati

The power of liberalism—though limited and never revered—enables it to serve as refuge while taming the demons of liberal society.

"The Limits of Liberalism"

William Galston

The liberal emphasis on unhindered mobility comes with costs, particularly for those unable to leave.

"Liberal Tolerance for an Intolerant Age"

Jason Brennan

What distinguishes liberal societies from all others is that they tolerate immoral behavior. It is this tolerance that protects us not just from our leaders but ourselves.

"A Refuge from Liberalism?"

Patrick J. Deneen

The belief we can "escape" remains a part of the liberal imagination. In truth, it is realized in the form of detachment from any community, an exodus without refuge.

"A Reply to My Critics"

Bryan Garsten

A liberal society must reckon the demands of the common good, while offering what we most crave—something worth sacrificing for.

"Why Autocracies Fear LGBTQ+ Rights" (April 2024)

Gino Pauselli and María-José Urzúa

The battle over rights for sexual minorities has divided countries into opposing camps. But autocrats are lashing out with one aim: countering the liberal international order.

"The Global Resistance to LGBTIQ Rights" (January 2024)

Phillip Ayoub, Kristina Stoeckl

Autocrats have found a new way to turn citizens against liberal democracy: convincing them that LGBTIQ rights, granted and protected in much of the West, pose a threat to their nation and its values.

"The Autocrat-in-Training: The Sisi Regime at 10" (January 2024)

Hesham Sallam

Egypt's general-turned-president has spent lavishly, cemented the military's political and economic control, and, afraid of suffering Mubarak's fate, become increasingly repressive. But with crushing inflation and everyday people suffering, is Sisi losing his grip?

Special Package: Tests to African Democracy (2024)

"The Truth About Africa's Coups"

Ken Ochieng' Opalo

Praetorian politics are not making a comeback. Africa's recent putsches have more to do with democracy's failure to deliver than any fondness for military rule.

"How Strategic Violence Distorts African Elections"

Michael Wahman

Violence need not be lethal to pose a threat to democracy. Indeed, low-scale violence has proven to be a far more effective means of manipulating elections.

"Why Malawi's Democracy Endures"

Kim Yi Dionne

Malawi is a "hard place" for democracy—its economy struggles and state capacity is weak. So how has it avoided the pitfalls that have doomed so many others?

"How Latin America's Judges Are Defending Democracy" (January 2024)

Diego A. Zambrano, Ludmilla Martins da Silva, Rolando Garcia Miron, Santiago P. Rodriguez

Can a strong, independent supreme court serve as a guarantor of democracy? In Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, judges are showing a surprising resolve in fending off their countries' antidemocratic forces.

"How Guatemala Defied the Odds" (October 2023)

Rachel A. Schwartz, Anita Isaacs

Almost no one expected a little-known candidate to defeat the ruling antidemocratic regime at the ballot box. But the Guatemalan opposition, backed by the international community, exploited the criminal oligarchy's fissures to halt the country's authoritarian slide.

"Why Latin America's Democracies Are Stuck" (January 2023)

Scott Mainwaring, Aníbal Pérez-Liñán

This is the toughest time for Latin America's democracies in decades. Democratic stagnation makes them ripe targets for illiberal populists and other would-be authoritarians who will feed the region's worst vices.

"The Real Dangers of Generative AI" (January 2024)

Danielle Allen, E. Glen Weyl

Advanced AI faces twin perils: the collapse of democratic control over key state functions or the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of the few. Avoiding these risks will require new ways of governing.

"Why Russia's Democracy Never Began" (July 2023)

Maria Snegovaya

People obsess over where Russia's democracy went wrong. The truth is it did not fail: Russia's democratic transition never got off the starting blocks.

"In Europe, Democracy Erodes from the Right" (January 2023)

Milan W. Svolik, Johanna Lutz, Filip Milačić, Elena Avramovska

When ordinary voters are given a choice between democracy and partisan loyalty, who will put democracy first? Frighteningly, Europe harbors a deep reservoir of authoritarian potential.

"Hindu Nationalism and the New Jim Crow" (January 2024)

Ashutosh Varshney, Connor Staggs

While the histories of white supremacy and Hindu supremacy are different, their political objectives are much the same. The BJP is forging a regime of exclusion and oppression as brutal as the Jim Crow South. Only India's voters can reverse its advance.

Anthony R. Brunello *(Eckerd College)* recently published the following article:

Brunello, Anthony R. "Extended commentary—Keeping the republic: A vision for America." *World Affairs 187,* no. 1 (2024): 106-117.

Vladimir Gel'man (*University of Helsinki*) received an award of honorary doctor from Malmö University, Sweden. He also recently published the following articles:

Gel'man, V., 2024. "Escape from Political Freedom. The Constitutional Crisis of 1993 and Russia's Political Trajectory." *Russian History, 50*(1-2), pp.1-20.

Gel'man, Vladimir. "Varieties of authoritarianism: violence, electoralism, and manipulations." (2024): 233-238.

Fabrice Lehoucq (*University of North Carolina, Greensboro*) published the following article:

"The Coup Trap in Guatemala," in Omar Sánchez-Sibony, ed., *State-Society Relations in Guatemala: Theory and Practice* (Lantham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2023), pp. 87-112.

Shamiran Mako *(Boston University)* recently published the following article:

Mako, Shamiran, and Allison McCulloch. "Afterword: Consociationalism and the State: Situating Lebanon and Iraq in a Global Perspective." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics 30,* no. 1 (2024): 164-172.

Jennifer McCoy (*Georgia State University*) was named a 2024 Andrew Carnegie Fellow, one of 28 scholars

nationwide who will explore political polarization as well as what might help tackle division and strengthen American democracy. The Fellowship will fund a two-year project, "Mitigating Pernicious Polarization through Innovative Civic Educational Interventions," with co-investigator Michael Evans to build student civic skills and dispositions to navigate the growing challenges of disinformation, distrust in government, divisive political rhetoric, and social fragmentation. It will measure the impact of innovative civic education assignments given to over 16,000 students over two years.

Kelly McMann, Lucy Adams Leffingwell Professor at Case Western Reserve University, is spending the 2024-2025 academic year as a Visiting Fellow at the Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame.

Olena Nikolayenko (Professor of Political Science, Fordham University) was a Foreign Visitors Fellow at the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center at Hokkaido University, Japan from July 1 to September 1, 2024. She delivered talks on contentious politics in Eastern Europe at Hokkaido University and the University of Tokyo.

Lynette Ong (*University of Toronto*) was promoted to Distinguished Professor of Chinese Politics at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy. Their book, *Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China*, was named a co-winner of the 2024 Canadian Political Science Association's Best Book Prize in Comparative Politics.

Max Stephenson Jr. (*Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance*) recently published the following articles:

Guerra, Vanessa, Max Stephenson Jr, Desirée Poets, and Molly F. Todd. "The contributions of community-led newspapers to the resilience of Rio's Maré and Rocinha favelas during the COVID-19 pandemic." *Journal of Urban Affairs* (2024): 1-17.

Moayerian, Neda, Desirée Poets, Max Stephenson, and Cathy Grimes. "The Arts and Individual and Collective Agency." *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies 10*, no. 4 (2023): 58-80.

Güneş Murat Tezcür (Arizona State University) recenlty published the following book:

Tezcür, Günes Murat. *Liminal Minorities: Religious Difference and Mass Violence in Muslim Societies.* Cornell University Press, 2024.

Julian Waller (*George Washington University & Center for naval Analyses*) recently published the following articles:

Julian G. Waller, "Characterizing Future Authoritarian Governance in the Space Domain," Journal of Advanced Military Studies, 15:1 Spring 2024, pp. 115-135.

Julian G. Waller, "Illiberalism and Authoritarianism," in Marlene Laruelle, ed. *Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*, 2024.

Julian G. Waller, "Distinctions With a Difference: Illiberalism and Authoritarianism in Scholarly Study," Political Studies Review, 22(2), May 2024, 365-386.

Kurt Weyland (*University of Texas at Austin)* recently published the following book and articles:

Weyland, Kurt. *Democracy's Resilience to Populism's Threat: Countering Global Alarmism.* Cambridge University Press, 2024.

Weyland, Kurt. "Concept Misformation in the Age of Democratic Anxiety: Recent Temptations and Their Downsides." *World Politics 76*, no. 3 (2024): 594-637.

Matthew S. Winters will become the Director of the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies at the University of Illinois at the beginning of the 2024-25 academic year. He looks forward to leading the center into its seventh decade, supporting East Asian studies on the Champaign-Urbana campus and global collaborations.

Matthew also recently published the following article:

Moreira, Jair A., Hyo-Won Shin, Matthew S. Winters, and Cara Wong. "Ballots beyond borders: attitudes towards external voting in Colombia." *Democratization* (2024): 1-29.