



Article

# Aggrieved White Men and the Danger They Pose to Democracy and Peace

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**Abstract:** This article examines the resurgence of fascism and white supremacy politics in Western societies through the lens of status, honor, and dignity. By focusing on the political appeal of leaders like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Viktor Orbán, and others, this study argues that these leaders resonate with primarily white, male supporters who feel that their social status and cultural identity are under threat. Drawing on works by Isabel Wilkerson, Ashley Jardina, and Arlie Hochschild, this analysis highlights how anxieties surrounding demographic shifts, perceived “status loss”, and narratives of cultural displacement fuel support for authoritarian policies. It posits that contemporary right-wing movements in the US, Europe, and Latin America are less about economic grievances and more about defending a social hierarchy in which white identity is paramount. This pursuit, while objectively not the same, still mirrors struggles among historically marginalized communities, as discussed by scholars like Bhimrao Ambedkar and Gopal Guru, challenging traditional rational-choice models of political behavior. Relying on an auto-ethnographic account obtained from living in one of the US’s most conservative regions, the West Texas plains, this study suggests that authoritarianism’s appeal lies in its promise to restore a social order steeped in white male dominance, showing how feelings of honor and pride can override democratic principles and fuel political polarization. Ultimately, this article cautions that a social science approach relying solely on rational actor models risks overlooking the potent influence of status anxieties in shaping modern political landscapes, with significant implications for democracy and justice.



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## 1. Introduction

In this article, I examine how a focus on status and its derivatives, honor and dignity can shed light on the rising support for authoritarian and even fascist politics now re-emerging in Western societies and former colonies. This trend is visible in nations such as the United States, Hungary, Italy, France, Germany, Austria, and Argentina, indicating a broader political shift toward right-wing ideologies and white supremacist politics worldwide.

In the United States, Donald Trump’s political trajectory exemplifies this shift toward authoritarianism and even fascism. Jason Stanley (2020) in *How Fascism Works* identifies a broad repertoire of tactics that facilitate the path toward fascism, including appeals to a “mythic past”, propaganda, anti-intellectualism, and the portrayal of certain groups as threats. He warns that “the dangers of fascist politics come from the particular way in which it dehumanizes segments of the population” (Stanley 2020, pp. xxviii–xxix). Trump

has proposed openly authoritarian measures that undermine democratic governance, threatening institutional autonomy and framing political opponents as enemies of the state (Boucher 2024). However, Trump's rise is not an isolated case.

In Brazil, a "honor lens" helps to understand support for Jair Bolsonaro, the former president whose policies resemble those of Donald Trump in the United States and who, like Trump, is facing legal challenges. Vânia Penha-Lopes (2021) has shown that both Trump and Bolsonaro capitalized on a sense of cultural loss among white populations. Penha-Lopes finds that a significant portion of Trump's support came from white evangelical voters who felt threatened by demographic changes and perceived moral decline in society (da Cunha 2021; Trangerud 2021). Bolsonaro's rise resonated with who felt their cultural identity was under siege (Amaral 2020; Rennó 2020). This cultural backlash indicates a broader trend where right-wing populist leaders exploit fears of losing cultural hegemony to mobilize support. The presidency of Javier Milei in Argentina presents a comparable phenomenon.

In Europe, leaders like Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Marine Le Pen in France, Herbert Kickl in Austria, and Björn Höcke from Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) exhibit a similar ideological orientation. Their platforms blend nationalism, xenophobia, and anti-democratic rhetoric aimed against what they see as an erosion of Western heritage. They propose a retreat to an imagined past where power, status, and racial "purity" were preserved, unchallenged by multiculturalism or liberal tolerance.

Social scientists, often reliant on behavioral models rooted in rational choice theory, have struggled to accurately predict the electoral success of figures like Trump, Milei, and Bolsonaro. Many of the policies advanced by these leaders appear neither rational nor beneficial to those who support them, posing a challenge to traditional social science explanations that are based on rational, self-interested, and utilitarian behavior models. Given their methodological choices, economists, in particular, have been unable to explain the "irrational" voting behavior of those who tend to economically suffer from the policies imposed by those they vote into power (Jardina 2019; Hochschild 2016, 2024).

Similarly, political analysts seeking to explain the rise of Bolsonaro, Trump, Kickl, Orbán, Milei, and similar others through a lens of neoliberalism, capitalism, and changing patterns of employment have fallen short of adequately capturing their rise and their appeal to those who are likely to suffer from the very economic policies these leaders propose. References to their "false consciousness" underestimate the power of pride and dignity that seem to motivate the support of right-wing and proto-fascist policies today as they did in the past (Jardina 2019; Bastos and Recuero 2023; Francia 2017).

Overall, a social science that has willingly confined itself to rational actor behavioral models seems unable to explain why some people are willing to vote for politicians who propose economic policies that will harm them. Such irrational behavior falls outside of explanatory models grounded in utilitarian frameworks that are based on economic rationality and on the assumption of radically individualistic actors, motivated by economic gain alone. To capture the global rise of the right and the dangers it poses to democracy and peace, a different behavioral model is required, one able to capture emotions and such "irrational" motivations as pride and dignity.

In this article, I propose to examine the rise of the right through a lens of status, honor, and dignity. I argue that it is particularly white men in societies constructed upon male dominance and white supremacy who are driving this movement, based on their perceived loss of relative pride and dignity vis à vis other groups who they have historically dominated. Aggrieved white men, once they start to perceive themselves as a group, have posed serious threats to democracy in the recent past. As their power is rising again,

democracy and peace are again at peril. I follow Max Weber ([1922] 2002) in my treatment of status, who has defined it as a marker of honor, and I adopt Pierre Bourdieu's treatment of societal honor, composed of symbolic and cultural capitals (Bourdieu 1984).

By focusing on status, I do not want to imply that my analytical framework is the *only* lens able to explain the current success of rightwing politics in the world. Most social and political outcomes have more than one cause (Bhaskar 2008), and more specific explanations require more contextualized treatments. I do aim to capture the common elements that rightwing movements in such different countries as Hungary, the US, Argentina, and Brazil share, which requires a level of abstraction from the specific forces at play in each country.

The lens of status, dignity, and pride thus aims at providing additional insights, complementing country-specific explanations as well as the analyses more focused on economic factors provided by such authors as Smångs (2021); Kalil et al. (2023); Penha-Lopes (2021); da Cunha (2021); Trangerud (2021); Bastos and Recuero (2023); Francia (2017); Yoder (2020); Weisskircher (2020); Förtner et al. (2020); and Pesthy et al. (2020), to name but a few.

An analytical focus on status, I want to suggest in this article, with its related components of pride and dignity, provides an additional and insightful way to conceptualize, frame, and hence explain the current rise in right-wing and proto-fascist politics worldwide. I shall illustrate the usefulness of such a framework by providing an auto-ethnographic account of my own living situation in one of the US's most conservative cities and counties, Lubbock, Texas. In the 2024 presidential elections, Trump won over 90 percent of votes in some counties of the West Texas plains. Understanding why so many West Texans support Trump thus allows for a contextualized explanation that is, however, generalizable within limits to all those places going through similar changes today.

## 2. Honor and the Defense of White Supremacy

Recent scholarship has provided valuable insights into the resurgence of white supremacy and its connection to status preservation. Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste* (2020) and Ashley Jardina's *White Identity Politics* (2019) highlight the significance of the "magical year of 2042" in the United States, when projections indicate that white Americans will no longer form the majority of the population. Both authors argue that this demographic shift lies at the core of white America's anxiety, fueling fears of political and cultural displacement. Jardina, utilizing a quantitative political science approach, documents measurable responses among white Americans to perceived threats to their status, offering an empirical basis for understanding the resonance of "replacement theory" in current political discourse.

The "replacement theory" suggests that Black, brown, Muslim, and other non-white, non-Christian groups will eventually outnumber populations of European descent, leading to a fundamental shift in Western culture and values. Wilkerson and Jardina argue that this belief fuels animosity in white communities, especially in the United States, where it taps into deep-seated fears of racial and cultural "contamination". They contend that the support for authoritarian leaders is not driven solely by economic or political discontent but by a profound existential threat to white identity and social status.

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild adds to this discourse with her ethnographic studies in *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016) and *Stolen Pride* (2024). Her research focuses on the emotional and psychological dimensions of perceived status loss among white Americans who feel alienated in their own country. In Louisiana, where she conducted fieldwork, Hochschild found that many white Trump supporters feel they are being left behind, standing in line toward the American dream without making any progress, often for generations. They interpret the advancement of marginalized groups as a betrayal, facilitated by government policies like affirmative action. This "line-cutting" narrative, as Hochschild describes,

fosters a zero-sum perspective, where any gain for Black or Hispanic communities is seen as a loss for white Americans.

In *Stolen Pride*, Hochschild extends her analysis by studying white supremacist groups in Kentucky, identifying a “pride paradox” among white Americans in economically stagnant regions such as coal and steel communities. For many, especially those without higher education, Trump represents a symbolic restoration of pride, using immigrants and minorities as scapegoats and reframing the conversation around honor and dignity in ways that resonate with the disenfranchised.

White supremacy functions both as a motivator and a mechanism for status preservation, as Eduardo [Bonilla-Silva \(2018\)](#) explains. He refers to “racialized social systems” in which advantages are allocated along racial lines, creating a hierarchy that privileges whiteness. In homogenous communities like Lubbock, defending white identity is seen as synonymous with preserving the social order. Efforts toward racial equity are thus viewed as direct threats to this order and perceived as attempts to undermine white status.

What it means to be white, to be sure, means different things in different countries and at different moments in time. It is historically, sociologically, politically, and geographically contingent ([Reiter 2020](#)). However, considering that aggrieved white men have been at the forefront of contemporary right-wing politics, it also appears that there is a shared framework that allows many of them to perceive themselves as “losing ground” vis à vis other groups. The fact that those other groups consist of historically marginalized groups indicates the importance of European colonialism for providing this shared framework. White identity politics are on the rise mostly where white male supremacy was implemented by European colonizers and where progressive policies, implemented over the past decades, have started to address unjust inequalities and marginalizations, thus threatening to erode white male supremacy.

What becomes clear is that authoritarianism’s appeal is not only about economic promises but also about restoring a threatened social hierarchy. My own observations add another layer to this discussion. Since moving to Lubbock, Texas—a predominantly right-wing, pro-Trump city—in 2020, I have seen firsthand how nostalgia for “traditional American values” permeates daily life, infusing even ordinary practices with symbolic weight. This perspective from within Trump’s America highlights how deeply embedded these sentiments are, as they manifest across various aspects of life and community interactions.

### 3. Pride and Dignity

As Indian scholars Gopal [Guru \(2009\)](#) and Bhimrao Ramji [Ambedkar \(2014\)](#) have noted, when marginalized communities gain opportunities for autonomy and voice, they often prioritize recognition and dignity over financial rewards. Poulomi [Chakrabarti \(2020\)](#), drawing from her research in India, shows that political leaders from historically oppressed caste groups frequently engage in symbolic expressions of status, such as building monuments, upon assuming public office. These actions emphasize the pursuit of dignity and status recognition over material welfare alone—a phenomenon mirrored in various historically marginalized populations ([Chakrabarti 2020](#)).

The insights of Guru, Ambedkar, and Chakrabarti challenge the traditional economic notion that humans act primarily as self-interested, rational profit maximizers. Amartya Sen, another Indian scholar, already argued in the 1970s that people are not “rational fools” but rather seek sympathy and commitment as ethical principles, guiding behavior beyond mere utility ([Sen 1977](#), p. 335). Critiquing utility theory for its simplicity, he observed, “The purely economic man is indeed close to being a social moron” ([Sen 1977](#), p. 336). This perspective suggests that economic motivations are often secondary to social factors like honor and community solidarity.

Chakrabarti (2020) further elaborates that claims for dignity by marginalized groups often manifest as demands for representation—whether symbolic, such as public recognition of identity, or descriptive, such as demographic parity in public institutions (Pitkin 1967; Chakrabarti 2020, pp. 8–9). This focus on representational justice highlights dignity as a primary motivator, challenging the rational-choice models that dominate economics and other social science theories.

What Sen, Guru, Ambedkar, and Chakrabarti collectively reveal is that human motivation within market dynamics extends beyond economic utility. Although self-interest is significant, behavioral theories based on rational choice alone tend to overlook the socio-cultural contexts in which individuals act. Indeed, a social science constructed entirely on rational actor behavioral models has been notoriously unable to explain, let alone predict, the success of such leaders as Trump, Bolsonaro, Orban, and Milei.

The search for dignity is also central to the Muslim world, as Akbar Ahmed (2003) has argued. Ahmed shows that honor is intricately linked to Muslim identity, particularly in cultures where it serves as a protective mechanism against perceived threats. This notion is supported by Maitner et al., who suggest that honor becomes associated with identities that provide individuals with strength and protection against rivals, historically rooted in tribal and familial structures but extending to national identities in contemporary contexts (Maitner et al. 2017). In Ahmed's narrative, the honor of the Muslim community is often under siege, leading to a defensive posture that shapes both individual and collective responses to external challenges. The emphasis on honor as a core aspect of identity resonates with the findings of Frey et al., who highlight how adherence to honor norms can significantly influence emotional reactions and identity formation (Frey et al. 2020). Furthermore, Ahmed's examination of honor reveals its dual role as both a source of pride and a potential catalyst for conflict.

The pressure to uphold familial and communal honor can lead to extreme measures, including violence, as illustrated in the work of Ashokkumar and Swann, who discuss how perceived violations of honor can provoke aggressive responses within honor cultures (Ashokkumar and Swann 2022). This dynamic is particularly poignant in Ahmed's analysis of the Muslim experience, where the community's honor is often threatened by external narratives that associate Islam with terrorism and violence. The implications of this siege mentality are profound, as individuals may feel compelled to defend their honor in ways that reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate cycles of violence. Moreover, Ahmed's insights into the gendered dimensions of honor are critical in understanding the complexities of identity within Muslim communities.

In Muslim communities, women, in particular, are often seen as bearers of family honor, and their actions are closely monitored to ensure compliance with societal expectations. This perspective is echoed in the research by Menal Ahmad, which highlights how ethnic minority women navigate their autonomy within honor-related contexts, often facing violence for deviating from traditional honor codes (Ahmad 2023). Ahmad's work underscores the intersection of honor, gender, and identity, revealing how these factors interplay to shape the lived experiences of Muslims in a world that frequently misrepresents their values and practices.

If honor, dignity, and recognition are indeed central to human motivation, the rise in right-wing authoritarianism and fascism can be interpreted as a reaction from those who feel neglected and who perceive their dignity and honor under siege. The fact that predominantly white men support authoritarian leaders, storm capitol buildings, and long for the "good old days" highlights the legacies of European colonialism, with its deep-rooted androcentrism and white supremacy.

The mobilizing power of dignity and pride, as the current resurgence of white identity politics worldwide suggests, is, however, not just about objective grievances, as whites, as a group, still dominate those societies where they have voted in authoritarian leaders. It is about their *perception* of a gradual loss of power vis à vis those groups they have previously dominated. Ultimately, then, white identity politics are based on an emergent sense of “groupness” (Brubaker 2006) based on fear and a perceived loss of status, even if such a status was never just. What the analyses of Sen (1977), Ambedkar (2014), Guru (2009), and Chakrabarti (2020) tell us is that loss of status is indeed a powerful motivator to form collective identities and to mobilize those who feel aggrieved. This does not mean that the grievances of Dalits are the same as those of white men supporting Trump and Bolsonaro; they are certainly not on objective and moral grounds. However, white men feeling aggrieved have had a similar effect on them as being effectively excluded has had on Dalits. It lets them identify as a group and mobilize their shared group identity.

Highlighting that it is not objective conditions that mobilize people and foster their belonging to groups but their perceived reality, particularly in situations of a perceived decline or loss of status vis à vis other groups provides a qualification to the argument of Rogers Brubaker (2006) who explained the emergence of groupness as triggered by objective conditions. A focus on perceived decline also allows for a better capturing of the role played by the media, as the perception of decline or loss among white men has been actively fanned by the rightwing media (Bastos and Recuero 2023; Francia 2017).

#### 4. Gender: Weak Men Driving Hard Politics

In the 2024 presidential elections, some 60 percent of white men voted for Trump, making this group his strongest block. Brazil’s Bolsonaro garnered about the same amount of support from white men. In Argentina, 64 percent of support for Milei came from men. Viktor Orban’s Fidesz is mostly supported by men, even if precise data are hard to come by. The German AfD, the Austrian FPÖ, the Italian Fdl, and the French National Front, now known as the National Rally, are all made possible by aggrieved and latently angry white men. Gender clearly must be part of any attempt to explain their successes.

As the classic study of early Nazi adopters in Germany by Klaus Theweleit (1977) has shown, it was men who felt threatened by women who became the first to join the Nazi movement. Theweleit psychoanalytical study focuses on the members of the Freikorps, paramilitary groups of former WWI soldiers, to show how, for these men, women posed a challenge to their identities. Beyond the physical presence of women among them, they particularly feared strong, outspoken women, and they reacted violently against a perceived rise in “female principles” in society. Theweleit connects this fear to the sexual anxiety of men who are ultimately insecure about their own identities and sexuality. To fend off the perceived corrosion of their manhood by women and female principles, these men resorted to fascism and violence. The profile of those who stormed the US Congress on 6 January 2021 strongly overlaps with those of the German Freikorps members. They, too, used violence, staged uprisings, and murdered innocents framed as their enemies. In a sad coincidence, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were also murdered on January in 1919.

In today’s political landscape, where women, but also Jews, Blacks, Gays, and Trans people are again threatened by insecure, mostly white men, fascism and violence are on the rise again. Successfully addressing the rise in fascism and authoritarianism must include a grappling with male identities and find a way to address the needs of those men whose identities are threatened by sexual anxiety, possibly connected to binary gender norms that force them into uneasy, uncomfortable, or even unbearable social roles (Bosson et al. 2021),

that contribute to the construction of the kind of toxic masculinities prone to violence that have become the hallmark of many proto-fascist white men.

To complicate matters, white women have also played important roles, making the rise of Trump and his simulacra possible. In the 2024 presidential elections in the US, 53 percent of white women voted for Trump, compared to only 7 percent of Black women. Race thus trumps gender in its explanatory power towards understanding Trump and, one must assume, others he inspires.

Still, in her 2023 work, Kyla Schuller explores how white women have historically combined elements of feminism with racism. Schuller finds that nearly half of Republican women voters—specifically 42 percent—identify as feminists (Schuller 2023, p. 2). She argues that, despite supporting a president who is a convicted sex offender and a known chauvinist, many white American women view aligning themselves with right-wing, authoritarian, racist, and even fascist leaders as a way to further a narrowly defined agenda focused on equal pay and market access. Some, self-identifying as activists for social justice and equal rights, nevertheless, support policies and politicians who aim to uphold white supremacy.

## 5. Living in Trump Country: A Personal Perspective

Living in Lubbock, Texas—a solidly Republican city and region—has allowed me to get to know Republicans, by whom I am now surrounded. The following auto-ethnographic account aims to illustrate the lifeworlds and associated values of those who feel that their lives and lifestyles have come under threat.

My wife and I moved to the Texas Plains in 2020 to work at Texas Tech University. Lubbock County backed Trump in the 2024 election with 69 percent of the vote, while surrounding rural counties in the Texas Panhandle gave him 70–95 percent support. Although some Lubbock neighborhoods—primarily Black, Hispanic, or university-adjacent—lean Democratic, the city as a whole remains staunchly Republican and committedly rightwing. The insights I can provide into these dynamics are thus specific to my place of living, but they are also typical and, as such, generalizable within limits.

My neighborhood, a predominantly white, affluent area, embodies this right-wing ethos. Trump flags and signs are ubiquitous, and the cultural fabric feels rooted in a nostalgic view of America. The aesthetics of the 1950s and the 1980s prevail—Reagan is revered as the hero who “made America great”, while the progressive shifts in the 1960s and 1970s seem absent from the collective memory. This neighborhood celebrates holidays with fervor: Christmas brings Disney-like displays with lights, inflatable Santas, and reindeer; Independence Day, Memorial Day, and Veterans Day see the streets lined with American flags. In this community, holidays and Christian rituals symbolize a commitment to “traditional American values” as an act of defiance against societal change.

Lubbock itself reflects a Reagan-era vision of America, where trucks are favored over cars, public parks are few and neglected, recycling is minimal, and public amenities like sidewalks and public transit are rare. Chain restaurants dominate, with local favorites like Sonic and Dairy Queen, while upscale dining and yoga studios are few. Christianity and patriotism are cultural cornerstones, and Sunday mornings are the quietest hours in town as nearly everyone attends church. Here, people proudly live in what they consider the “good old days”, untouched by trends toward diversity, environmentalism, or multiculturalism. Global warming is labeled a left-wing conspiracy, and science, in general, is viewed with suspicion.

The typical Lubbockite embodies the demographic profile most likely to support Trump: white and without a college education. Lubbockites fall behind the national educational average, with 35 percent holding a college degree (compared to the national

average of about 40 percent). Lubbock is a college town. Outside of the “city”, college-degree holders drop to under 10 percent in some counties.

## 6. The “Deplorables”

In her bid for the presidency, Hillary Clinton referred to some of those supporting Trump as “deplorables”. Living amongst those labeled such, I am able to witness firsthand some of their life choices and plights. To many in Lubbock, terms like “sophisticated” and “cosmopolitan” are insults, emblematic of values that threaten their lifestyle and beliefs. To them, driving a large truck and wearing wrangler jeans and cowboy boots and an expensive cowboy hat is enough to signal being well off. Male fashion statements here are typically made by wearing a large belt buckle. Women show their sense of fashion by treating their hair with hairspray and forming it into elaborate hives of surprising height and resilience against the strong winds that are typical here.

Cosmopolitan lifestyles have transformed not just what people wear and what they consume, as Bourdieu (1984) has argued. It has become embodied. Being perceived as “uncool”, “lame”, and “ugly” has become physically manifest as most of those labeled such are now overweight, deeply affecting the self-esteem, honor, and pride of these mostly rural “deplorables”. Indeed, as the latest fashion trend, fed by Ozempic, again favors the super skinny, “the deplorables” are getting fatter. The latest data suggest that 45 percent of those Americans without a complete college education are obese, compared to some 27 percent of college-educated Americans.<sup>1</sup> Distrusting and willfully ignoring nutrition science and unable to afford organic food, they eat themselves literally to death. The life expectancy of college-educated Americans was, on average, 8.5 years higher than of those without a BA.<sup>2</sup> This trend is further aided by increased rates of drug-related deaths disproportionately affecting non-college educated whites.<sup>3</sup>

The income of those not having a college education has remained stagnant for decades. Those earning a median income of around USD 40,000/year (Americans with some or no college, but no degree), witness daily, how fancy influencers and slim celebrities earn millions simply for forging, and embodying, the latest fashion trend.

The appeal of religion makes sense for all those who feel, and effectively are, judged as “being a loser”. God, after all, loves all his children, and he does not judge, at least not until you die, and even then, he cares not for fashionably slimness or a college diploma. In the Christian churches so dominant in places like Lubbock, deplorables can feel loved, valued, and appreciated. Christian religion, beyond representing the “good old days” also allows for recuperating, or at least mitigating, lost status.

Many in Lubbock see themselves as “ordinary Americans”, distinct from the “cosmopolitan elite” on the coasts. They do not read *The New York Times*, rarely travel abroad, and are detached from trends in fashion or global politics. Their views align closely with the conservative perspectives promoted by media outlets like Fox News, ubiquitous in any local store. For these residents, “cosmopolitanism” is a threat to their way of life; “sophistication” and “modernity” are not aspirations but corrosive forces of a good Christian lifestyle. It should not come as a surprise then, that in the US, white Christians embrace more anti-black racism than any other group.<sup>4</sup>

When I tried to sign up for a home delivery of the *Financial Times*, I had to learn that this is impossible, for lack of demand. Recently, when asking for soda water and grapefruit juice in a local diner, the waitress told me that they are “not fancy enough” for these requests. They only serve plain water and orange juice. There was a certain pride in her voice and demeanor.

This way of life, steeped in a nostalgic vision of America, embodies resistance to a more diverse, environmentally conscious, and inclusive future. Many Lubbockites view issues



like climate change as conspiracies and racism as a resolved issue. Queerness remains a largely unseen and unspoken subject.

Lubbock represents a population that feels not only left behind but increasingly alienated by cultural shifts. Lubbockites know that their preferences, values, and lifestyles are often mocked by “coastal elites”. This sense of ridicule is internalized, with some wearing T-shirts declaring, “I am a Deplorable”, reflecting their awareness of how they are perceived by more liberal, educated groups. The 2024 presidential election underscored how many Americans share this worldview. My findings resonate with those by [Norris and Inglehart \(2019\)](#) who describe the rise in populist authoritarianism as a reaction against “cultural elites” who advocate values that diverge from traditionalist norms. This backlash, they argue, is a global phenomenon, manifesting in nations where demographic changes and liberal policies challenge historical majority dominance.

## 7. Forward to the Past

What Lubbock has taught me is that Trump’s appeal is not about political preferences; it is about a broader contest over what kind of future America will have. Supporting Trump is a way for many here to resist a modernity that they believe marginalizes them. In their view, the future they are fighting for is a past where family, faith, hard work, and traditional values prevail. This vision has no room for groups that challenge these values: queers, Blacks, Jews, Hispanics, Muslims, immigrants, or the transgender community. By driving large trucks, rejecting environmental concerns, and maintaining green lawns in a semi-desert region, they hold onto a version of America where such issues do not intrude on daily life. Avoidance is their central coping strategy.

For right-wing Lubbockites, resistance is not mainly about political ideology; it is rooted in a deep sense of pride, honor, and dignity tied to their identities. They feel entrapped in a cultural battle over their way of life. It has left them feeling defensive and alienated ([Mols and Jetten 2017](#)).

Voting for Trump and similar leaders is ultimately rooted in fear and denial. It reflects a fear of societal change and a reluctance to acknowledge the pressing need for sustainable alternatives to safeguard the future. Many right-wing whites also fear that those long-oppressed, particularly Black Americans, might seek retribution. Lubbock has a history of enforcing “sun-down laws”, allowing whites to stop and question Blacks about their whereabouts, and the city remains highly segregated to this day. The city’s poorer areas are predominantly Black and Hispanic, and these neighborhoods host industrial facilities, including cotton storage sites, rail stations, and energy plants—large, loud, and polluting. Groundwater levels are dwindling, and record-breaking heat continues to define the summers. Yet, in the face of these challenges, Lubbockites maintain a vision rooted in pride, honor, and defiance against change, seemingly oblivious to the realities threatening their way of life.

Political psychology research reinforces the link between perceived status loss and authoritarian leanings. [Mols and Jetten \(2017\)](#) argue that far-right support often arises not from material deprivation but from cultural displacement. Traditionalist white communities feel their way of life threatened by globalism, multiculturalism, and what they perceive as an erasure of their cultural legacy. Trump’s slogan, “Make America Great Again”, appeals to this desire for cultural preservation, aligning with those who feel they are on the losing end of modernity.

## 8. Lessons About the Dangers of White Honor and Pride Under Threat

Lubbock’s cultural landscape illustrates a type of lost pride similar to what many East Germans felt after the fall of the GDR in 1991. For East Germans, unification meant

the abrupt need to “measure up” to the consumerist sophistication of their Western counterparts, who were already adept at navigating a world of luxury goods and high-status lifestyles (Förtner et al. 2020; Pesthy et al. 2020). East Germans, too, embodied their lack of comparative status the same way Lubbockites today embody their rural lack of sophistication and cosmopolitanism. They too looked the part. The worker and peasant identities once valued in socialist East Germany lost their currency in a united Germany, where the allure of cell phones, expensive cars, and a globalized internet culture marked the new standard of being and belonging (Yoder 2020; Weisskircher 2020).

Pride is fundamentally relational; it arises through comparisons. In today’s world, the “fancy” individuals to be compared with are often media-amplified symbols—the polished West Germans, slim and “cool”, often non-white celebrities, or other idealized figures. However, in today’s Germany, there are about 67 percent of Germans without a college education, more than 55 million.<sup>5</sup> There also some 6 million Muslims residing permanently in Germany, but average white folk and Muslims are notoriously absent from any billboards and media advertisements. Over time, feeling unappreciated leads many of them to resort to self-promotion and self-appreciation to reclaim their dignity and identity.

History underscores a significant lesson: democracy, justice, and peace are threatened when white males perceive themselves as an aggrieved group. Protecting democratic values requires all of us to pay attention to the formation of “white male groupness” (Brubaker 2006), which has repeatedly posed dangers to modern society. As the political scientist Anthony Marx has argued, it is precisely the proven potential of violence of white men acting as a self-conscious group that has brought us Apartheid in South Africa, as well as legal segregation and the Ku Klux Klan in the US (Marx 1998). The rise of Nazi Germany followed the same pattern (Theweleit 1977).

The lessons leading up to both World Wars highlight these dynamics. Germany, feeling overshadowed by England, began expanding its navy out of a sense of lost pride, actively promoted and fanned by the Kaiser. The Treaty of Versailles left many Germans feeling humiliated, a sentiment Hitler tapped into with promises to restore German pride. Mostly German men, suffering the hardships of the Versailles Treaty and further strangled by the Bank Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed, became the eager followers of Nazi slogans, promising them to Make Germany great again (Theweleit 1977).

Similarly, as Anthony Marx (1998) and Eric Foner (2014) have shown, it was southern white men who so resented Black enfranchisement and minimal empowerment that they constructed Jim Crow laws that kept Blacks at the bottom of society for the next 100 years. The Ku Klux Klan, the over 3000 Blacks lynched, and the racial hatred that marked US society until well into the 20th century was a direct response to Black empowerment perceived as a threat to white privilege, pride, and honor. In South Africa, after the Boer War defeat in 1902, aggrieved Afrikaners responded by instituting apartheid (Marx 1998).

The call to “Make America Great Again” is not new; Reagan used this slogan in 1980, and Hitler’s promises to restore German greatness preceded it. Like many Germans of the interwar period, today’s supporters of Trump, Bolsonaro, Milei, Orbán, and Le Pen elect candidates who vow to restore their dignity in the face of perceived loss. As history shows, the promise of a restored “greatness” often entails blaming marginalized groups: immigrants, Blacks, Jews, Muslims, queers, and other minorities. This troubling pattern, exemplified in Nazi Germany, is making a comeback in today’s political landscape.

Allowing aggrieved white males to construct a sense of groupness for themselves, built on lost status and pride, has proven to be extremely dangerous and perilous to democracy and peace. It is thus an urgent task of politics to address the perceived status-loss of this group, even if it is more imagined than real. We can all witness the consequences of not addressing these issues in today’s politics.

## 9. Some Conclusions and Implications

In 2024, the resurgence of violence against immigrants, minorities, queer, and transgender individuals casts a shadow not only over the United States and Europe but also over Brazil, Chile, and Argentina. This resurgence is particularly tragic for the United States—a nation founded by those fleeing persecution for their beliefs and identities. Yet, as Ta-Nehisi Coates (2024) cautions, “Your oppression will not save you”. Fascism, he argues, was not eradicated in 1945 but remains a latent and persistent threat.

Focusing on status and its derivatives, honor, dignity, and pride offers a more nuanced understanding of human behavior. Individuals seek recognition and validation as core motivations, navigating between different impulses depending on the context. They shift between acting as *homo economicus* (rational self-interest), *homo reciprocans* (reciprocal social obligations), or *homo honorabilis* (pursuit of honor and dignity). This flexibility underscores that human motivations are not fixed but contingent, influenced by cultural bonds, love, self-sacrifice, or pride. In some contexts, cultural bonds inspire altruism; in others, honor becomes the dominant force, transcending economic rationality.

The appeal of authoritarianism in contemporary politics cannot be attributed solely to economic disenfranchisement. While economic concerns play a role, they are often secondary to the psychological and cultural impact of perceived status loss. Leaders like Trump, Bolsonaro, Kickl, Orbán, Meloni, Le Pen, Höcke, and others resonate with communities that feel their identity, values, and honor are under siege. In this sense, authoritarianism offers a mechanism to defend status—a way to reassert traditional social hierarchies in an era of increasing equality.

The attachment to a bygone era in communities like Lubbock is best understood through the concept of status as articulated by Max Weber ([1922] 2002) and expanded by Pierre Bourdieu (1984). Status, as a marker of social honor, encompasses not only economic capital but also symbolic and cultural capital. Trump’s rhetoric appeals to conservative communities across the United States by promising the restoration of a social order where whiteness once conferred unquestioned authority and respect. Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*—the ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions shaped by one’s social environment—further illuminates how communities like Lubbock embody and perpetuate conservative values, passing them down as markers of social and moral standing.

Trump’s political success lies in his ability to frame sociocultural changes as existential threats to the honor and dignity of “ordinary” citizens. By portraying immigrants, minorities, and liberals as adversaries, he mobilizes an audience that perceives itself as besieged by forces intent on stripping them of their place in the social hierarchy. This narrative galvanizes support for policies that, under the guise of protecting national interests, primarily serve to reinforce status boundaries and uphold white, Christian values.

For the first time since the onset of colonization, some white men are confronting genuine competition due to the advancement of historically marginalized groups and policies promoting their upward mobility. As members of these previously excluded communities achieve progress—albeit within constrained boundaries—those accustomed to unearned privilege react with resentment. Many now perceive themselves as disadvantaged or discriminated against, fostering a collective identity rooted in a perceived loss of dignity and status. This shift represents, for some, their first encounter with true competition, as the historical “affirmative action” that excluded women and people of color for centuries begins to erode.

Social sciences that rely on rational actor models—assuming individuals have clearly ordered, utilitarian preferences—fail to capture the threats posed by an aggrieved group of white males, many of whom are actively supported and encouraged by their spouses (Schuller 2023). These models aim to explain human behavior with mathematical precision

but struggle to account for the rise in authoritarianism. In contrast, humanities scholars and novelists, unencumbered by rigid methodologies, have demonstrated greater capacity to understand and articulate these dynamics. As David Brooks (2024) and Ta-Nehisi Coates (2024) argue, the motivations of aggrieved white males are not rooted in rational economic calculations. On the contrary, they are often willing to endorse policies that harm them economically, provided their pride and dignity are preserved. They are not “rational profit maximizers”, as the behavioral model dominant in economics and rational choice suggest.

Viewing authoritarianism through the lens of status anxiety reveals why individuals support authoritarian leaders, frequently prioritizing status preservation over democratic principles. For many, maintaining cultural identity and social honor outweighs the abstract ideals of democracy and pluralism. In communities like Lubbock, where tradition, whiteness, and a hierarchical social order prevail, these values shape the political landscape and fuel the rise in authoritarianism as a counterforce to modernity.

The threat posed by white men—many supported by their spouses—should not be underestimated. Historically, such dynamics have driven institutionalized racism in the United States, Apartheid in South Africa, and the rise in Nazism in Germany. To safeguard democracy and peace, it is imperative to address the needs—whether real or perceived—of those who feel marginalized by cosmopolitan elites. Failure to do so risks perpetuating cycles of resentment and authoritarian resurgence.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1496462/obesity-prevalence-among-adults-in-the-us-by-gender-and-education/> (accessed on 4 February 2025).
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/accounting-for-the-widening-mortality-gap-between-american-adults-with-and-without-a-ba/> (accessed on 4 February 2025).
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.prb.org/resources/opioid-overdose-epidemic-hits-hardest-for-the-least-educated/> (accessed on 4 February 2025).
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/08/25/americans-are-divided-on-whether-society-overlooks-racial-discrimination-or-sees-it-where-it-doesnt-exist/> (accessed on 4 February 2025).
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.statista.com/topics/7319/education-in-germany> (accessed on 4 February 2025).

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