

**CONTEMPORARY (RIGHT-WING) POPULISM AS A SYPTOM OF
LATE MODERNITY: SOCIAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE**

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Submitted to Central European University - Private University
Undergraduate Studies

*In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Politics,
Philosophy and Economics*

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Vienna, Austria
2025

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For bibliographic and reference purposes this thesis should be referred to as: Pavlovicova, Alexandra. 2025. Contemporary (Right-wing) Populism as a Symptom of Late Modernity: Social Theory Perspective. BA thesis, Bachelor Department, Central European University, Vienna.

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Vienna, 26. May 2025

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Abstract

The persistent success of contemporary right-wing populism in Europe no longer follows the conventional economic and demographic explanations, which raises the question of how it can be examined by scholars differently. This thesis explores if and in which way it can be understood as a problem, or a ‘symptom’, of late modernity, drawing on Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity and Richard Sennett’s analysis of flexible capitalism. This thesis proposes that right-wing populism develops as a response to three interconnected consequences of late modernity: liquid identity, economic uncertainty and lack of institutional trust. The empirical analysis synthesizes the existing research on right-wing populism together with populism in general and interprets the patterns through the liquid modernity theory. The thesis demonstrates that populist appeal stems from offering what liquid modernity has dissolved and reveals populist voters are not primarily older conservatives but modern citizens across demographics that struggle with modernity’s cross-pressures. Finally, the thesis shows how social theory can enhance understanding of populist patterns, which can inform the design of more robust future empirical models.

Acknowledgements

I extend my gratitude to my supervisor, Felix Butzlaff, from the Department of Public Policy,
for his guidance, invaluable advice and persistent support throughout the writing process of
this BA thesis.

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Chapter One: Introduction

There is much research on populism, yet only a small amount of literature tackles its nature and development, let alone in relation to the present and the preceding periods that shaped it. Today, we see empirically that voting behavior for right-wing populist parties no longer follows the often-explored economic and demographic logic but has developed different patterns. Going beyond merely economic and demographic explanations to understand what creates conditions for populism is key. Therefore, in this thesis, I strive to understand how contemporary right-wing populism develops alternatively, through the lens of social theory. It ought to serve as a tool to clarify the patterns that create an environment for populism's recent continued success. Particularly, I want to investigate it through the prism of late modernity concept.

The sociological concept proposes that contemporary societies are a clear continuation of modern institutional transitions and cultural developments. It explores the social, cultural, and economic changes that occurred in modern societies. The rapid social transformations create uncertainty that manifests itself as a mechanism of social change and social modernity, which impacts our lifestyles. In the present era, an increasing number of successful populist leaders create appeal to this sense of uncertainty. To analyze the connection between the modern lifestyle and the recent surge in authoritarian populism in Europe, the guiding question is: in which way can we understand right-wing populism (or populism at all) as a problem of social theory of late modernity?

This paper understands right-wing populism as a movement and a belief that operates by claiming there exists a single, unified "common people" with shared interests and values, portraying this imagined homogeneous group as the only legitimate source of political authority while positioning itself as the authentic voice of these "real people" against corrupt elites or outside threats inspired by Schäfer (2022). In their political programs, populists often seemingly

appeal to nation belonging, and three, in my thesis identified, consequences of late modernity: *liquid identity, economic uncertainty, and lack of institutional trust*. I must add I use the term economic uncertainty in the sense of economic hardship including economic insecurity and inequality.

To understand populism, its rise, and its success as the symptom of late modernity, this paper will consider these listed phenomena that I intend sociologically characterize the present time. They will be regarded as consequences of modernity, which created an environment for the persistence of contemporary populism. In the subsequent theoretical part, I present three arguments, one for each phenomenon, to outline how it potentially relates to its rise.

This research will use a combined view of Zygmunt Bauman and Richard Sennett as a tool to make sense of the relationship between contemporary right-wing populism and the listed consequences of late modernity. These theoretical perspectives clarify the cross-pressures that modernity imposes upon individuals, cross-pressures subsequently reflected in political discourse. The *diagnosis* of modernity's effects on right-wing populist responses offers a framework for bridging these interconnected phenomena.

Ultimately, this research will bring new insights and introduce political dilemmas by revisiting research on populism and right-wing populism through the prism of modernity and social theory, which usually is not the case, although it is highly instructive. Understanding populism holistically requires a deeper analysis of contemporary social change through the lens of modernity rather than viewing it solely as a demographics-specific political phenomenon. This thesis aims to create a natural bridge between theory and practice, where sociology identifies patterns and structural forces of the relationship between the modern era, its consequences, and the conditions they created for authoritarian populism; politics provides the pathway to enact meaningful change based on that knowledge. Regarding the theory, I will use Bauman's

concept of liquid modernity conditions forcing individualization (Bauman 2000) and Sennet's perspective on how modern capitalism undermines the capacity for lasting institutional and social bonds (Sennett 1998).

This research consists of three main chapters: Literature Review, Theoretical Framework, and Theoretical Analysis. In the first chapter, I will provide an overview of the existing literature on populism, populism and social theory, and populism in relation to liquid identity, economic uncertainty, and lack of institutional trust.

In chapter two, I will refer to the aforementioned ideas concerning modernity stemming from Baumann's and Sennet's work in modern social theory. I will elaborate on Baumann's *Liquid Modernity* chapters on Emancipation and Individuality, which elaborate on how the liquefaction, as Bauman often puts it, of traditional social structures has led to both freedom and profound insecurity in modern life. As for Sennet's *Corrosion of Character*, I will consider this essay complementary to Baumann's work, focusing on flexible behavior and specialization in the modern workplace. I examine how Sennet's concept of flexible capitalism reveals the costs of short-term employment—what he terms the "corrosion" of character qualities like trust that both connect humans and provide a stable sense of self.

In the last chapter, I will operationalize the ideas by applying the reasoning of Bauman and Sennet and subsequently using the existing empirical literature on contemporary right-wing populist parties and movements in Europe. Hence, the thesis will draw upon how previous research has identified patterns in social and economic insecurity, institutional trust, identity markers, and voting behavior – but interpret and conceptualize them through a social theory-informed research perspective on populism. I will analyze how liquid identity, economic uncertainty, and low institutional trust relate to contemporary authoritarian populism by examining how late modernity manifests in populist rhetoric and appeal. However, the reader

should remember this thesis is based on theory and empirical findings. It does not provide firsthand evidence apart from working with primary literature in the main theoretical section.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Although the causes and continued success of contemporary right-wing populism have been studied for years, there is a wide variety of definitions of populism. These include multiple perspectives: economic, political, psychological, or sociological as well as many explanations of right-wing populism's authoritarian nature. Yet, there is still substantial uncertainty as to what triggers its continued success in Europe and the way they are reshaping the democratic order and withstanding countermeasures (Blühndorn and Butzlaff 2019). With contemporary and authoritarian populism increasingly entering the European political field, analyzing its impact on social structures, behaviors, and relationships is crucial.

Generally, although there might be consensus on the examples of contemporary populism, there is not one for its classification. More importantly, there is not one on operationalization and occurrence either. It was found that different populist movements do not uniformly oppose global constitutional principles, but rather present varied responses based on their ideological orientation (Koch 2020). As more scholars attempt to define new types of populism, the classifications are becoming hollowed out and losing their analytical value. The only stable and clearly defined category over time is right-wing populism (Naxera, Kaše, and Stulík 2024). Regarding the support for extreme populist parties, Akkerman et al. (2017) found similarities and differences between supporters of left and right-wing populist parties.

The new people/elite cleavage appeals to voters from both the left and right sides of the spectrum due to which, they hypothesize, the demands for a new political form and representation, especially with a populist character. This cleavage is an example of a two-dimensional ideological populist explanation. Additionally, populist parties in East-Central Europe were found to succeed in opposition but also effectively govern, challenging the idea that populist governments are doomed to fail (Ágh 2016). It was found that some mainstream

parties adjust their position to close the ideological gap with populist parties (Bayerlein 2021). However, Bonikowski et al. (2019) stated that populism is not an ideology but a theory of society, which gets close to what this thesis aims to explore. Nevertheless, many scholars examine the reasons and influence of voting for parties through the lens of demographic differences such as gender, education, or income (Sciubba 2021; Hooghe et al. 2024; de Clercy et al. 2025).

Some other scholars examined how economic insecurity relates to political populist preferences (Guiso et al. 2024), finding that voters directly demand protection in response to economic uncertainty and indirectly change their trust levels and attitudes. Moreover, economic conditions shape social identities, which in turn affect political preferences. Economic fragmentation leads to social fragmentation through the formation of incompatible social identities. These social identities are value-driven and sorted into three categories: Communitarian, Multi-affiliated, and Individualistic (Snower and Bosworth 2021).

Additionally, the Cultural Backlash Theory (Norris, Inglehart 2019) is probably the recent and most prominent version of this understanding of a wish for the past by older cohorts who hold more conservative or authoritarian views and link it to the success of authoritarian populists. However, there is little empirical support, and the trend does not hold, for there is no polarization in preferences between young and older cohorts. Younger cohorts are nowadays more inclined towards voting for authoritarian populists (Schäfer 2022). Hence, I maintain that scholarship should move on to analyze what and how created the environment for the continued success of authoritarian populism in Europe rather than trying to explain it through this “older cohort” narratives that fail to account for complex socioeconomic factors and institutional failures that transcend demographic boundaries.

In present times, our understanding of identity, economic security, and institutional trust all together shape the aforementioned contributors to polarization and social fragmentation as key institutional failures. Examining them in complex webs beyond politics and demographics is necessary for understanding societal divisions. These divisions pose a challenge to the established political frameworks. Therefore, I propose a different theoretical approach to re-examine and look at authoritarian populism and its success through the lens of social theory (a combined view of Richard Sennett and Zygmunt Bauman).

Whilst considering populism as a response to the listed institutional failures, I suggest they can be understood as consequences of liquid modernity. I connect Bauman's concept to how populism can be considered a response to the fluidity and uncertainty of contemporary life and Sennett's perspective on modern capitalism, explained in the next chapter. Authoritarian populism in the present time, where rigid structures have dissolved into fluid uncertainties, creating ground for authoritarian populist movements that promise stability amid widespread institutional failure, has to be explored through a novel prism. In the upcoming two chapters, I show how my approach transcends purely economic or ideological explanations by trying to reveal how populist appeal functions as a response to the profound disorientation of liquid modernity itself.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

Following the literature review, this part presents the modernization-theoretical perspective this thesis is based on and interprets contemporary right-wing populism as a reaction to the concept of liquid modernity. It also provides the definitions of key terms later developed in the empirical section. I will explain how it connects to what we observe in the present and its discontents. To do that, I use Bauman's concept of liquid modernity, which is mirrored in the corrosion of democracy due to the surge in right-wing populism. I attempt to use social theory to lay the foundation for the link between the consequences of late (liquid) modernity and the contemporary far-right populism in Europe. To conclude this chapter, I propose three theoretical arguments that serve as the basis for the empirical analysis.

Regarding the starting point of the era, modernity is a broad term. In this study, I deal with "late modernity", the legacy of modernity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which else can be called a distinctive and reflexive phase of modernity, as opposed to the preceding linear phase referred to by several authors (Giddens 1990; Beck 1992; Bauman 2000). Particularly, late modernity, as defined in the following paragraphs, guided by the assumption that this phase includes the contemporary history period to the present day, will be discussed. The rationale behind the assumption is backed by Bauman's thought that: "The society which enters the twenty-first century is no less 'modern' than the society which entered the twentieth; the most one can say is that it is modern in a different way," (Bauman 2000, 28). In other words, Bauman argues that contemporary society has not moved to a postmodern but, instead, transformed from one modernity to another, which is differently modern. Bauman builds on Ulrich Beck's idea, who famously introduced the notion of 'second modernity' (Beck 1992), which reflects on new risks society must combat and withstand. Nevertheless, Bauman brings a new perspective on how modernity shaped its form in the twenty-first century.

Liquid Modernity

Zygmunt Bauman coined the term liquid modernity - also referred to as late modernity as stated above – which is tied to the period of modernity, especially as its continuation is specific to the recent highly globalized societies and rejected the idea of postmodernism. The emphasis is on constant change and transformation within society – liquidity with the aspects of cultural disembedding, social differentiation, and globalization (Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2019). Liquidity is the opposite of solidity, a characteristic of the preceding “classic” modernity in its early phases. Bauman’s definition of liquid modernity describes this era as characterized by the disintegration of social networks and collective action resulting from increasingly mobile, evasive, and fluid power structures (Bauman 2000, 14-15). This attribute of fluidity and liquidity carries and evokes uncertainty: power operates through disengagement and escape rather than control, social bonds become fragile, temporary, and "until further notice" (Bauman 2000, 178), and global powers actively dismantle social networks to maintain their fluidity and strength. As a result, human connections become increasingly transient and disposable (Bauman 2000, 14).

Baumann uses the metaphor of people becoming like "electronic moles" desperately seeking connections (sockets), only to find these connections becoming increasingly scarce and eventually replaced by temporary, disposable power sources (batteries) (Bauman 2000, 15). This metaphor represents Bauman’s anticipation of where liquid modernity leads: a world of impermanent, disposable relationships and diminishing social stability, which impacts our sense of identity.

Bauman himself refers to ‘Society of Individuals,’ a title given to a study by Norbert Elias (1991). The main thought of Elias’s social theory, as Bauman points out, consists of how modern society shapes the individuality of its members, and in turn, individuals form a society

based on what choices they make and what actions they take (Bauman 2000, 30-31). In simpler terms, what Bauman means is that society shapes us as individuals, but we also shape our society based on what is possible within the connection we have with other society members – cast as individuals in the context of modern society. We do not make choices randomly but rather within the socially “woven web of their [Author’s note: members’ of the modern society] dependencies” (Bauman 2000, 30). However, how exactly did individualization transform our understanding of modern society? Primarily, it impacted how we lead our lives. It transformed human ‘identity’ from a given to a task-driven enterprise, something the individuals as the members of society can actively manage. In this sense, it is emancipatory and transcends into politics, which has become more concerned with life decisions and focused on liberation from oppression and inequality (Giddens 1991). Building on Bauman’s social theory, one could argue that, while in the past, human identities were mostly shaped by what we were born into, modern living has allowed for the need for self-determination. Modernity equals individualization. It is the same concept that holds for the whole duration of the modern era, including all sectors of society (Bauman 2001).

The role of individualization is also relevant in separating one concept of modernity from another. For instance, one might ask what distinguishes Bauman’s liquid modernity from Ulrich Beck’s ‘second modernity’ (1992), as both explain modernity as a reflexive concept about the contemporary era, and some of their ideas overlap. While Beck’s ‘second modernity’ puts forth how modern society produces and distributes new risks (environmental hazards or technological threats), which are often beyond institutional control, Bauman reflects on the unstable and fluid character of social institutions and the consumer aspects of modern life. Beck’s understanding of individualization consists of people making life choices without traditional institutional guidance - that is, he sees it as a response to institutional failure. In contrast, Bauman holds that individualization is part of the broader liquefaction of all social

structures, making it a culturally conditioned phenomenon that shapes human identity. Therefore, human identities have also become liquid, which has an impact on our choices. These choices reflect the instability a modern life carries as an effect (Bauman 2000, 25). In the following paragraphs, I will define Bauman's notion of liquid identity and the meaning of consumer in modern capitalism.

Politics of Liquid Identity and Institutional Trust

In liquid modernity, the notion of identity in the modern world carries a portion of inevitable uncertainty and insecurity. While a variety of definitions of the term 'identity' have been suggested, this paper concerns identity as in Bauman's liquid modernity. Hence, this piece explores the idea that a globalized society is an individualized society (Bauman 2001).

According to de Tocqueville (based on Bauman's interpretation), we need to distinguish between two sides, or identities for that matter, of ourselves as members of society: the citizen and the individual. Whereas the citizen cares about the community (the city) and believes that "If my city/community thrives, I will too", the individual thinks: "Why should I care about 'common cause' unless they directly benefit me?" (Bauman 2000, 36). Using this example, Bauman suggests that modern life encourages individuals to seek their own benefit as opposed to thinking about what would benefit the community. There is this question of whether the common good has ever existed. This makes society be seen as a collection of individuals each pursuing their separate goals.

Due to that, the view of what public authority (government and institutions) should do has narrowed down to two things: 1) protect 'human rights' in the sense that no one is restrained in pursuing their own interest and 2) provide basic security by guarding people's bodies and property (Bauman 2000, 36). Having said that, individualization has benefits in seeming to offer freedom and autonomy, however, "the other side of individualization," as Bauman puts

it, “seems to be the corrosion and slow disintegration of citizenship“ (Bauman 2000, 36). In simple terms, as members of society become more focused on individual concerns, the sense of citizenship (caring about and participating in shared public life) gradually falls apart. Reading Bauman, the main consequence of a declining sense of citizenship weakens the capacity to address societal problems that require collective action as in it weakens the trust in institutions – social and political.

Bauman’s work has been taken up in the literature on the relationship between citizenship, individualism, and yet another concept of political subjectivity - articulated in connection to late modernity (Giddens 1991; Beck 1997; Rose 1999; Blüdnorn and Butzlaff 2019) - which allows to explore individual interpretations of political phenomena. When I mention political subjectivity, I mean the concept of political theory that takes as its foundation that the connection between subjectivity and crisis *is* a constitutive condition of modernity. From this viewpoint, the modern political subject is understood as an autonomous, rational, self-creating individual building on early modern texts such as Locke (1689) but also contemporary authors (Habermas 1985; Taylor 1991; Bauman 2000) linking it to what Giddens (1991) terms ‘life politics’ - the transformation of political identities in the reflexive phase of modernity.

For that matter, Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity transforms how individuals understand themselves not only as citizens but also as political participants. It shapes the relationship individuals have with politics and their identity thereof, which then transcends to the socio-economic dimension as well. In the next paragraph, I will explain how social theory relates this dimension to the notion of modern capitalism.

In the subchapter *Capitalism – Heavy and Light* of the chapter on *Individuality*, Bauman addresses the shift from heavy capitalism to light or from solid to liquid (Bauman 2000, 54-59). To illustrate that, Bauman uses a metaphor for transportation. Whereas the previous *heavy*

capitalism was like a ship with a captain who navigated it towards a concrete destination, liquid capitalism is like an airplane with no pilot, and the passengers find out “the pilot’s cabin is empty” (Bauman 2000, 59). This way, Bauman describes the insecurity liquid capitalism invokes. For in liquid modernity, the way power and authority operate is significantly different from the past. Contrary to stable institutional rules and structures, they are in flux and individuals are seeking their own interests. As Bauman adds, there is no “the legislator, umpire and supreme court of appeal” (Bauman 2000, 57) because the world has shifted to being just “one of the players, keeping its cards close to its chest, setting traps and waiting for its turn to cheat” (Bauman 2000, 57). It implies a loss of trust in institutions and, in that sense, that there is no reliable referee or judge in social life, as it all has become an unpredictable game of players, each looking for their own goals.

Economic Uncertainty

Economic change is an inseparable part of all stages of modernity, and liquid capitalism is one method to describe it. With innovation and modernization, late modern society was introduced to a new system of power and simultaneously modern forms of flexible behavior (Sennett 1998). Sennett outlines three main elements of flexible behavior: discontinuous reinvention of institutions, flexible specialization of production, and concentration without centralization of power (Sennett 1998, 40). Sennett comments that modern management favors ‘loose networks’ (Sennett 1998, 40) over hierarchical structures, such as those ruled in the Fordist era, precisely because networks can be more easily dismantled and reconstructed. Sennett points out that this fragmented, less coherent nature of networked systems creates space for dramatic change.

Unlike continuous time experience (illustrated by ritual practices and traditional workplaces), where changes are incorporated into existing frameworks without disrupting core meanings (Sennett 1998), flexible organizations deliberately create discontinuities, clearly separating the

present from the past. By core meanings, Sennett means fundamental values and purposes of an institution. Flexible specialization thrives in today's high-tech environment through easily reprogrammable machinery, instant global communication, and streamlined decision-making in small workgroups. Its defining characteristic is allowing external market demands to reshape internal structures, creating an environment where disruptive change becomes not just accepted but expected.

Despite innovation's benefits, flexible work seemingly brings about unprecedented experiences of uncertainty. This sense of uncertainty, according to Sennett, impacts our character. Altogether, new capitalism and the uncertainty it produces result in societal fragmentation. While flexible capitalism rewards elite leaders who embrace change and fragmentation, seeking progress, the same traits harm ordinary workers. Sennett reveals how the system rewards members of society depending on one's economic position. This form of capitalism and the economic policies that come with it bring about economic security via individualization and alienate us from each other, consequently creating competitive pressures. Consecutively, it often serves as an excuse for generated inequality. Henceforth, I describe how contemporary populism appeals to individuals by making them feel desired again, claiming to know how to counter inequality and insecurity. With globalization, the middle classes face higher competition in the labor market (Babst, Groß, and Lang 2024). Although they possess established skills, these skills devalue as these workers are increasingly employed under atypical working conditions, which might result in a decline in an individual's socioeconomic status (Giesecke 2009). Relative deprivation, the sense that one is worse off compared to others, has emerged as a key concept in this regard. In reference to that, populists present themselves as those offering alleviation of this status anxiety to workers (Burgoon et al. 2019).

Right-Wing Populism in Liquid Modernity

I have addressed and interpreted Bauman and Sennett regarding the concept of liquid modernity and how it translates into the idea of identity, institutional trust, and economic uncertainty under a new form of capitalism. We should understand that the surge in populism resembles a new phase of modernity, as suggested in the theoretical framework. What Bauman suggested starts with liquid modernity, Blühdorn (2013) continues by referring to the new, more recent third modernity, in which populism thrives. Getting back to the definition of populism I suggested (see introduction), the aspects of the dissolution of the past social structures create individual freedoms to self-determine ourselves, however, creating insecurities that leave people to look for it in institutions. When those institutions are not able to fulfill that need, people, as political participants and civic actors, turn to those who promise to solve that. According to the World Happiness Report, far-left voters showed higher levels of social trust compared to the right-wing populists, who have a very low level of social trust (Algan, Blanc, and Senik 2025), which I will get back to in the following section. I argue that these results are connected to the conditions liquid modernity has created and will try to support them with evidence.

While in this section I laid the theoretical foundation for the following empirical part, I will next try to demonstrate three arguments about the mentioned concepts of liquid identity, economic uncertainty, and lack of institutional and in connection to contemporary right-wing populism's proliferation in Europe. Regarding identity, I argue that those (voters) with limited cultural, social, and economic capital are more susceptible to the destabilizing effects of liquid identity, making them more likely to support populist movements that offer stable collective social identities and nation-based group belonging. Lack of institutional trust creates a void (Mair 2013) that populist movements fill by offering direct forms of belonging through national identity. Finally, economic uncertainty intensifies the search for stable group attachments, making nationalist populist appeals more attractive as they promise economic protection and

collective meaning. I will draw upon how recent research has identified patterns in social and economic insecurity, institutional trust, identity markers, and the popularity of populism. Then, I will interpret and conceptualize them through the social modernity theory-informed research perspective on populism along the lines of economic insecurity, institutional trust, and identity markers.

Chapter Four: Empirical Part

In this chapter, I will analyze social discontent, social needs, and expectations, which, I maintain, appear as consequences of the socio-economic climate that liquid modernity gave space to, and populism showed to succeed in. I will so by seeking to prove the proposed arguments from the theoretical chapter.

The generally observed discontent translates into how the society members understand institutions, whether they trust them, and how they make choices as civic actors and political participants. I offer an overview of several studies that empirically deal with the rise of right-wing populism in Europe in connection to identity, low institutional trust, or economic uncertainty, which point to social fragmentation, decreased life satisfaction concerning insecurity, and eroded trust as key factors driving populist voting behavior. I discuss the results of these consequences in reference to liquid modernity and relate it to the discontent with the status quo, which I claim altogether induces voting for populists.

The aspects of liquid (technological development, individualization, societal differentiation, cultural disembedding) have contributed to fragmentation rather than cohesion (Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2019) both in social and individual understanding. The emergence of incompatible social identities, widening inequality of skills, and incompatible economic policies create social, economic, and political fragmentation respectively, and generate political disparities (Snower and Bosworth 2021). Regarding that, the recent growth of populist movements in Europe is another obstacle to achieving social cohesion (Babst, Groß, and Lang 2024).

In the context of liquid modernity, where social structures and institutions have become fluid, unstable, and fragmented, social bonds weakened, and identities became liquid, individuals drifted from traditional identities, demanding more and more self-determination and autonomy.

However, if individuals desire more self-determination and autonomy (which seem to be *individualistic* values), then how come populist parties, which offer a *collective* experience, have such a big appeal? In liquid modernity, a globalizing world, places and destinations are also constantly changing among other things, causing uncertainty and changing the problem of identity from one of pathfinding to one of direction-seeking and constant vigilance. Bauman suggests that the pursuit of identity in a globalized world functions as a substitute for a lost sense of community (Bauman 2001). The appeal of populist movements stems from their ability to perform a form of collective identity that contemporary *society* has theoretically moved beyond but *individuals*, paradoxically, still seem to desire (Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2019).

Especially right-wing populist movements seem to thrive by offering a collective experience that is technically unachievable and incompatible with modern values. For example, they often promise national autonomy in ways it would go against the modern global interconnectedness. Additionally, as explained in the theoretical part, individual rights protections have become ever more important, including minority rights. Populists either frame such protections as impediments to collective action or promise simple solutions and restored community (Müller 2020; Mudde 2004). However, modern democratic values often require accepting complexity and ongoing uncertainty.

Concerning that, Blühdorn and Butzlaff (2019) criticized the long-established narrative that the populists' celebration of the people, of collective identity and popular sovereignty, in which populist movements make promises that they can never fulfill (Müller 2016, 28), claiming it entirely fails to recognize that in the era of late modernity (or third modernity as they suggest), fulfilling these promises is not their goal and would be counterproductive for them (populist leaders) as for the voters. This paragraph points out the paradox of liquid modernity, the fact that individualization has its benefits, as I explained Bauman thought in the theoretical chapter, but also disadvantages. That is why we need to move beyond asking "Why do people want

collective identity?" to asking "what needs does the pursuit of collective identity fulfill, even when people know it is unattainable in the modern world? The psychological appeal of populist movements must be, besides offering a collective meaning and identity, attributed to different circumstances and requires a different explanation. For instance, empirical research suggests life satisfaction as one reason behind it (Algan et al. 2025; Alabrese et al. 2018). This concept includes the perception of identity fragmentation, economic insecurity, and lack of institutional trust – all three notions this thesis mentioned emerged in response to liquid modernity.

Populism and Trust

In a similar vein, empirical results suggest that nowadays, subjective attitudes, such as lifestyle satisfaction and social trust, impact voting behavior much more than traditional ideologies or class struggle (Algan et al. 2025). The decline in well-being and social cohesion across Europe and the United States has significantly contributed to growing political polarization and support for anti-establishment movements (Algan et al. 2025). As people's happiness levels have fallen and trust in others and institutions has eroded, consequently, character corroded, as Sennet puts it (Sennet 1999). Many voters have leaned towards more extremist political candidates. While those with high trust voted for the left, those with low trust voted for the right (Algan et al. 2025). What is more, international surveys and surveys run through social media platforms detected that negative emotions strongly predict populist voting behavior across Western Europe and the United States (Algan et al. 2025).

The surge in populism in Europe and the resentment of 'the system' has been notable particularly in Austria (the Freedom Party of Austria), Denmark (the Danish People's Party), Finland (the Finns Party), France (the National Rally), Germany (Alternative for Germany), Hungary (Fidesz), Italy (the Northern League and Fratelli), Poland (Law and Justice), Sweden (The Sweden Democrats), and Switzerland (the Swiss People's Party) to name a few (Algan et

al. 2025). In these instances, the populist right-wing movements mirrored anti-redistribution, anti-immigrant, and illiberal ideas.

Other studies suggested that low levels of trust or low satisfaction with democracy are related to populism. Particularly, they induce populism (Doyle 2011; Norris 2005), where lower social trust was linked to anti-system votes. Moreover, it was found that people with low life satisfaction and low satisfaction with the establishment tend to trust political parties less, are more likely to support authoritarian claims (such as the need to have a strong leader), and are more likely to reject the current government (Alabrese et al. 2018). I suggest this weakened social trust and trust in the system reflects economic and social identity factors.

Populism and Liquid Identity

The perception of social identities at peril can serve as a mechanism that links broader social change to populist tendencies. In their empirical model oriented on the German labor force, Babst et al. (2024) identified two threats to social identity: lack of social recognition and identity insecurity as the drivers for populism's success. Referencing Tajfel and Turner (1979; 1986) and Fukuyama (2018), they interpret social recognition as crucial for creating or destroying valued social identities, conditioned on membership in different social categories, depending on recognition from the broader society. Lack of social recognition occurs when it is perceived that the social group one is part of is devalued. With rapid societal changes, traditional ways of recognition were altered, and social identities became more fluid–liquid (Bauman 2000).

Additionally, those groups that were previously dominant are no longer at the top of the hierarchy of recognition, while other groups strive for equality and recognition. This competition can lead to a sense of threatened loss of recognition for formerly dominant groups or a sense of lack of recognition for aspiring groups (Babst, et al. 2024). In other words, when particular members of society feel their need for recognition goes unfulfilled, they understand

their concerns, anxieties, and aspirations as being ignored or dismissed by society. Consequently, this lack of recognition creates a sense of alienation rather than identification from mainstream social and political institutions. Populist movements meet these demands, as they promise to return to the traditional status order in their agendas (Oliver and Rahn 2016).

Regarding liquid identity, populism attracts people who feel socially disintegrated as they seemingly offer a straightforward solution to identity insecurity in rapidly evolving societies. The empirical findings indeed confirm the theory about the link between the threats to social identities and the surge in populism, as well as confirmed their other hypotheses about the effects of social identity threats being partly mediated by economic and cultural threats (Guiso et al. 2024; Babst et al. 2024; Hartmann, Kurz, and Lengfeld 2022). In this sense, their findings align with the identity argument in this thesis that more susceptible individuals to populism are those vulnerable in all these aspects: cultural, social, and economic.

Returning to Bauman's argument, social identities have also become political identities as individuals took on the role of active political beings – participants (Bauman 2000). Political identities are crucial for understanding voting behavior. It is the combination of emotional appeal and rational reasons form who individuals vote for. Complementary to findings of Babst et al. (2024) are findings of Meléndez and Kaltwasser (2019), corresponding to their theory that populist forces can only achieve electoral success when an anti-establishment political identity is prevalent. Populism is often defined as containing an anti-establishment element, and the European Union (henceforth 'the EU') can be perceived as a form of 'establishment', creating an apparent link regarding euroscepticism too, which often is part of the populist agendas in Europe (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2024). In the EU example, political identities on a national level transcend with transnational – the EU level. These findings show us modern identity struggle overlaps with political attitudes and national but also transnational effect.

Populism and Economic Uncertainty and Flexible Capitalism

Economic uncertainty is another aspect that results from the environmental social change launched. This volatility contributed to economic fragmentation (such as growing income inequality), leading to social fragmentation, which finally produces political fragmentation that translates into dividing political preferences (Snower and Bosworth 2021). Getting back to the concept of relative deprivation (see theoretical part), several studies proved that relative deprivation might be a prerequisite for populist voting behavior or populist attitudes (Babst et al. 2024; Manunta et al. 2022; Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018; Spruyt, Keppens, and van Droogenbroeck 2016). Moreover, rising inequality only increases political polarization, which helps populist movements gain support (Snower and Bosworth 2021). These findings suggest economic divisions manifest in opposing political preferences, including those for populist movements. In particular, economic insecurity best explains the success of right-wing populism (Scheiring et al. 2024). The support of right-wing populism is mirrored in the economic insecurity among previously protected ‘labor market insiders’ – who have some material security to lose but do not belong to the most vulnerable group (Kurer 2020).

In contrast, Babst et al. (2024) review studies that found that the perception of the individual’s economic situation is the strongest determining factor for populist voting compared to the perception of the economic development at the country level. Taking Germany from the above-mentioned countries (see the start of this chapter) as an example, recent research shows that although statistics before the COVID-19 pandemic pointed to positive economic developments and a stabilization of inequality after 2005, citizens perceive it much more pessimistically. Furthermore, it was found that many Germans overestimate the unemployment rate and perceive society as unfair and unequal.

However, the evidence revealed a below-average income inequality compared to other developed countries and consistently high levels of social security (Hüther and Niehues 2021). As a result, the discrepancy between perceptions and reality contribute to a decline in trust in institutions, which I address in my arguments. Furthermore, examining the voter base of Germany's Alternative for Germany Party (henceforth AfD), mostly young male of lower income and education, it was found that those who vote for AfD were less satisfied with democracy (the system) but were also more insecure about their economic situation (Hartmann et al. 2022). It suggests economic insecurity indeed plays a role in deciding to turn to radical populists together with decreased faith in the system. However, the study did not find an association between greater support for AfD and economic grievances among the less well-off but those at risk of being there (Hartmann et al. 2022). In other words, it is not about how much injustice they feel regarding their evolving economic situation but how modernization and its processes make individuals feel and perceive economic uncertainty. Nevertheless, other studies confirmed individuals dissatisfied with their lives may, as victims of the system, consider that the democratic system and legal institutions have not protected them against life insecurities and risks (Algan et al. 2025).

This conclusion connects us to the argument made in this thesis that economic uncertainty rather intensifies the search for stable group attachments, making nationalist populist appeals more attractive as they promise economic protection and guarding their interests. That is to say, I am not defending the modernization losers' thesis (Hartmann et al. 2022) - which theorizes the rise of populist and far-right movements by focusing on the economic disparities caused by modernization processes - in this paper. Instead, I have been trying to show how the combination of all three key indicators, economic insecurity, identity fragmentation, and distrust in institutions or society, are the consequences of the social environment created by liquid modernity, which laid the ground for the development of populist attitudes.

Overall, life satisfaction has indeed decreased in both Europe and the US (Algan et al. 2025). Based on the findings of Algan et al. (2025), it cannot be associated with the height of national income as an explanation. Instead, the plummet seems linked to widespread financial insecurity and loneliness – the symptom of deteriorated social cohesion. Besides, this observation affects nearly all demographic groups. However, the most notable decline was among rural populations, those with less education, and, strikingly, younger generations (Algan et al. 2025). Whereas the consequential low life satisfaction serves as a breeding ground for populist movements, the lowered social trust vastly contributed to the success of particularly far-right populist movements.

Theoretical Framework vs. Empirical Findings

This section aims to synthesize the literature examined building on the theoretical framework. Based on the empirical findings, the data validate Bauman's theory of Liquid Modernity along the arguments I proposed. Moreover, most of the reviewed studies suggest the aspects: economic, cultural, or trust- and identity-related should not be studied separately but instead they should be examined holistically. They demonstrate the combination of all of the markers working together rather than figuring as isolated factors. These elements interact as symptoms of the broader social climate created by liquid modernity. Recognizing interrelations between these notions is important to grasp an understanding of late modernity and, as I maintain in this thesis, it is necessary in the attempt to explain the success of contemporary populism.

Bauman argued that identities have become liquid and individually constructed rather than 'given'. I laid a theoretical prediction that individuals with limited social capital struggle most with liquid identity's destabilizing effects. The study by Babst et al. (2024) found that lack of social recognition and identity insecurity drive populist support, while other research showed people feel their social groups are devalued, creating alienation from mainstream institutions,

which confirms that those vulnerable in all aspects: cultural, social, and economic are most susceptible to contemporary populism.

Concerning trust, in the theoretical framework I mentioned that liquid modernity involves the disintegration of social networks and loss of reliable institutional "referees" – where society becomes an unpredictable game of players each looking for their own goals (Bauman 2000, 57). While the report by Algan et al. (2025) showed those with low *social* trust voted for the right, other studies have confirmed low levels of trust or low satisfaction with democracy are related to populism. In particular, the example from Germany revealed a discrepancy between perceptions and reality that in turn contributes to declining institutional trust.

Lastly, Sennet's framework of flexible capitalism in which he explains how it contributed to fragmentary change and unprecedented (economic) uncertainty, combined with Bauman's comparison of capitalism before and then from a ship with a captain to an airplane with no pilot (Bauman 2000, 59). Studies show that the identification with economic insecurity best explains the success of right-wing populism (Scheiring et al. 2024; Kurer 2020), where different research suggest *perceptions* of economic insecurity and being at risk of downward mobility (Hartmann et al. 2022) matter more than actual economic conditions. Also, relative deprivation showed to play a role in workers' perceptions and populism (Babst et al. 2024; Manunta et al. 2022; Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018; Spruyt, Keppens, and van Droogenbroeck 2016).

All in all, the findings particularly underline the argument that populism offers what liquid modernity has dissolved: stable collective identities, institutional certainty, and economic security promises, essentially seemingly offering to reverse liquidity back to solidity. The correlation is strong in showing how liquid modernity creates the very conditions (fragmentation, insecurity, distrust) that make populist appeals attractive. This analysis shows that populism is a modern phenomenon that builds on grievances modernity presents and

attempts to establish an alternative, despite the populist alternative being unattainable. We cannot ignore what modernity brought, such as globalization and technological progress, let alone fight its consequences. Also, populist voters are not strictly old conservatives retrospectively longing for traditional values and societal organization, as some literature suggested before (Norris, Inglehart 2019), but *modern* citizens who struggle with the consequences of modernity.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This thesis examined contemporary right-wing populism through a social theory-driven perspective, particularly Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity and Richard Sennet's analysis of flexible capitalism. To move beyond just economic and demographic explanations, I argued that populism develops as a response to three consequences of late modernity: liquid identity, economic uncertainty, and declining institutional trust. I claimed they created a fertile ground for contemporary right-wing populism.

The theoretical framework demonstrated how the dissolution of stable social structures produces insecurity and uncertainty. Identities become fluid and self-constructed, economic ties become uncertain under flexible capitalism, and institutional authorities lose reliability. The empirical analysis confirmed the theoretical predictions, showing that populist movements succeed by virtually offering what liquid modernity has dissolved: stable collective identities, easy solutions to economic insecurity, and institutional certainty.

This research found that, unlike representing a nostalgic return to traditional values by older conservatives, contemporary populism reflects the struggle of modern citizens with late modernity's cross-pressures and contradictions – the liberation and insecurity individualization brings. Populist voters do not consist of one demographic group but individuals across the demographic spectrum. Ultimately, this thesis concluded that populism is a modern phenomenon, seeking to reverse liquidity by offering an unattainable alternative to the conditions that late modernity has created but cannot revoke.

This thesis did not mean to generalize the findings but rather explain the fundamentals behind its theoretical approach that should be considered in further research. Nonetheless, the topic should be examined using different case studies, and additional comparative analyses should

be developed. The lack of comparative elements and the absence of firsthand evidence can, therefore, be considered the greatest limitation of this thesis. Also, right-wing populism is a complex phenomenon, and I did not analyze it from all angles as the amount of analysis was limited due to the restricted scope of this thesis.

However, I believe that my fore-proposed approach to studying populism created a theoretical perspective that could spark new empirical research in sociology and political psychology, which may build models based on how it unfolds in particular cases. I also believe new policies can be designed to remedy the social discontent resulting from late modernity and the surge of right-wing populism. For example, policymakers could contribute to forging mechanisms that help citizens of all social categories withstand the consequences of the ever-evolving modernity. For example, the focus should be on how to build a stable welfare state, implement safety nets, and thereby weaken populist appeal. In agreement with (Scheiring et al. 2024), researchers should focus on examining how individuals experience economic uncertainty, how different factors are interrelated and develop over time, and how cultural and identity elements interact with economic forces, avoiding studying these separately. Finally, researchers should target all social groups.

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