

Not Just Shrinkage: Left-Behind Places, the Polycrisis, and Populist Politics

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Abstract

While the existence of marginalized or left-behind places is not a new phenomenon, both marginalization and socio-economic, spatial, and political polarization have accelerated over the past decades as a central effect of neoliberal globalization, and in the case of eastern Germany, the process of German unification in that context. Economic marginalization, widely seen by those marginalized as driven by national and transnational elites, has led to the growth of anti-elite or populist perspectives, reinforced by the financial crisis and subsequent austerity of 2007–2009. For many reasons, the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, which we see as a societal or cultural trauma, became a catalyst for spreading those perspectives and driving a more overt political expression of them. In this commentary, we trace the conjoined history of economic marginalization, left-behind places, the effects of the pandemic in the context of the polycrisis, and the growth of anti-elite populist movements. We further explore how recent developments can enrich the debate on shrinkage and decline, discuss the implications of this history for future possibilities and challenges for democratic rule, public policy, and society, and suggest directions for further investigation.

Keywords

left-behindness; marginalization; polycrisis; populism; shrinkage

1. Introduction

The rise of populist movements across Europe and the United States over the past decade has prompted many efforts to understand the reasons for this phenomenon and the ways it has redefined the once

seemingly settled political landscape of post-World War II—or in Eastern Europe, post-1991—liberal democracy (Dijkstra et al., 2019). While the term is far from clearly defined, populist movements have been characterized as those which reject elites and established parties, distrust globalization, emphasize national sovereignty and interests, define the nation in ethnic terms, exclude outsiders, and present themselves as guarantors of order and security (Lazar, 2021).

This commentary will explore one strand of this question, the relationship between “left-behind place” status and the role of the polycrisis with support for populism. We suggest that left-behind status may be a more useful lens through which to examine these issues than shrinkage *per se*. At the end of this commentary, we will address that question and how it might inform shrinking city research in the future.

2. The Salience of Being Left Behind

The term “left-behind” first appeared in the UK in the 2010s to describe places, rather than people, facing economic stagnation or decline, especially post-industrial and rural areas. It is thus related to marginalization and peripheralization as they are used in geographic contexts. Indeed, one can plausibly see “left-behindness” as a product of marginalization, rather than as a distinct condition (MacKinnon, 2021). While population shrinkage is not intrinsic to left-behind places, the two categories share considerable overlap. Left-behind conditions are most strongly associated with smaller, particularly post-industrial, peripheral cities and with marginalized rural areas, both most likely to be shrinking as well. While shrinking places need not be left-behind places and vice versa, when the two factors coincide—as they often do—they reinforce one another.

Left-behind places are found to varying extents in nearly all industrialized/developed nations in the Global North, where populations are either shrinking or growing slowly and unevenly. Significant variation between countries exists, however, both in the extent of left-behind conditions and their economic, social, and political implications, reflecting demographic, cultural, and spatial differences between countries. These differences have yet to be fully explored in the literature.

Some of the factors which vary from country to country and increase the likelihood and number of left-behind places may include (1) the extent to which economic, political, and cultural activity is concentrated in a single city or region, such as in the UK or South Korea; (2) where peripheralization overlaps with ethnic, societal, or political “otherness,” as in predominately ethnic Russian areas in the Baltic states, but arguably also in eastern Germany; and (3) spatially uneven population trajectories, especially where a country’s population is simultaneously shrinking and concentrating in one dominant area, as in Bulgaria or Hungary.

The state of being left-behind, or “left-behindness,” however, should not be seen solely or even principally in economic, demographic, or spatial terms. As others have observed, the economic conditions leading to left-behindness have powerful social, cultural, and political implications. Indeed, the term is often used to describe the social and political dimension of marginalization, or shrinkage. Left-behind places have been dubbed “geographies of discontent” (Dijkstra et al., 2019). That discontent, as we explore in the next section of this commentary, makes these places particularly sensitive to polycrisis effects.

3. Mobilizing “Left-Behindness”: The Role of the Polycrisis

Marginalization leading to left-behindness is a long-term cumulative process, punctuated by local marginalizing events, such as a factory closing. Marginalized communities are simultaneously affected by multiple exogenous crisis events or long-acting exogenous processes reinforcing their marginalization. The phenomenon of multiple crises, taking place simultaneously or sequentially with overlapping and cumulative impacts, has been dubbed the polycrisis (Tooze, 2022). As Mallach et al. (in press) discuss, the world has faced overlapping polycrises since 1990, notably the global financial crisis and Covid-19, while Europe has also experienced post-socialist transition, migration shocks, Brexit, and the war in Ukraine. In post-socialist countries, the collapse of state socialism and the painful transition to a market economy remain a lasting trauma, with the effects of that transition still widely felt. More recently, while the direct economic effects of the global financial crisis of 2007 and subsequent austerity policies may have passed, the social trauma it generated is still very much present. The full extent to which that crisis has affected political, cultural, and social behavior has yet to be adequately investigated.

As the cumulative effect of overlapping crises has grown, trust in political and social elites has declined, leading to increasing hostility to perceived elite control, attitudes that were particularly widespread during and immediately after the Covid-19 pandemic, and which prompted strong resistance to expert-driven pandemic measures. The effect of the pandemic on social and political behavior, however, would most probably have been much less had it not taken place at a time when the social trauma of the global financial crisis was still intensely present.

This reaction was not only to the measures *per se*, but to the absence of communication and the perceived lack of respect by elite decision-makers for their opinions and for their autonomy as individuals or members of a community. This reaction, taking place in the context of their communities' demographic shrinkage and aging, reflects the underlying dynamic of marginalization. As those regions and communities have gradually fallen further behind their nation's dominant central regions, feelings of distrust and the rejection of the authority of elite institutions grow.

The outcome is polarization of political opinions and positions, diminished credibility of traditional mainstream (elite) political parties, and their replacement by new, explicitly anti-elite, or so-called populist, political movements. These movements, while operating within the democratic political system, are typically hostile to the principles and values of liberal democracy, and seek implicitly or explicitly to undermine the system from within, as can be seen in the behavior of Orbán in Hungary or Trump in the United States. While other anti-system and non-mainstream parties have emerged, such as regional parties rooted in sub-national cultural or political identities and often stronger in affluent regions, and left-wing populist movements, they play a far more limited role in their countries' politics.

The effects of the polycrisis are likely to be most pronounced among those who see themselves as alienated from the centers of political or economic power, and without power to respond to or influence the public response to crises. Thus, we would argue that the *actual* or *objective* crisis—an economic shock, a sudden influx of refugees—is not so much the trigger as is how the objective crisis is *perceived*, which is driven by an amalgam of how the crisis is being handled by elite decision-makers and the pervasive effect of left-behind conditions. That in turn reinforces the individual's sense of being left behind, creating a vicious cycle of further

alienation from established authorities and a more pronounced shift toward alternative leaders, who may not offer concrete solutions but at least convey a sense that they understand and relate to the left-behind community's conditions.

Covid was a powerful trigger. Conditions dictated that governments take action, while the combination of uncertainty about the behavior of the pathogen and the need for urgency led governments to bypass public discussion and democratic processes, imposing stringent and widely-resented burdens on the public with little communication or explanation. Political and scientific leaders offered inadequate and inconsistent rationales for the measures they imposed, or modified or reversed those measures without apparent justification. While pandemic restrictions triggered some overt resistance, for most the response was less resistance as it was an intensification of a trauma that was already deeply embedded in the body public from years of the polycrisis, further reinforcing already widely present anti-elite attitudes. The aftermath of the pandemic also saw a pronounced increase in the share of votes going to populist parties in major European countries (Figure 1).

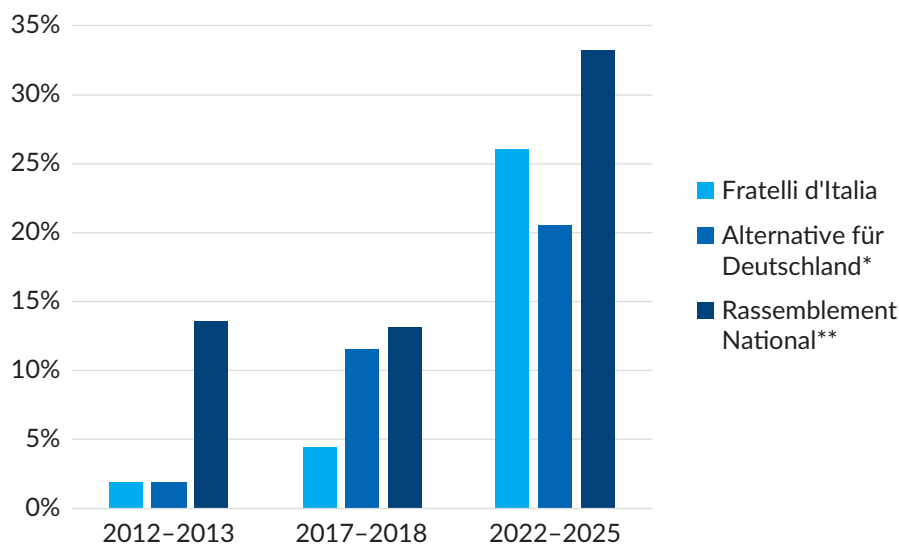


Figure 1. Support for populist parties in national elections, 2012–2025. Notes: * % of constituency votes; ** 2024 Elections.

4. The Politics of “Left-Behindness”

Defining the politics of left-behindness is complicated. Multi-level relationships exist between personal or spatial left-behind status, the cumulative effects of the polycrisis, the trauma of the pandemic, the loss of trust in mainstream institutions and politics, and the growth in support for right-wing populist parties that promise to Make (insert name of country) Great Again, through a return to an unspecified earlier and better time. Hannemann et al. (2024) describe a four-step process that leads to the *chronification and emotional lock-in of regional embitterment*, which populist actors exploit by providing arenas for expressing and reinforcing collective resentment.

A collective identity grounded in marginalization emerges, rooted in resentment and anger toward those seen as responsible for their having been left behind. This can reflect an individual's geographic identity of

living in a left-behind place, or their personal identity, reflected in underlying attitudes or values and status anxieties, not necessarily defined by economic marginality. It is important to distinguish the individual and the geographic states of left-behindness. While support for populist movements is strongest in left-behind *places*, their strongest supporters are not necessarily left-behind *people*, in the sense of actual material deprivation or downward mobility.

Engagement with populist movements valorizing their marginality relative to the political mainstream not only offers people an opportunity to express their resentment but also builds social identity around the movement they see as articulating that resentment. The positions adopted by populist movements, which blend legitimate critiques of established political systems, the inherent contradictions of the meritocratic state, and the alienation of marginalized communities from institutions and the state, with invented narratives about the deep state and global elites, reinforce and buttress that identity. Populist movements reject key features of modern society with its growing ethnic diversity, its rapidly changing technology, and its shifting social, sexual, and cultural mores, and promise a return to a familiar past, echoing aspects of early 20th-century fascism (Gultasli, 2021).

While the politics of left-behindness are in some respects better analyzed through the lens of psychology than the conventional tools of political science, it is important to remember that whatever its cultural and psychological manifestations, *left-behindness is rooted in concrete economic disparities*.

5. Conclusion: The Implications of Populist Politics for the Study of “Left-Behindness” and Shrinking Cities

For those like the authors who value liberal democracy, the rise of populist politics, with its disdain for democratic values and its echoes of pre-World War II fascism, prompts deep apprehension and unease. The rise of Erdoğan in Turkey and Orbán in Hungary, the growing support for the AfD in Germany and similar movements elsewhere, and above all, Trump’s presidency in the United States, have raised deep concerns about the fragility of liberal democracy and its ability to survive this changing political environment. This is particularly true in the United States, where a system that has long been seen as paradigmatic of a stable, resilient although flawed democracy has been exposed as fragile by the success of Trump’s attack on its central institutions.

While the parliamentary model of multi-party coalition government in many European countries may allow mainstream parties to create so-called “firewalls” to keep populism out of power and render a Trumpist takeover less likely, such firewalls are inherently unstable. The question of how elite-driven parties can and should address the challenge of populism has become a burning concern, made particularly problematic by the reality that many of the inequities that are driving populist movements were the direct result of the policies of those same mainstream parties since the neoliberal shift of the 1980s.

Efforts by mainstream parties to formulate political platforms that focus on the material inequities of left-behind status by proposing various measures of “levelling-up” are unlikely to be effective counters to movements grounded much more in symbolic representation than literal amelioration of material conditions. The possibility should not be underestimated that much of the world, not only Europe and North America, is going through a systemic political realignment whose consequences cannot be predicted.

An extended discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this commentary. What is relevant here, however, is how little discussion of these issues, or the underlying questions of anti-elite discontent or resentment, is to be found in the by-now extensive body of shrinking city literature. The same is somewhat less true of the literature of left-behind places, where scholars such as Rodriguez-Posé and MacKinnon have called attention to the cultural and political dimensions of left-behindness. That in turn prompts a second question, which is the relationship of the shrinkage and left-behind frameworks to one another. Clearly, they are not identical, but are they closely enough related so that they can be considered a single literature?

One obstacle is that the concept of being “left behind” is inherently vague and subjective; thus, as Fiorentino et al. (2024, p. 1) point out:

The term has quickly taken on an almost generic quality, in that it is used to denote any place—a region, a city, a town, a local community, a neighborhood—that is deemed to suffer from one or more economic, social or cultural disadvantages, especially when compared to other places—regions, cities, towns, local communities, neighborhoods—that do not suffer from such disadvantages.

Taken to its extreme, almost any place other than the most elite enclaves could perceive itself to be left behind, at least relative to *somebody* else. While some writers have defined left-behindness in relative terms, i.e., areas that are *falling further behind* other areas over time, that definition is equally problematic. Fiorentino et al. (2024, p. 2) add, “It is perhaps because of this very ‘fuzziness’ that the idea has appealed to politicians and policymakers,” to which we would add, “and scholars.” By contrast, shrinkage is a reasonably objective category, if unclear about where to draw the line.

Part of the problem is that, unlike shrinkage, being “left-behind” is less a geographic or economic concept than a term that reflects subjective emotions and feelings rather than objective conditions. As such, it works well as a shorthand term for the particular cluster of conditions, attitudes, and values that, as we have discussed above, appear to trigger support for populist movements. It is those attitudes and values that form the connective tissue between the long-standing economic conditions of small Pennsylvania counties and their support for Trump’s presidential campaigns, or those of eastern Germany and its support for the AfD.

At the same time, the polycrisis framework can add a meaningful dimension to our understanding of marginalized cities and regions, whether shrinking, left-behind, or otherwise, as we try to gain an understanding of how attitudes have shifted and support for populist movements grown, and how economic conditions or trends are transformed into political attitudes. We would suggest that scholars studying shrinking cities pay more attention to the social, cultural, and political dimensions of the cities they study, and that the concept of left-behindness can be a useful way to frame that work. It is, after all, the social and cultural dimension that gives human meaning to otherwise abstract, often bloodless, economic and demographic statistics.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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