

## **“Save Our Children”: Breaking Down Far-Right Narratives Around Youth**

Article by Amanda Machin, Niklas Bjurström

June 16, 2025

From 20<sup>th</sup>-century fascist regimes to today’s incendiary leaders, Europe’s far right has always used children as part of its political toolbox. Nowadays, right-wing extremists are casting environmentalists and LGBTQIA+ activists as dangerous to the youth and their innocence, yet a deeper look at their rhetoric reveals the racist roots and gendered consequences of far-right discourse. But how can we challenge these narratives?

“For decades, the dominant culture said that having a child was likely to be incompatible with many other choices; that having a child compromised your freedom, your career, your dreams and in some cases even your beauty...” Giorgia Meloni, the Italian prime minister and leader of the far-right Brothers of Italy party, [made these remarks](#) in a speech last year. Her comments are far from isolated. Today, in the discourse of far-right politicians, we can detect a tendency to depict children – including both future generations and existing young people – as the vulnerable and innocent victims of “dominant culture” and “liberal elites”. Far-right parties and leaders from across Europe claim that “our children” are being threatened by those who are preoccupied with issues such as climate change, gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights, and colonial history. These actors portray an image of an antagonised nation while simultaneously asserting themselves as the saviours of that nation and casting environmentalists and progressives [as its enemies](#).

This “us” vs “them” dichotomy can be seen as inevitable in any form of politics, as thinkers such as [Chantal Mouffe](#) point out. In the far right’s case, however, this construction is presented in highly nationalistic and xenophobic ways where the “us” is ethnically defined and reified, and the “them” are racialised others who are aided by treacherous elites. What intrigues and worries us is that, as it brings children into the picture to construct an exclusionary “us”, the far right heightens the ostensible innocence and vulnerability of the nation as well as the apparent ethical righteousness of those who claim to be its protectors. Children, therefore, have become a powerful instrument of the far right.

*As it brings children into the picture, the far right heightens the ostensible innocence and vulnerability of the nation and the apparent ethical righteousness of those who claim to be its protectors.*

### **“The end of Civilisation”**

Our ongoing research on the discourse of European far-right parties and leaders around children over the last four years shows that these actors often use two distinct narratives. The first one, which we call the “degrowth” narrative, suggests that fearmongering activists and progressive politicians are scaring

people about the future and putting them off having children. The pessimistic predictions and ethical demands of Greens have led, according to this view, to a perilous decline in birth rates across Europe. For instance, in the same speech quoted at the beginning of the article, Meloni claims that “In recent years, it has even crazily been argued that having a child means doing something that is bad for the environment. It is more sustainable not to have children... people and the environment are apparently enemies and, if we care about the environment, then we should give up on humans and thereby reduce the carbon footprint produced by children...”.

Paradoxically, while it rejects predictions about the disastrous consequences of anthropogenic climate change, this narrative itself foretells a catastrophic future arising from the decrease in the number of children born per woman. Meloni suggests that concerns about overpopulation and climate change “risk dragging Italy and Europe to the brink of disaster, leading us to believe that we should pursue an ideal of ‘happy degrowth’ applied also to the birth rate.” Elon Musk has often made similar comments, for instance remarking that “population collapse due to low birth rates is a much bigger risk to civilization than global warming,” and more recently: “low birth rates will end civilization”.

This narrative is also popular with Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán. In 2023, Orbán declared that “it is the mindset of Western elites that prevents us from even being able to identify the most important challenge we face: the question of demography. Instead of this, politics is preoccupied with how to enforce carbon quotas in the economy and gender quotas in society”. Meanwhile, in Germany, a family policy spokesperson for the AfD party has claimed that “The federal government is fighting so-called climate change with billions. Let’s instead fight the demographic catastrophe with investments in children and families.” In addition, earlier this year, in a discussion with conservative thinker Jordan Peterson, the leader of Reform UK party Nigel Farage criticised “net-zero” policy and complained about “carbon dioxide hysteria” and pessimistic predictions about the economy. On demography, Farage warned: “of course we need higher birth rates but we’re not going to get higher birth rates in this country until we can get some sense of optimism”.

Note the quiet slippage between “humanity” and “civilisation” and national identities in the rhetoric of these far-right figures. Meloni seems to indicate that she is not giving up on “humans”, but later in the same speech claims that “our past... will only live on for as long as there are children whom parents and grandparents can pass their culture and traditions on to”. Elsewhere, she has proclaimed the importance of “bringing children into the world” because “Italians are a people destined for extinction”. As Diego Marin and Marguerite Culot put it: “it is not that the birth rate is falling that raises alarms for green nationalists, but rather *whose* birth rates are falling”.

Indeed, while it is true that birth rates are in decline in certain European countries, there is no downturn for the *global* population. This far-right demand for the protection of “our children” and their call for growth in the “native population” is both highly racialised and highly gendered. The degrowth narrative resonates with the well-documented anti-immigration and xenophobic policies of the far right and its notorious conspiracy theory of “the great replacement”. As a result of this view, Elżbieta Korolczuk and Krystyna Boczkowska explain, women’s bodies become a resource, working in service of the reproduction of the white “indigenous” nation.

The degrowth narrative also clearly aligns with policy demands for tighter restrictions on women’s reproductive rights, placing a particular ethical and symbolic burden on women to stay at home and have more children, and “disciplining” their bodies through what has been called “pro-natalism”. Take this recent post on X from Swedish Democrat politician Magnus Olsson: “Insane that women in Sweden would rather operate away their uterus than get pregnant. But what do we do? A campaign is needed

now, for example Dare To Give Birth 2026! ... If not Muhammed wins”.

It is thus not surprising that the [birth strike campaign](#) has become a target of this “degrowth narrative”. [Birth strikes](#) – organised by women refusing to bear children – have been used by a variety of different political movements, including most recently by climate activists. The far right portrays these measures as an example of how activists are allegedly attempting to make “ordinary people” feel guilty and restrict their freedoms. For instance, in response to a young politician who announced she would abstain from getting pregnant until Norway met its climate goals, the leader of the far-right Progress Party [denounced](#) what she called “baby shaming” of Norwegians who wish to become parents: “After having gone for the car and the Friday taco” she complained, “the Green Party’s next target are our children.”<sup>1</sup> Environmentalists are therefore portrayed as fear-mongering zealots who want to regulate everyday life and activities ranging from eating meat to having babies.

## Infantilising the youth

The second strategy, which we call the “degeneration narrative”, portrays *existing* young generations as vulnerable individuals needing protection from elites who are trying to scare, harm, and mislead them. This infantilising rhetoric suggests that “climate hysteria” is causing anxiety and depression and that biased educational policies are leading to distrust and harm. For example, Swedish Democrat politicians [have expressed concern](#) about the opposition’s “doomsday propaganda” around the climate crisis, which they say is causing fear and anxiety amongst young people.

In Norway, Progress Party (FP) politicians claim that mainstream and especially left-wing parties are frightening children and destroying their faith in society with their gloomy predictions about the future. [Ketil Solvik-Olsen](#), one of the most prominent members of the party, claimed: “by scaring the youth into mental imbalance a part of adolescence and trust in society is destroyed... I feel bad for them, since they are having a part of their lives destroyed”. In the same year, [Maurith Fagerland](#), another FP politician, echoed this concern: “Children and the youth don’t have a developed enough brain to take in all the information. We need to take children and the youth’s psychological health seriously, and all the fear-mongering they are hearing may put them on benefits while still young”. Hence, children are framed as vulnerable and in need of protection from an environmentalist elite and biased media that are only pushing one side of the debate.

## Unbound: The Battle Over Freedom – Our latest print edition is out now!

Read it online or get your copy delivered straight to your door.

[READ & ORDER](#)

Meanwhile, Reform UK leader Nigel Farage has [complained about](#) “the march of the left through all of our educational institutions”, which he claims has led to an unbalanced curriculum about British history. According to Farage, the result is that “60 per cent of our youngsters now have no respect or love for this country’s history. And corresponding with that is a collapse frankly in belief in our form of government, our democratic systems”. Farage repeats this claim in a recent [Instagram post](#): “I think the education system... is wilfully poisoning the minds of all of our young people about who we are as a country, our history, what we stand for. The whole thing is an absolute disgrace.”

Similarly, in a 2022 [publication](#) that delved into the public school system, the Danish People’s party suggests that “Decades of socialist imprint and radical cultural dominance have made deep marks on the public school, which progressively doesn’t prepare our youth for a world where a high level of knowledge

is a prerequisite for making it”. While calling for a reform to national standards for education, the report also emphasises teaching works that address “our Danish DNA” and outlining the “daily struggle for us Danish and Europeans to preserve our culture and values”.

## **A dark page out of history**

The two narratives – degrowth and degeneration – present far-right parties and leaders as those who will “put things right” and protect “our children”. This focus on, and instrumentalisation of, youth as symbolic of the nation is, however, nothing new for the far right.

Fascist rhetoric of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe celebrated the young for their energy, creativity and purity, feeding into a “cult of youth”. Central to the “fascist aesthetic” was an image of a young, healthy, strong, and white male body as a disciplined machine. Young generations in Germany and Italy were portrayed as “new men” who would lead the revolution, regenerate the nation, and secure the longevity of the fascist regimes. Far from actually entrusting political decisions to the youth, this aesthetic used them as a tool to boost the fascist vision of the past and future, and to promote its racist and chauvinist fantasies. These regimes declared themselves as representing the “youth of the nation”. Benito Mussolini’s government, for example, promised to “make way for youth”, while Adolf Hitler famously declared that “whoever has the youth has the future”. But of course, propaganda about youth empowerment was ultimately intended to serve the goal of securing complete control over the whole of society. Any rhetoric about empowering young people was belied by the total subjection of everyone.

*This focus on, and instrumentalisation of, youth as symbolic of the nation is nothing new for the far right*

## **The battle for the future**

According to our analysis, the far right across Europe and beyond is peddling narratives that utilise children as convenient symbols of a nation endangered by progressive elites. But what are the impacts of such rhetoric?

Firstly, by depicting “our children” as under threat, far-right parties solidify a racialised “us” that is cast as innocent and in need of protection. Second, by invoking concerns about the youth’s mental health, the far right seeks to delegitimise climate activism and undermine environmental policymaking. Third, these narratives disempower young people by constructing them as victims rather than political actors with their own opinions and agency. Fourth, by emphasising falling birth rates as an urgent issue – despite the fast-growing global human population – far-right narratives ultimately serve to discipline women’s bodies. And lastly, through attacks on the educational system and the media, they potentially erode trust in public institutions.

In order to resist these far-right narratives, it is crucial to reveal the racist roots and gendered consequences of its discourse, which quietly places on women the burden of reproducing the nation. It is also more important than ever to take children seriously, listen to their concerns, and welcome them as active political agents who can speak for themselves. Our educational systems must equip the youth with the tools for the sort of critical thinking that today’s polarised politics requires.

Although parties on the far right might count young people among their voters, the empowerment of

children at least opens the possibility that they can refuse the symbolic role they've been given and make *their own* political demands. Their future depends on it.

---



Amanda Machin is Professor of Political Sociology at the University of Agder in Kristiansand, Norway and an editor for the journal *Environmental Politics*. She is interested in the dynamics, theories, discourses, imaginaries, protests, identifications, performances and bodies of ecological and radical democratic transformation. With Marcel Wissenburg she has recently completed editing the collection *Environmental Political Theory in the Anthropocene* for Edward Elgar.



Niklas Bjurstrøm is a student at the University of Agder in Kristiansand, Norway. He is interested in political sociology, gender studies, rhetorics, discourses, and social inequality, with a particular focus on the dynamics of gender roles within right-wing populism in Scandinavia.

Published June 16, 2025

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/save-our-children-breaking-down-far-right-narratives-around-youth/>

*The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space.*

*Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.*