



Replacement Theory: Frenchman Renaud Camus coined doctrine embraced by White attackers

Camus Feared culture clashes in Europe

POLITICAL PERIL: Renaud Camus, pictured at left, conceived the term “the great replacement,” in a couple of texts he wrote in 2010 and 2011

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One wonders whether true White supremacists who espouse the “Great Replacement” theory would feel the same way if they knew it sprouted from France and the pen of a former socialist and gay-rights icon.

While ideas about a clash of cultures and difficulties of assimilation have been kicking around for decades, what’s become known as Replacement Theory in the current political debate really got its start with Renaud Camus and a couple of texts he wrote in 2010 and 2011 laying out his worries about waves of foreigners sparking a clash of cultures in Europe.

Those ideas have been chanted by White supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, and later were attributed to mass shooters in Pittsburgh, El Paso, Texas, and Buffalo, New York — and now are being attached to those who have used the word “invasion” to describe the ongoing surge of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border.

“The truth is you don’t need to visit the dark corners of the internet to see these White supremacist views anymore,” Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer said in the wake of the May 14 Buffalo shooting at a supermarket in a predominantly Black neighborhood. “You can hear it at most Trump rallies, every time the Republican standard-bearer vilifies undocumented immigrants and spreads the lie that they stole the 2020 election.”

Some of those who draw the linkage acknowledged the words from mainstream conservatives aren’t the same as the hate-filled screeds of the shooters. But they say the figures on the right have coaxed their troops into the clashes.

“One thing that’s sad about this situation is that a sector of the population avails itself of this racist discourse and favors those figures, as we saw with the triumph of Trump in 2016, with their vote,” Maribel Hastings and David Torres, from America’s Voice, wrote in a piece last week. “Just like we will see in future contests, there is a receptive audience and politicians know that. But when someone interprets this rhetoric literally and it culminates in violence or death, those same politicians wash their hands of all responsibility.”

But Mark Krikorian, executive director at the Center for Immigration Studies, said what Mr. Schumer and others on the left are attempting is nothing new.

“That’s always been their MO, is to connect people who were obviously cranks or haters to anyone who disagrees with them and try to use that as a cudgel to suppress debate,” he said. “The use of this Buffalo psychopath’s screed is just the latest example of what the anti-borders authoritarian side has been doing for years.”

The 18-year-old man accused of opening fire at the Buffalo supermarket has been connected to a 180-page rant posted online that detailed plans for the attack, coupled with horrific caricatures of Black and Jewish people, myriad facts about race, birth rates, big business and beliefs in a plot to foster “White genocide.”

In his tirade, the author said he used to be “deep into communist ideology” as a young teen, then drifted rightward, and now sees himself as “mild-moderate authoritarian left,” and “would prefer to be called a populist.” He said he blames both immigrants and “the capitalists,” and while he is angriest at “the Jews,” and then immigrants, he attacked a Black neighborhood because they are “also a problem.”

“I can’t possibly attack all groups at once so might as well target one,” he wrote.

The author never mentions President Trump, nor for that matter Mr. Camus, but the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Anti-Defamation League say Mr. Camus’ theories underpin the rantings.

“Camus believes that native White Europeans are being replaced in their countries by non-White immigrants from Africa and the Middle East, and the end result will be the extinction of the White race,” the ADL says in its explainer on “The Great Replacement.” ADL said the theory kicked around European intellectual circles for decades but Mr. Camus gave it renewed vigor with his work, including a 2011 pamphlet, “Le Grand Remplacement.”

It wasn’t always so. Mr. Camus, like the author of the Buffalo attack diatribe, made his own journey from left-wing activist — French media place him among the antigovernment riots of 1968, and The Nation labeled him a “gay icon” for his early writings — to warning about cultural erosion.

His replacement work came several years after massive riots in heavily immigrant suburbs of Paris in 2005 drew international attention to France’s struggles with integrating newcomers, particularly Muslims.

His musings gained steam in France, and elsewhere in Europe, as the continent saw a wave of migration from Asia and Africa in the last decade, an influx that surged during Syria’s civil war.

Across the Atlantic, Mr. Trump was also paying attention.

As he pushed for stricter immigration enforcement in the U.S., he held up Europe as a worst-case alternative scenario.

“For those who want and advocate for illegal immigration, just take a good look at what has happened to Europe over the last 5 years,” the president tweeted in 2018. “A total mess! They only wish they had that decision to make over again.”

He pointed to Germany, saying crime there was “way up” and tying it to the newcomers.

“Big mistake all over Europe in allowing millions of people in who have so strongly and violently changed their culture,” he tweeted.

To his supporters, those were truths of assimilation. To his detractors, they were racist diatribes that fed and sustained White supremacists.

“Racism, an obsession with demographics, and specifically with maintaining and expanding a White majority, has been a consistent part of the anti-immigrant movement,” Lindsay Schubiner, who works on countering White nationalism for the Western States Center in Portland, Oregon, told reporters.

The ADL says replacement theory is peddled by Fox News hosts and some Republican members of Congress, while the SPLC name-checks former Trump administration officials and Mr. Krikorian’s group, the Center for Immigration Studies.

Mr. Krikorian says he’s been facing that sort of ideological blackballing for years. He said it’s leftwing activists who fuel racist violence through attempts to silence important debates, sending people to the fringes.

“The number of cranks, small as it is, would be a whole lot smaller if mainstream debate permitted the articulation of concerns about loose borders and excessive immigration,” he said. “The SPLC and The New York Times and the whole bunch of them are actually fostering this demented discussion because they’re suppressing normal debate over a federal government program.”

That program is the immigration system, which Mr. Krikorian’s group argues needs more controls on legal immigration and a stricter approach to enforcing laws against illegal immigration.

It turns out that a large part of the public shares those views.

A major study by AP-NORC, a leading social science polling outfit, found that 36% of American adults want the overall number of immigrants to the U.S. reduced, while 39% say it should be kept the same. Just 25% said they want to see it increased.

When asked specifically about economic and cultural competition between native-born Americans and immigrants, 58% of adults in the December 2021 polling expressed some level of concern, AP-NORC found. And 32% said they believe there is an effort underway to “replace native-born Americans with immigrants who agree with their political views.”

Those are the basic tenets of replacement theory, the study said, and 17% of adults agreed with both statements.

AP-NORC went further, saying those feelings, and indeed a more general skepticism of immigration, were most prominent among White Americans who tend toward conspiratorial thinking.

Mr. Krikorian said it's not surprising people believe there's a shift in political power through demographic changes.

That's also been the conclusion of Democratic strategists themselves, culminating in the "Hope and Change" coalition of young people, women and particularly voters of color who powered President Obama to two White House wins.

"The left that has been crowing triumphantly about the replacement of the existing American population with people they like better — i.e., more likely to go along with the plans of the left," Mr. Krikorian said. "Conservatives in general, and people concerned about immigration control, have simply been responding to the promotion of this replacement idea by the left."

The irony, Mr. Krikorian said, is that the replacement argument isn't working out so well for Democrats, as evidenced by Mr. Trump's ability to increase his share of Hispanic voters from 2016 to 2020.

"It might have worked politically in the sense of importing a reliable voting block for the Democrats if the Democrats had stayed a normal center-left part, but the left has gone so crazy, especially with this gender stuff and everything related to that, that the voters they thought they were importing, and their children, are voting Republican in increasing numbers," he said.