It's not racist to be attached to one's own culture.

We need to talk about white identity. Not as a fabrication designed to maintain power, but as a set of myths and symbols to which people are attached: an ethnic identity like any other.

In the West, even without immigration, we're becoming mixed race. This is not speculation but is virtually guaranteed by the rates of intermarriage occurring in many Western countries.

Projections reveal that faster immigration may slow the process by bringing in racially unmixed individuals, but in a century those of mixed race will be the largest group in countries such as Britain, America and Australia. In two centuries, few people living in urban areas of the West will have an unmixed racial background. Most who do will be immigrants or members of anti-modern religious groups like the ultra-Orthodox Jews. The reflex is to think of this futuristically, as bringing forth increased diversity, or the advent of a “new man”, but if history is our guide, things are likely to turn out quite differently.

Many people desire roots, value tradition and wish to maintain continuity with ancestors who have occupied a historic territory. This means we’re more likely to experience what I term whiteshift, a process by which white majorities absorb an admixture of different peoples through intermarriage but remain oriented around existing myths of descent, symbols and traditions. Naturally there will be contestation, with cosmopolitans lauding exotic origins, but most people will probably airbrush their polyglot lineage out of the story to focus on their European provenance.

Whiteshift has a second, more immediate, connotation: the declining white share of the population in Western countries. International migration has a long history: the share of the world’s people living in a different country from the one they were born in has risen only modestly since 1960. But there has been a big rise in the number of people leaving “global south” regions such as Africa, Latin America and developing Asia, including the Middle East. This figure more than doubled between 1990 and 2015 as 54 million people immigrated to Western countries. While nearly 40 per cent of those moving to European countries came from within Europe, 60 per cent arrived from beyond it. Moreover, the vast majority of immigrants to North America came from the global south — a big change from the period before 1980.

Whites are already a minority in most major cities of North America. Together with New Zealand, North America is projected to be “majority minority” by 2050, with Western Europe and Australia following suit later in the century. This shift is replacing the self-confidence of white majorities with an existential insecurity channelled by the lightning rod of immigration. No one who has honestly analysed survey data on individuals —the gold standard for public opinion research— can deny that white majority concern over immigration is the main cause of the rise of the populist Right in the West. This is primarily explained by concern over identity, not economic threat. Not everyone seeks to maintain connections to ancestors, homeland and tradition, but many voters do.

Those with a conservative psychological make-up wish to maintain continuity with the past. For them, ethnic change is the irritant, not levels of diversity. Voters with an authoritarian profile, by contrast, seek order and security. Diversity, whether ethnic or ideological, however long its provenance, is problematic because it disrupts a sense of harmony and cohesion. Thus for authoritarians, high levels of ethnic diversity are as much the problem as ethnic change. Even if the rate of change stays constant, high diversity levels increase discontent among those
who value existential security and stability. As Western cities have been overwhelmingly white within living memory, today’s ethnic shifts are triggering both conservative and authoritarian responses. Many people have fond memories of youth, viewing this time as their halcyon days. Older conservatives look back on the way things were with profound nostalgia. Since Western populations are ageing, with the share over 60 projected to reach 30-45 per cent of various countries’ populations by 2050, the average voter is getting older. The difference between nations’ current ethnic composition and their makeup at the time today’s median voter was 20 years old is widening. Given that old people vote at much higher rates than young adults, their nostalgia is an important ingredient in the rise of right-wing populism. On the other hand, today’s young people are growing up with greater diversity, so begin with more polyglot memories. With some exceptions, they are less likely to support anti-immigration politics. If the rate of ethnic change slackens, the difference between the ethnic composition of “golden age” memories and current reality will narrow, which could weaken support for right-wing populism. The loss of white ethno-cultural confidence manifests itself in other ways. Among the most important is a growing unwillingness to indulge the anti-white ideology of the cultural Left. When whites were an overwhelming majority, empirically unsupported generalisations about whites could be brushed off as amusing and mischievous but ultimately harmless. As whites decline, fewer are willing to abide such attacks. At the same time, white decline emboldens the cultural Left, with its dream of radical social transformation. This anti-majority adversary culture operates on a large scale, permeates major institutions and is transmitted to conservatives through social and right-wing media. This produces a growing “culture wars” polarisation between increasingly insecure white conservatives and energised, white, small-l liberals. In the 1960s, the countercultural movement that I term left-modernism developed a theory of white ethno-racial oppression. Its outlook superseded the logical, empirically grounded, left-liberal civil rights movement after 1965 to become a millenarian project sustained by the image of a retrograde white “other”.

Today, left-modernism’s most zealous exponents are those seeking to consecrate the university campus as a sacred space devoted to the mission of replacing “whiteness” with diversity. In softer form, this ideology penetrated widely within the high culture and political institutions of Western society after the 60s. It produced norms that prevented democratic discussion of questions of national identity and immigration. Declaring these debates deviant in the name of anti-racism introduced a blockage in the democratic process, preventing the normal adjustment of political supply to political demand. Instead of reasonable trade-offs between those who, for example, wanted higher or lower levels of immigration, the subject was forced underground, building up pressure from those whose grievances were ignored by the main parties. This created an opportunity that populist right-wing entrepreneurs rushed in to fill. Ethno-cultural change is occurring at a rapid rate at precisely the time the dominant ideology celebrates a multicultural vision of ever-increasing diversity. To hanker after homogeneity and stability is perceived as narrow-minded and racist by liberals. Yet diversity falls flat for many because we’re not all wired the same way. Right-wing populism, which champions the cultural interests of group-oriented whites, has halted and reversed the multicultural consensus that held sway between the 60s and late 90s. This is leading to a polarisation between those who accept and those who reject the ideology of diversity. What’s needed is a new vision that gives conservative members of white majorities hope for their group’s future while permitting cosmopolitans the freedom to celebrate diversity. Cosmopolitanism and what I term ethno-traditional nationalism are both valid world views, but each suits a different psychological type. Imposing either on an entire population is a recipe for discontent because value orientations stem from heredity and early life experiences. Attempts to re-educate conservative and order-seeking people into cosmopolitanism will only generate resistance. Differences need to be respected. My book White Shift is not just a prediction of how white identity will adapt to
demographic change but a positive vision that can draw the sting of right-wing populism and begin to bridge the “nationalist-globalist” divide that is upending Western politics.

We are entering a period of cultural instability in the West attendant on our passage between two relatively stable equilibria. The first is based on white ethnic homogeneity, the second on what the prescient centrist writer Michæl Lind calls “beige” ethnicity, a racially mixed majority group. We in the West are becoming less like homogeneous Iceland and more like homogeneous mixed-race Turkmenistan. But to get there we'll be passing through a phase where we'll move closer to multicultural Guyana or Mauritius. The challenge is to enable conservative whites to see a future for themselves in whiteshift — the mixture of many non-whites into the white group through voluntary assimilation.

This is a process that is in its early stages and will take a century to complete. Until the mixed group emerges as a viable majority that identifies, and comes to be identified, as white, Western societies will experience considerable cultural turbulence.

American history offers a preview of what we're in for. We should expect a civilisation-wide replay of the ethnic divisions that gripped the US between the late 1880s and 1960s, during which time the Anglo-Protestant majority declined to less than half the total but gradually absorbed Catholic and Jewish immigrants and their children into a reconstituted white majority oriented around a WASP archetype. This was achieved as immigration slowed and intermarriage overcame ethnic boundaries, a process that still has some way to run.

Notice that identifying with the white majority is not the same as being attached to a white Christian tradition of nationhood. Only those with at least some European ancestry can identify as members of the white majority. However, minorities may cherish the white majority as an important piece of their national identity: a tradition of nationhood. In the US, some 30 per cent of Latinos and Asians voted for Donald Trump and many lament the decline of white America.

In surveys taken soon after the August 2017 Charlottesville riots, 70 per cent of nearly 300 Latino and Asian Trump voters agreed that “whites are under attack in this country” and 53 per cent endorsed the idea that the country needed to “protect and preserve its white European heritage” — similar to white Trump voters.

Is a common national “we” not the solution to all this? I’m afraid not. Political scientists often differentiate “civic nations”, defined by loyalty to the state and its ideology, from “ethnic nations”, united by shared ancestry. All Western countries have been trying to promote civic conceptions of nationhood to include immigrants, but the populist Right shows that limiting nationhood to the American Creed, the French Republican tradition or “Australian values” doesn’t address the anxieties of conservative voters. These universalist, creational conceptions of nationhood are necessary for unity but cannot provide deep identity in everyday life.

Ethnic nationhood, which restricts citizenship to members of the majority, is clearly a non-starter. But things aren’t so black and white. There is a third possibility — ethno-traditional nationhood, which values the ethnic majority as an important component of the nation alongside other groups. Ethno-traditional nationalists favour slower immigration to permit enough immigrants to voluntarily assimilate into the ethnic majority, maintaining the white ethno-tradition. The point is not to assimilate all diversity but to strike a balance between vibrant minorities and an enduring white Christian tradition. This is the first of two exclusive extracts from the book White Shift: Populism, Immigration and the Future of White Majorities, published by Allen Lane and out now. Copyright ©2019 Eric Kaufmann. Look out for the second extract next week.